

# Sonas Housing Association Model of Supported Transitional Housing

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## About the Authors

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Monica O'Connor worked with Women's Aid for fifteen years. During that time she was involved in direct service provision, policy development, training and research. She was a member of the Irish Government Task Force on Violence Against Women for three years. In 1997 she was appointed to the European Women's Lobby Observatory on Violence Against Women and is the author of the First Report of the Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women (2004). She is the co-author of:

“Making the Links”, Kelleher and Associates and O'Connor (Women's Aid, 1995). “Safety and Sanctions”, Kelleher and Associates and O'Connor (Women's Aid, 1999). “Vision Action Change: Feminist Principles and Practice of Working on Violence Against Women, the Women's Aid Model of Work. O'Connor and Wilson (Women's Aid 2001).

## Foreword

There are many routes into homelessness. One of the less documented of those is domestic violence. The word home should conjure up an image of comfort, warmth and safety but for many women and their children home is a dangerous place; so unsafe that they are forced to leave. Regardless of whether or not they are council tenants or joint home owners when they “may not reasonably occupy “their homes, they are homeless.

There has been little documentation in Ireland of homelessness as a result of violence in the home. What material has been available concentrated on the fact of homelessness for families living in emergency accommodation, principally Bed & Breakfast. The general consensus in all reports is that Bed & Breakfast accommodation is totally inappropriate for families and in particular those forced to flee violence but who may be still in danger.

Sonass Housing Association, which has provided supported transitional housing since 1996 for women and their children homeless because of domestic violence, commissioned this study to establish what responses are available to these families. In this study, the researchers show that the responses of Women’s Refuges have gone virtually unnoticed and yet for over thirty years they have been a focused and specialised response to the traumatic effects of forced homelessness because of violence. Refuge, however, as the name suggests, cannot provide a service for the longer period of time some women will need. This is where supported transitional housing has a vital role to play.

The survey of the case studies undertaken by the researchers and the interviews carried out with women using the service illustrates the appalling systematic levels of violence. We are satisfied that the model of supported housing we have developed is one which has been designed to address the many complex problems such experiences of violence create. Without ongoing support many families are vulnerable to recurring homelessness.

The recommendations and conclusions in this report very clearly embrace an improved partnership approach, seeing the statutory agencies playing a crucial role in developing not only thorough primary assessment, but joining the voluntary providers in ensuring a continuum of responses from prevention to long term housing. For safety reasons families often have to move location. This report calls for a Code of Guidance which would inform the approach of all local authorities and health boards in responding to families homeless because of violence. A coherent policy would mean that no matter where a woman presented for support or accommodation in Ireland she could expect a consistent, appropriate response.

Sonass would like to acknowledge the expertise and professionalism of our two authors Monica O’ Connor and Niamh Wilson. Their care and sensitivity in gathering information for this report from women who use or have used our service is greatly appreciated. To those women, particular and sincere thanks are due. The service is delivered by staff who, in putting the women’s well-being at the centre of their concern, deliver professional and

considered support. Special thanks are due to them for the cooperation and support afforded to the authors in carrying out their work. I would like to thank our Board members who provided me with welcome knowledge and support and furthermore my colleagues in the Sonas Housing Partnership. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the specialists expertise of our editor, Grainne Healey.

*Muireann Morris*

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## Introduction

Violence against women has been recognised as one of the most prevalent forms of human rights violations in the world. When women experience violence and abuse at the hands of a male partner or husband, the result for many women is that they have to make themselves and their children homeless to access safety and protection. In many cases, women lose their homes. Sonas Housing Association (SHA) was developed as a response to women who had left crisis accommodation and have ongoing support needs as well as a need for safe, secure accommodation. As a response to women experiencing violence, Sonas Housing is unique in that it provides a range of supports to women and children whilst they live in high quality housing, for a period of time before moving on to permanent housing. The focus of this study is to document the Sonas Housing Association model of supported transitional housing.

### Focus and scope of the study

A comprehensive literature review on violence against women, homelessness and housing was carried out for this study. The experiences of women and children in all forms of emergency accommodation were explored in order to examine the suitability of these responses for this vulnerable group and to inform the study. The experiences of homeless women, and of services provided by frontline organisations dedicated to responding to violence against women, were also explored.

In documenting the Sonas model of work, eleven women who have accessed supported transitional housing in Sonas were interviewed to gather information about their experience of violence, homelessness and their experience of Sonas' model of work. Those women who were invited to participate were invited on the basis of ethical guidelines that ensured participation would not compromise the safety of the woman. This study is not intended to be an evaluation of Sonas but a documentation of their work. With this aim in mind, an attempt was made to access women who would be broadly representative of the diversity of women in Sonas; however, the study does not claim to represent the views and experiences of all women who have accessed their services and accommodation.

Case reviews of worker's files for 2003 were carried out. There were thirty-nine transitional housing tenants and eleven permanent tenants in this year. Twenty-eight files were identified for review as these women were receiving a high level of support in that year. Twenty-five files were reviewed and reviews of three files were unable to be carried out within the timeframe. Workers were also interviewed to draw out some key learning, issues and challenges in the work they do in delivering Sonas supported transitional housing. A group interview was held with children's workers to enable the documentation of Sonas' response to children.

In both interviews and case file reviews confidentiality was assured. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report for women and researchers had no direct access to the files.

## Section 1 Literature Review

### Introduction

The focus of this research report is to provide a comprehensive documentation of the integrated supported housing model as developed and delivered by Sonas Housing Association for women and children out of home because of domestic violence. The researchers examined available evidence in Ireland on women's experience of homelessness as a result of violence and abuse at the hands of a male partner or husband. This section provides an overview of that experience, beginning with women's experience of violence, the levels of danger and risk they lived with and the consequent reality that their homes were no longer safe homes, but in fact the most dangerous place for them to be.

The experience of women and children when out of home because of violence is documented in a number of studies carried out in the Dublin region in recent years and relevant information from these reports is reviewed. There is little documented evidence of women's experience of Refuges in Ireland, so the outcomes from reviews and evaluations from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) are also examined. Also referred to are a number of evaluation studies in Ireland and the UK of non-governmental organisation's outreach programmes. Whilst these support, information and advocacy services are targeted at women not resident in Refuges, the core purpose of Refuges is to deliver these same responses to women whilst also providing safe accommodation to them and their children. For this reason, the key findings of these evaluations are included to demonstrate their impact and outcomes for women.

Finally, this section provides an overview of the policy context in which responses to violence against women, housing and homelessness are delivered in Ireland.

### Women's experience of violence within intimate relationships

#### Prevalence

Violence against women in all its forms has been recognised as one of the most pervasive of human rights violations on a global level. Studies from across the world indicate that between 20% and 50% (World Health Organisation, 2002) of women experience violence from an intimate partner, or domestic violence, as it is commonly known<sup>1</sup>. The first Irish national prevalence study was carried out in 1995 (Kelleher Associates & O'Connor, 1995). In this survey, of the 677 women who completed questionnaires, 18% of women had experienced violence from a partner or husband.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst it is recognised that domestic violence can occur between other family members, in same sex relationships and by women against male partners or husbands, in the vast majority of cases the perpetrator is male and the victim female (92%-97%). In addition, the majority of reported cases show that women are more likely to experience repeat victimisation and post separation abuse and to suffer injuries requiring medical attention and emotional harm as a result of domestic violence. Violence against women: An issue of Gender (Cork Domestic Violence Project, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services, National Women's Council of Ireland, Network of Rape Crisis Centres Ireland, Women's Aid, Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre, UCD, 2001).

In a survey of women in doctor's surgeries in one Dublin area for the same study that figure doubled to 36%. In a survey of approximately 500 women in Ireland, 42% of women reported having experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime and 25% of the perpetrators of these crimes against adult women are male partners or husbands (McGee et al 2002). In a survey of 1,692 women attending doctors surgeries (Bradley 2002) two fifths of the women had experienced some form of violence and abuse at the hands of male partner and 69% of the women reported controlling behaviour by their partners.

## The nature of domestic violence

Women's testimonies have provided an in-depth understanding of the nature and dynamics of men's violence within intimate relationships. The documentation of women's experiences show that violent and abusive men systematically employ a multiplicity of abusive and coercive tactics with the intention of gaining and maintaining control over all of the key aspects of the woman's life (Mulvey et al, 1994, Kelleher Associates and O'Connor, 1995, Kelleher Associates and O'Connor, 1999). The Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women, 1997, defines domestic violence as:

*“Domestic violence refers to the use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence, in close adult relationships. ... The term “domestic violence” goes beyond actual physical violence. It can also involve emotional abuse; the destruction of property; isolation from friends, family and other sources of support; threats to others including children; stalking; and control over access to money, personal items, food, transportation and the telephone.”*

Those working to address violence against women have come to understand that domestic violence is, by its nature, sexualised and is focused on ensuring the domestic and sexual compliance of a woman to her husband or partner (O'Connor & Wilson, 2002). With this intention, violent and abusive men actively seek to isolate women from any possible sources of support such as family, friends and community and to prevent women from accessing or maintaining independence through participation in the work place and society in general.

Thirty-five years of service provision, activism and research has led to a shared understanding of male violence amongst key service providers, human rights agencies and government bodies. This understanding is that men's use of violence within intimate relationships is underpinned by the power, privilege and entitlement that men hold at all levels of society. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993, states:

*“Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of their full advancement, and that violence*

*against women is one of the crucial mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position with men.”*

### **Risk of homicide and serious injury**

The risk of homicide or serious injury within the context of domestic violence has been documented and studied in a number of countries. In the United States of America (USA), a retrospective study of files of women murdered by husbands, partners, ex-husbands or ex-partners found that in approximately two thirds (Campbell, 1995) of the cases, there was a documented history of domestic violence. In Ireland, Women’s Aid monitors all media coverage of female homicide in the country. They have recorded (Women’s Aid Media Watch, August 2004) 101 female homicides since the beginning of 1996. Sixty-eight (67.32%) of these women were murdered in their own home. Of these murders, only seventy cases have been resolved and where a conviction was gained, 81% of these women were murdered by someone they knew. Of these women, forty-six of them were murdered by a partner or ex-partner.

Studies show that the most dangerous time for women is when they are about to leave or have just left an abusive relationship. 70% of female homicide is committed by a current or former male partner of the woman (Campbell, 1995). Over 50% of women had been murdered by male partners after they had left them. Research in the USA (Zorza, 1994) indicates that 70% of the most serious assaults, rapes and homicides occur after the woman has left.

Women sustain serious injuries as a result of domestic violence. A study carried out on the effectiveness of the legal system’s response to domestic violence in Ireland in 1999 (Kelleher & Associates & O’Connor, 1999) found that in two research sites, injury as a result of physical and sexual assault was recorded in 26.4% of domestic violence call-outs to Gardaí. Violence against women is the single biggest reason for the admittance of women to accident and emergency units in the USA (Koop, 1989).

### **Children as witness and victims of domestic violence**

In the first national prevalence study in Ireland (Kelleher Associates and O’Connor, 1995) 64% of women said that their children witnessed the violence. In a study in the UK (Hughes, 1992), 90% of children were reported to be in the same or next room at the time of an attack.

Children, however, are not merely witnesses of domestic violence, but are also primary targets of the perpetrator’s abuse. In their groundbreaking study in 1988, Evan Stark and Anne Flitcraft analysed data drawn from a large sample of women attending hospital accident and emergency rooms. They found that women who were abused were six times as likely to have the actual abuse of a child recorded and that the perpetrator was three times

more likely to be male. Stark and Flitcraft demonstrated that “battering is the most common context for child abuse, that the battering male is the typical child abuser”. In an overview of American studies (Edelson, 1995), in 32% to 53% of all families where women were being physically beaten by their partners, children are directly subjected to violence and abuse by the abuser. In Ireland, a review of child protection cases for one year, 2002, in one Community Care Area in the Western Health Board was carried out. Domestic violence was an issue in 80% of the cases of the eighty women who contacted social workers for support and services in relation to child protection issues (O’Connor & Wilson, forthcoming).

### Women’s access to protection from violence in the home

The Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women (1997) acknowledges the importance of the legal system as the only system in Ireland with the power to hold violent men accountable and thus to ensure women and children’s safety. The Domestic Violence Act (1996) was enacted with the intention of enabling victims of domestic violence to remain in the home with the protection of court orders. The legislation gave specific powers of entry to private homes, and of arrest, to the Gardaí. The Non Fatal Offences Against the Person Act (1997) brings all the crimes against the person under one Act. This can be used by the Gardaí where there is evidence that an assault or threat of assault has occurred<sup>2</sup>. An Garda Síochána have a policy, which supports the implementation of the Domestic Violence legislation and is the only state agency with such a policy (An Garda Síochána Policy on Domestic Violence Intervention, 1997)<sup>3</sup>. Despite the presence of such legal remedies, which are designed to protect victims of domestic violence, there continues to be relatively low percentages of women accessing the legal system or the Gardaí (Kelleher Associates and O’Connor, 1999).

Figures from the Courts Services for 2003 show that 3,586 people applied to the courts for barring orders. The courts do not keep a gender breakdown of applicants but international studies indicate that 92% to 97% of victims of domestic violence are women (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Of the 3,586 applications in Irish courts in 2003, 1,850 were withdrawn or struck out, 161 were refused and 1,575 were granted. In the same year 2,557 people applied for safety orders, 1,336 were withdrawn or struck out, 113 refused and 1,108 granted (Court Services Annual Report, 2003).

A study carried out on domestic violence and the enforcement of the law in Ireland in 1999 documented a number of barriers that prevented women from accessing the protection of the law (Kelleher Associates and O’Connor, 1999). These included gaps in the legislation, which led to some women not being eligible to apply for court orders and the inconsistent enforcement of the law, which failed to hold many violent men accountable. This study examined civil applications for court orders in three research sites and found

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<sup>2</sup> An outline of all legislation relating to physical and sexual violence is contained in the First Report of the Irish National Observatory on Violence Against Women, O’Connor, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst most Health Boards have not developed policy in this area, the Western Health Board has produced a set of guidelines for all personnel in responding to violence against women (Western Health Board, 2003).

that the percentage of applications for orders which were withdrawn or struck out were 48%, 61% and 67% respectively. Interviews with women and service providers indicated that the reasons women withdrew applications were complex. Many women were aware of the grave risk to their physical safety incurred as a result of taking a legal action against their abuser and therefore chose to drop the application as a safer option.

Whilst the study found that the arrest rate in Ireland is relatively high at 27% nationally, criminal charges brought against men for assault or breaking a court order resulted in only 2% of men in research site one, 6% of men in research site two and 1% of men in research site three receiving a prison sentence. The study concluded that the failure of the legal system to hold perpetrators of domestic violence accountable results in women continuing to live at risk of re-victimisation and that thus the home remains an unsafe place for women and children.

### The diversity of women's experience of violence

Women have many different life experiences, identities and positions in society that impact on their experiences of violence and on the response they get when seeking support and protection. For example, a consultation carried out by Women's Aid with disability activists found that they had knowledge of where a woman's impairment had been used by her abuser to further abuse and control her. Examples of this would be leaving objects in the way of a visually impaired woman or leaving a woman with a mobility impairment in bed all day without food or water (Wilson, 2001). There is statistical evidence which indicates that disabled women are more likely to experience sexual violence both as children and adults. The increased vulnerability of some women with disabilities is targeted by perpetrators of violence and abuse who can also be the woman's main carer (Turk and Brown, 1993; Brown, Stein and Turk, 1995).

Traveller women and women from other ethnic minorities face the additional discrimination of racism in trying to negotiate their rights and access options. If their abuser is a member of their own community, they face isolation from their community if they seek to get away from or take legal action against their abuser. Whilst this can be a risk for all women, it can be a greater deterrent if a woman's community is the main source of support in a society in which she may experience forms of discrimination such as racism (McGee et al 2002). A recent report on the experiences of immigrants in Ireland highlights the additional barriers that immigrant women face when coming to live in Ireland, (Kelleher Associates, 2004).

Homeless women or women involved in prostitution can be targeted by sexual abusers and may then face the additional trauma of not being believed or responded to appropriately because of their marginalized status in society. In cases where women experience additional discrimination, there is also likely to be increased risk of isolation and lack of access to resources that may provide the woman with a possibility to take some action (O'Connor and Wilson, forthcoming).

## Women and children out of home because of violence

### The extent of women and children's homelessness

The Homeless Persons Unit (HPU) run by the Northern Area Health Board is the main referral and assessment centre for those people out of home in the Dublin City area. Figures for 2003 show that 214 women presented as homeless to the HPU. Of these, 26% of the women said that they had become homeless as a result of domestic violence. Figures for the first quarter of 2004 showed that the unit had 733 new or repeat cases in this period. Of these, seventy-eight were single women and forty-four were women with children, (seventy-seven children). The Counted In Survey (Williams and Gorby, 2002) carried out on behalf of the Homeless Agency in 2002 found that of 2,920 households homeless in the Dublin City area, 640 households had children with them (1,140 children), 66% of the families were headed by lone parents and 94% of these lone parents were women.

### Where women and children are accommodated when homeless

The Counted In Surveys conducted for the Homeless Agency in 1999 (Williams and O'Connor, 1999) and 2002 (Williams and Gorby, 2002) documented the type of accommodation people were in over a seven day period.

Type of accommodation	2002	1999
Refuge	4	6
B&B	88	53
Relatives/friends	5	35
Other	1	1
Other combinations	1	3

A number of reports have noted the unprecedented rise of the use of Bed and Breakfasts (B&B) as emergency accommodation for people out of home (Houghton and Hickey, 2000, Bergin, 2002, Halpenny et al, 2002, Smith et al, 2001). In 1990 the Homeless Persons Unit (HPU) placed just five families in B&B. This contrasts sharply with 1,202 households in 1999. Of these, 1,518 were adults and 1,262 were children. 71% of the adults were women. The largest group in terms of family status were lone parents at 39.6%. Some 92% of those lone parents were women and 75% of single adults were women (Houghton and Hickey, 2000). In a study of the health needs of 100 homeless women in 2001, 66% of the women surveyed were in B&B's and 33% of women were in homeless hostels (Smith et al 2001). Comparing the level of use of B&B as accommodation for homeless people with the UK situation, only 14% of homeless people are in B&B accommodation in London as compared to 32% in Ireland (Bergin 2002). A study for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in the United Kingdom (2002) of the provision of accommodation and support for households experiencing domestic violence in England found that 15% of homeless households were accommodated in Refuges and that only 6% were in bed and breakfast accommodation.

In Ireland 2003 records from fourteen of the eighteen Women’s Refuges in Ireland indicate that there is a shortage of Refuge accommodation for women and children out of home because of domestic violence. 1,586 women and 2,741 children sought and accessed shelter in Women’s Refuges in Ireland in 2003 (Sonas Housing and National Network of Womens’ Refuges and Support Services Survey of Refuge Use, 2003). Of these, 661 were settled women, 765 were traveller women and 139 were non-national women. Twenty-one of the women had a disability. On 590 occasions, the Refuges had to refuse access to families because they were full. Kelleher and Associates (2001), in the report on a framework for responses to violence against women to the Eastern Regional Planning Committee on Violence Against Women found that 1,104 women were refused accommodation in the three Women’s Refuges in the Eastern Health Board area, because of lack of space.

### Duration of homelessness

Available data indicates that the duration that people are living out of home is getting longer as evidenced by these figures from the 1999 (Williams and O’Connor 1999) and 2002 (Williams and Gorby, 2002) Counted In Surveys.

Period of time homeless	2002	1999
Less than 6 months	26%	45%
6-12 months	29%	29%
1-3 years	36%	22%
3-5 years	9%	4%

The average duration of homelessness was thirteen months.

In a review of bed and breakfast use by Bergin in 2002, the average length of stay in B&B’s was eighteen months with some families in them for more than two years. The average length of stay of women in the emergency homeless accommodation surveyed (Smith et al 2001) was seventy-two weeks.

### Factors leading to homelessness

In Bergin’s 2002 study of B&B use as emergency accommodation, respondents were asked to state the reasons for homelessness. Those interviewed identified complex and multiple reasons for their homelessness. Chief amongst these are lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, family conflict, addiction problems and community difficulties. Respondents in Smith et al’s survey (2001) of 100 homeless women also cited these factors. The two top reasons leading to homelessness were failure to find affordable accommodation (18) and domestic violence (14).

All studies on homelessness reviewed for this research consistently stress the importance of having a more in-depth and complex understanding of the causes of homelessness and distinguishing between the events precipitating this incident of homelessness and the original cause for homelessness. Factors identified as a primary reason or a principle factor in homelessness should not be interpreted as the causes of homelessness for a number of reasons. Houghton and Hickey (2000) state:

*"When people are asked about precipitating factors for their homelessness, they tend to consider the triggers for their homelessness rather than the underlying factors or cause.... The pathways into homelessness are complex and they are often made up of many factors including housing need, personal issues, economic disadvantage and social isolation."*

Smith et al (2001) provide an example which illustrates the importance of in-depth and appropriate assessment. The reason given during interview for one woman's homelessness was that she did not get on with her family, but because this researcher enquired about sexual violence later on in the interview, the woman later indicated that the sexual abuse of her children by her father, with whom she shared the family home, was her reason for leaving home.

One of the primary reasons for homelessness is the failure of local authorities to provide social housing at a pace with the increasing housing waiting lists (Houghton and Hickey, 2000). In 1999 the housing waiting list equalled 39,000 households. The increased housing waiting lists are due to a number of factors including the slow down of the housing building programme, escalating house prices in the home ownership market and increased rents in the private rented sector.

In the 2002 Local Authority Assessment of Social Housing Need (DOELG, 2002), 48,413 households were assessed as being in need of housing. 43% of these were lone parent households. The report notes that only 9% of total housing completions in 2001 were social housing and 6% in 2000. It concludes that households find themselves having to compete for housing in a sector which is supposed to cater solely for their needs and that it is those who are most marginalised who have the greatest difficulty in accessing housing.

## **Violence and abuse as a cause of homelessness**

In a survey of 100 homeless women's health needs in 2001, fifty-five of the women reported experiences of physical violence in adulthood (Smith et al, 2001). The majority (80%) reported the violence that they experienced was in the context of a single long-term relationship with a husband or partner. For 85% of the women, the main location for the violent behaviour was in their home and for at least fourteen women, becoming homeless by leaving the violent partner was the only way they could escape the violent behaviour they had experienced.

Forty-nine of the women reported that they had experienced some form of serious sexual violence, assault or abuse in their lifetime. 69% of these women were abused before they became homeless (thirty-two of forty-nine women.). Forty-two women identified the perpetrators of which there were fifty-five (fifty-four of these perpetrators were men and one was a woman). Some of the women who experienced sexual violence at the hands of other family members reported that leaving home was the only route of escape for them.

The report found that the levels of violence that these women experienced were three times the rate of Irish women, in general, as reported in the national prevalence study on domestic violence in 1995 (Kelleher Associates and O'Connor, 1995). It concluded that for some women the only way to stay safe was to become homeless.

Houghton and Hickey (2000) cite domestic violence as the primary reason for homelessness in 7% of cases and cite it as the most prevalent reason for homelessness amongst lone parents at 11.1%. A woman's explanation of her homelessness as cited in Bergin (2002) is an example of how looking at only the precipitating factor causing the current spell of homelessness could lead to concealing domestic violence as the primary cause.

*" He (partner) wouldn't leave and I was terrified of him so I had to get up and get a boat with my kids. We moved to England and I just wasn't getting a house over there so my mum asked me to come back. She told me I could live with her and that there would be no problems, we'd get along fine. We came home and it wasn't like that at all... so that was the start of me becoming homeless."*

It is evident from the figures provided by the HPU, that only one reason can be recorded as a cause of homelessness and that therefore it is difficult to assess to what degree domestic violence was a factor in women's decision to leave their homes in order to access safety and protection. The most common reason given by women contacting the HPU in the first quarter of 2004 was domestic violence, with five of the seventy-eight single women and five of the forty-four women with children, citing domestic violence as the primary reason for their homelessness.

These figures contrast sharply with figures from the UK which show that 38% of families using Shelter's Homeless to Home projects lost their home due to domestic violence. In a study of families at a homeless centre in Birmingham, nine out of ten families were reported to be fleeing from violence and of these cases the perpetrator was a partner or former partner of the woman. In 2001/2002, 47% of women accommodated in a supported housing programme for homeless women and children in Bradford, UK, were homeless because of domestic violence. (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2002).

## The use of bed and breakfasts as emergency accommodation for women and children out of home

### The experience of women and children in bed and breakfast accommodation

A number of studies have been carried out on the experience of women and children who are homeless. In the majority of cases, the respondents were living in bed and breakfast accommodation (Halpenny et al 2002, Smith et al 2001, Halpenny et al 2001). A study carried out by Focus Point (Houghton and Hickey, 2000) and one carried out by Bergin (2002) on behalf of the Homeless Agency focused specifically on bed and breakfast usage as emergency accommodation for people out of home. All of these studies have concluded that the use of bed and breakfasts, and the increasing length of time that people are living in them, is unacceptable. The studies found that living in a bed and breakfast typically meant living in grossly inadequate and overcrowded conditions.

In Halpenny et al's study on children in families living in bed and breakfasts carried out in 2002, over 70% of the families had only one bedroom for the whole family and 45% of the families had to share toilet facilities. In all of the reports, women reported a lack of privacy and overcrowding; a disruption to any kind of routine, which made parenting more difficult; a lack of dignity and isolation from family and friends.

*"It's just like you have no privacy. Like the privacy you would get in your own home.... you know what they (children) are allowed to touch and what they are not allowed to touch and you won't have anyone shouting at them either. You'd be able to come and go as you please. I don't know, you just feel as if you are being watched all the time" Mother, with two children (Halpenny et al, 2002)*

*"Its hard, you've no dignity, no self respect... you don't feel worth anything. You're afraid to stand up and say excuse me, you know, I am entitled to a house" Mother with six children (Halpenny et al 2002)*

Children had little or no play space and often had to stay in the family bedroom for hours at a time whilst older children would be trying to do homework. Older teenage children of both sexes had to share bedrooms. Children reported feelings of isolation and loneliness as most of them are accommodated in areas away from family and friends. They could not invite friends home from school and were afraid of the stigma of being homeless if school friends knew where they were living. Younger children could not bring toys with them and had to leave them with extended family members and they reported finding it particularly hard to be given directions from people other than their mother. In some cases children reported being shouted at by workers and other residents.

*"It wasn't very nice because you weren't allowed out anywhere at the front or the back and you weren't allowed into your friend's room...like we just had to stay in all the time... and like there wasn't any women workers, it was just men like so they didn't really*

*understand like... One woman came into clean sometimes but it was mainly men all the time.” (Halpenny et al, 2002)*

*“Because any time we just knock, when we have to come in, he (staff member) just shouts at us.” (Halpenny et al, 2002)*

In some bed and breakfasts, families were required to leave the premises during the day which results in them being on the streets all day.

*“ When you’re put in a B&B you have to be out at certain times of the morning and my ma does not have that much money and she can’t really go anywhere and on Sunday and Saturday mornings almost everything’s closed and you just wander around on your own, or sit in parks. And wait ’til its time to go back in.” (Halpenny et al, 2002)*

Smith et al’s (2002) study of the health status of 100 homeless women in Dublin found that scores indicating psychological stress amongst homeless women were five times, or greater, than Irish norms. Almost a half of the women were on some form of prescribed medication. Houghton and Hickey (2000) referenced the body of research demonstrating that hostel dwellers and people in B&B’s face significant health problems and are at increased risk of morbidity and mortality. They state:

*“Medical services both physical and psychiatric are based on a catchments area system that militates against homeless people seeking treatment. Homeless individuals and families tend to use A&E departments for the treatment of physical and psychiatric illness because they do not have access to GP’s. The level of physical and psychiatric health needs illustrate once again that in some cases homeless households require more than a house.”*

## **The operation of the bed & breakfast system**

Bergin studied the operation of the bed and breakfast system as emergency accommodation on behalf of the Homeless Agency (Bergin 2002). Everyone homeless in Dublin is referred to the Homeless Persons Unit which is run by the Northern Area Health Board for the three area health boards. Bed and breakfast accommodation is funded by the Dublin City Council but administered by the Homeless Persons Unit (HPU). Dublin City Council has a set of criteria and standards but Bergin found that in practice only some of them are complied with. This results in the absence of clear written house rules for residents and staff, a lack of complaints procedures for residents and rooms are not made available for visiting staff such as doctors, nurses or social workers as required in the criteria. There is a failure to cross check with the Gardaí in relation to clearance forms for employees and Bergin concluded that this exposes residents and children to unacceptable risks. There are no sanctions for non-compliance and no written contract between landlords and the state agencies.

In placing people in emergency accommodation only those Bed & Breakfast's inspected and approved by Dublin City Council should be used. However, in the 2002 study, Bergin found that the HPU were placing some homeless people in some unapproved B&B's. This means that some B&B's that the City Council had discontinued using because of failing standards were being directly or indirectly used by the HPU. Bergin concluded that:

*“There are no adequate information systems in place in the HPU for the systematic collection and dissemination of information on the characteristics and needs of people who present to the unit. This is a serious weakness in the system for both assessing needs and planning responses to them.”*

### **Costs of bed and breakfast as emergency accommodation.**

In 1990 the cost of B&B placement within the Dublin City Area was £540. This rose to £4.7 million in 1999 and to 18 million euro 2002 (Houghton and Hickey, 2000). It is estimated that 20 million euro was spent in 2003. Houghton and Hickey state that the huge increase in cost is not just attributable to the growth of numbers in households being placed, but also to the increased length of time that people were living in B&B's. Their study conducted a random sample of 200 households in B&B's and found that the average length of stay was eighty-one nights.

Dublin City Council does not set any maximum or minimum rates and does not relate payments to quality of accommodation (Bergin, 2002). Bergin found that the payment is related predominantly to the capacity of landlords to negotiate effectively with Dublin City Council. In some instances landlords attempted to maximize the number of paid spaces, by fitting more beds into rooms. This results in landlord's profits being maximised whilst residents experience overcrowded and unhealthy conditions. At the same time, there is no shortage of B&B space in Dublin. He states:

*“The present system offers no incentive to landlords to maintain/upgrade their properties. In some cases the opposite is true, nice upgrading may mean reducing the number of bed spaces.”*

*“Landlords are earning supernormal profits in the delivery of the B&B service ”*

### **Conclusions and recommendations in relation to bed and breakfast usage**

*“The rise in use of B&B's as emergency accommodation, and the increase in the time people spend there is unprecedented, expensive and unacceptable.” (Houghton and Hickey, 2000)*

All of the reports studying Bed and Breakfast usage and women and children's experiences of them conclude that the use of B&B's as emergency accommodation for people out of home is unacceptable and inappropriate. Smith et al (2001) stress that the

provision of emergency accommodation through ad hoc arrangements in the private sector is unsatisfactory and state that the private sector does not have a remit to provide the type of support needed by this distressed and vulnerable group. The report highlights the very high levels of physical and psychological problems amongst these homeless women as a cause for concern, not only because of the impact on the lives of the women themselves but also because of the effect on the lives of the children in their care. The report recommends that publicly funded, accountable and professionally staffed or inspected supported accommodation should be made available.

This report also highlights the lack of accountability of this privately owned provision of emergency accommodation and is particularly critical of three bed and breakfast owners and one homeless hostel run by a religious order which refused access to researchers for the study. They state:

*“It is...reasonable to expect services paid for or subsidised by public funds to be responsive to research that aims to inform the service providers and policy makers. Refusal to do this...reflects poorly on the accountability of services provided by the private sector.”*  
(Smith et al 2001)

All of the reports recommend the phasing out of Bed and Breakfast as emergency accommodation and propose that concrete targets be set. For example, Bergin recommends:

*“That by June 2004 B&B will only be used for emergency purposes and in those exceptional cases will be used, for homeless families for a maximum of eight weeks and for couples and individuals for a maximum of sixteen weeks.”* (Bergin 2002)

Studies reviewed for this research found that the factors leading to homelessness are multiple and complex and they argue that responses should reflect this. (Houghton and Hickey, 2000 Bergin, 2002, Halpenny et al, 2002, Smith et al, 2001). They call for a holistic approach to families out of home tailored to the individual circumstances and realities of a given family. Initiatives should be designed to address, seamlessly, housing and support needs. In the report on the 2002 Local Authority Assessment of Social Housing Need (DOE&LG, 2002) it is recognised that ideally accommodation should be provided in the community of origin. However, the report acknowledges that this is often not suitable for women out of home because of violence. Although most women want long-term secure accommodation the report states that:

*“There is a serious need for women who have experienced violence for safe emergency, transitional and long term accommodation. Supports are needed rather than a mere “bricks and mortar” approach.”* (DOE&LG, 2002)

Recommendations also address the need to prevent homelessness in the first place. Bergin argues that constantly seeking additional temporary accommodation is not sustainable without seeking to stem the demand and that initially, this means meeting people's long-term housing needs (Bergin 2002). He also calls for a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and states:

*“A greater role for homelessness prevention, advice and assistance is also necessary if we are to reduce the dependence on B&B, By enhancing advice services and adopting a more proactive stance, homelessness can be prevented for a certain proportion of at risk people”. (Bergin, 2002)*

Houghton and Hickey (2000) call for interventions based on individual needs assessment and state that the use of best practice models are essential to improve health and social conditions amongst this disadvantaged group. Bergin (2002) states that when referred into B&B's, households should be assessed in greater detail as to their support needs and the circumstances of their becoming homeless. The HPU and other voluntary providers should offer assistance other than the offer of B&B to people who present themselves as homeless.

The need to be aware of the support needs of families back into mainstream housing is addressed also and Halpenny et al (2002) recommend

*“... a more extended period of planned and supported preparation before they (families) can successfully make the transition back to mainstream housing. For families with extra needs beyond housing alone, intensive tailored programmes of support may be needed to address health, addiction, domestic violence and other such issues”*

Recommendations in Houghton and Hickey (2000) state that the money currently being used to temporarily house people in B&B's, should be used instead to provide good quality emergency/temporary accommodation, purpose built to meet the needs of the heterogeneous homeless population. A greater variety of emergency and/or temporary accommodation should be provided and the level of low, medium, and high support housing units must be increased to meet the needs of the different sub populations within the homeless population.

Bergin (2002) recommends that Dublin City Council should be given direct control over what establishments can be used and that no new B&B beds should be added to the system without evidence of clear need<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Authors recognize that some of the recommendations may have been implemented since the publication of these studies.

## **Specialised responses to women and children out of home because of domestic violence**

### **Women's Refuges**

The development of Women's Refuges was the first response of the women's movement to the prevalence of male violence against women within intimate relationships. The first Refuges started in the UK, the USA and Ireland in the early 1970's (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Since then a diversity of responses have been developed by the non governmental sector to meet the complex and multiple needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence, however, Refuge provision remains at the core of the movement to combat male violence. (O'Connor and Wilson, 2002).

The Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women (1997) states that women and children should be facilitated to remain in the home and that it is the perpetrator of violence and abuse who should be forced to leave. However, it acknowledges the reality that in many cases this option will not be practical and that there will be situations in which the violence will be so severe as to cause the woman to fear for her physical safety. In such a situation where a woman is forced to leave her home, the report recommends that the most appropriate form of accommodation outside of the woman's circle of family and friends is a properly managed Woman's Refuge with the capacity to provide a range of supports.

There are eighteen Refuges in Ireland across sixteen counties. Their total capacity is 454 beds and they have an overall capacity for 111 women and 353 children at any one time (National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services, forthcoming). A study of the operation of the eighteen refuges by the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services (NNWRSS) found that despite the absence of standards or regulations at a national level, the majority of Refuges provided a range of services to women out of home because of violence. Typically Refuges had clear regulations/guidelines for all workers and residents in relation to:

- **Non-tolerance of abusive behaviour**
- **Banning the use of alcohol and drugs**
- **Confidentiality agreements**
- **Responsibility of care for children and accommodation.**

The study found that a woman out of home because of domestic violence who accesses accommodation in a Woman's Refuge can typically expect a range of responses including; one to one support from a trained staff member who will support the woman to examine her options and to make decisions regarding her and her children's safety and welfare; information about her rights and options, responses focused on children's needs through group activities and liaison with schools and other services; advocacy with and for the woman with a range of agencies; accompaniment to court and other important appointments.

The report identified a number of challenges that organisations running Refuges are aware of and are working to address including: the need to agree a set of standards to ensure that best practice responses are consistent across the country; the need to ensure that Refuge as a response to women also responds to those women most marginalised in the community; the need to develop further responses to children and the challenge of balancing service provision with work for wider social change towards the elimination of violence against women.

## Costs

All frontline organisations responding to violence against women including Refuges are funded through annual core funding from the Department of Health and Children through the eight Regional Health Boards. In addition, some Refuges access Department of Environment and Local Government funding through local authorities which pay for the costs of providing accommodation for people out of home at a set cost per bed per night or at a fixed cost per bed for the year.

The Department of Health and Children's funding to over sixty frontline organisations providing services to women experiencing domestic violence and rape and sexual assault increased from 3.1 million pounds in 1996 to 11.95 million euro in 2004<sup>5</sup>. The funding levels have not increased since 2002 (O'Connor, 2004). The National Network of Women's Refuges and Support services estimate that annual costs for running seventeen of the eighteen Women's Refuges in Ireland amounts to approximately 7.74 million euro. All of the Refuges provide a range of specialised services to women and some include ongoing support post crisis such as outreach work and education programmes. Where outreach support to non-residents is integrated into Refuge provision, costs for this service are included under this figure<sup>6</sup>. All Refuges report that the main barrier to them in meeting the challenges identified and in expanding their services to meet the needs of a wider group of women is the lack of resources (NNWRSS, 2004) and all frontline services responding to violence against women spend a substantial amount of time trying to access additional funding from both government and private sources and through their own fundraising efforts.

## Women and children's experience of Women's Refuges

Whilst there are now eighteen refuges in Ireland and many of them have been in existence since the 1970's or 1980's, lack of resources has prevented the documented evaluations of this specialised service to women and children out of home because of domestic violence (Morton, 2003). In Prizeman's review (2002) of the three women's refuges in the Eastern Regional Area, she concluded that the Refuges provided a very valuable and necessary

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<sup>5</sup> This funding allocation is shared amongst all Refuges, domestic violence support, information and advocacy services including the Women's Aid national freephone helpline and Rape Crisis Centres.

<sup>6</sup> Internal network survey carried out amongst affiliates in 2004.

service. Women living at the Refuges felt safe and supported despite some unsatisfactory conditions created by a lack of resources (Prizeman, 2000). Evaluations and surveys of the effectiveness of Refuges have been carried out in the UK and the USA and provide some information on the experience of women and children. There are also a number of evaluations on outreach support, information and advocacy services, which are targeted at women not living in Refuges. As the core purpose of Women's Refuges is to provide this service, whilst at the same time providing safe accommodation for women and children made homeless because of domestic violence, the findings of these evaluations are also of relevance to this study.

An investigation on the experiences of women, children and young people who have lived in Women's Aid Refuges in Scotland and an assessment of the level and standard of accommodation provided by Scottish Women's Aid was conducted in 2002 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2004). Most women were very happy with the service they accessed in the service and highly valued the emotional and practical support they received. The non-judgemental and empowering approach of workers was particularly highlighted as being helpful. Those Refuges that took a proactive approach to providing support, information and advocacy were more highly assessed by women to be effective as compared to those that took a reactive approach and waited until something happened or the woman requested help before responding. A high premium was placed on the effective twenty-four hours emergency response service from Women's Aid and the safety provided by most of the Refuges was seen to be of paramount importance. Research for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister found that Refuges were perceived by both users and professionals as providing a unique and highly regarded service (Levinson and Kenny, 2002).

Children also reported high levels of satisfaction with Refuges where services for children were available. The provision of a response to children however was inconsistent in that some Refuges did not have enough resources to provide any or adequate numbers of children's workers. The main concerns of both children and women was that there were not enough contact hours with workers and that children needed more one on one time and "in-depth" work with workers. Children and women stressed the importance of children having contact with children's workers as soon as they come into the Refuge.

The quality of accommodation in Refuges was mixed and was mostly affected by the level of resources Refuges had and whether the building was purpose built or not. The most popular model of Refuge amongst women and children was that of cluster Refuges, which comprise self contained flats for each family with communal space attached. Shared Refuges which required families to share cooking and bathroom space was not chosen by any women or children as their preferred Refuge option. However, they did report that in shared Refuge space they experienced greater levels of support and a sense of security gained by living with families in similar situations and by having closer contact with workers on an ongoing basis. The majority of women and children valued workers being on site and felt that was an important support for them.

The report recommended that national minimum standards be put in place for Refuge provision and that all future Refuge development be based on the cluster Refuge design. They recommended that all Women's Aid groups providing Refuge move towards proactive support, information and advocacy and that increased funding needed to be made available to increase the services to children in Refuges. Increased partnership work was recommended to enable the Refuges to better meet the needs of a diversity of women.

In a study into shelter capacity and provision in the state of Minnesota, the authors carried out a review of evidence into the effectiveness of shelters as a response to women experiencing domestic violence (Coleman, 2001)<sup>7</sup>. They concluded that the studies indicated that shelters have a long term deterrent effect on violence in that they help women keep themselves and their children safe from future abusive situations. They argue the benefits of shelters can be greatly augmented by cooperative efforts with child protection agencies and the legal system.

A report to the Western Health Board on current responses and gaps in responses to violence against women in County Roscommon contains a review of literature in Ireland and the UK on women's experiences of support, information and advocacy services provided by frontline services (O'Connor and Wilson, forthcoming). The studies reviewed drew out the most important helping factors in these services and concluded that women consistently reported that the most effective responses have been from community-based women's organisations providing specialised services to women experiencing violence (Boyle, 1998, Kelly et al, 1999, Burton and Kelly, 1998, Kelleher Associates, 2001). The specific factors, which made these specialised services so effective, included:

- **Challenging women-blaming messages, which helped women change their perspective.**

*"It helped me hold my partner accountable for his actions and to learn that I would not be able to make him change. I was amazed to hear other women's partners behaved in a remarkably similar abusive way as mine. I could then separate the abuse from feelings of self blame and realised I had to leave him or things would get worse and worse." (Burton and Kelly, 1998)*

- **The trusting relationships that the women had with support workers were highlighted as being very important in supporting women who experience violence.**
- **Provision of clear and accurate information about all of the woman's options particularly in relation to her legal rights and time to work through the possible consequences of taking action.**

*"Friends and family can give you sympathy. The project gives you solid information and practical advice, which helps you to make a plan for the future." (Kelleher Associates, 2001)*

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<sup>7</sup> Women's Refuges are commonly called shelters in the United States of America and Canada.

- **The ongoing nature of the support and the fact that support was always available regardless of what decision the woman made.**
- **Proactive advocacy which resulted in women being supported to make decisions more quickly and remove barriers, which prevented them from achieving protection and support and access to basic services.**

*“ This is excellent, I can’t say enough praise for the police and the DVM. They worked brilliantly together. The support was invaluable. Thank God for this place.” (Kelly et al 1999)*

- **The accessible nature of the support services.**
- **Support to overcome the trauma of violence and abuse and move on to a life free of violence and abuse.**

*“ I have rediscovered myself again and have re-learned to value and love myself again. I have renewed confidence and now feel prepared to move on in my life and regain further independence by rejoining the workforce.” (Boyle, 1998)*

Paramount to all of these responses was the prioritisation of women and children’s safety. These organisations had an in-depth knowledge of the level of danger women and children lived in and an understanding of the risk factors for serious injury or homicide. Therefore, regardless of what stage a woman was at in accessing protection and support, practitioners worked to maximise women’s and children’s safety by assessing risk, working out safety plans with women, advocating with the police, courts, legal aid services and probation and welfare and accompanying women to court.

### **Level of Refuge provision**

In examining the level of shelter provision and whether it was adequate in the state of Minnesota, researchers used a statistical model that related shelter occupancy to county population (Coleman, 2001). They estimated that in a county of approximately 100,000 population, that seventeen shelter beds for women were needed. They found that whilst Minnesota as a whole had enough sheltered accommodation, that there were some areas that had none or very little and that this prevented women in these areas from accessing shelter. Where women had access to shelters, they estimated that 20% of those women who experienced violence and abuse at the hands of a male partner availed of this option.

## Where women went when they left Refuges

The survey carried out by Sonas Housing and the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services (Sonas and NNWRSS, 2003) collated data on where women went when they left Refuges.

Table 1: Where women went when they left Refuges

Where women went	Settled women	Traveller women	Non national women
Home to partner	215	378	36
Home without partner	75	47	11
Home with court order	59	26	12
Supported housing	5	1	3
Local authority housing	1	1	-
Housing association	3	-	-
Private housing	89	13	9
Family and friends	89	82	14
Other Refuge	24	38	3
Hostel or B&B	25	4	1
Other	21	8	5
Unknown	87	74	5
Total	693	672	99

The survey carried out by Sonas Housing and the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services (Sonas and NNWRSS, 2003) collated data on where women went when they left Refuges. Of 1,464 cases, 629 women went back to their partner or husband, 133 went home without partners or husbands and ninety-seven went home with a court order. Of the remaining women the majority went to private housing (111), family or friends (185) or the location was unknown (166). Only two women accessed permanent accommodation in local authority housing straight from Refuge in 2003.

## Women and children's experience of transitional supported housing

Sonas Housing Association and the Sonas Housing Partnership are the only providers of transitional supported housing for women and children out of home because of domestic violence in Ireland. Tenancy is conditional on tenant's acceptance of the Sonas model of support. Sonas provides houses and apartments for women and children for up to two years and during this time the supported transitional housing is designed to enable women to regain control and autonomy for themselves and their children. Following the completion of the agreed time in transitional housing, Sonas in cooperation with local authorities assist families in moving on to a permanent home (Sonas Housing Association Information Leaflet 2004).

A review of Sonas Housing's model of supported transitional housing was carried out in 2000 (Zappone, 2000). Sonas work to the same principles and practice guidelines as the services reviewed in the previous section and therefore women who participated in the evaluation reported a consistently positive response reflecting many of the experiences reported in the studies referenced earlier. The review said that the impact of Sonas' empowerment model of work had a positive impact on the majority of the tenants and concluded that Sonas Housing Association had made significant progress in meeting its original aim of restoring control to women who had experienced domestic violence. The focus on supporting women to overcome the emotional and psychological effects of violence and abuse leads to women being able to move on from the experience of domestic violence and to restore a sense of control and well being in their lives and for their children.

*"There is a positive atmosphere here. I feel supported to meet my challenges. They provide a listening ear. My key worker treats me with respect. She says that I have all the answers inside of me, that we must make the choices ourselves. I would recommend Sonas to anyone."*

The high quality of the accommodation and the safety and security women experienced when living there gave women the space to consider their future without the stresses associated with other forms of accommodation women live in when out of home because of violence.

*"The accommodation is great. Exactly what I need. It's a very cosy bungalow. The maintenance is great." (Zappone, 2002)*

## **Policy context**

### **Violence against women**

There have been a number of legislative and policy developments in Ireland in recent years that impact on the delivery of responses to violence against women. The most significant development was the setting up of the Task Force on Violence Against Women and the production of the Task Force Report in 1997 in which a comprehensive set of recommendations were proposed. The subsequent establishment of the National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women and eight regional planning committees saw a national structure for the first time with a remit to have a national overview of the development of responses to domestic violence, rape and sexual assault. The Regional Planning Committees have a strategic overview of their region and bring together key non governmental and statutory agencies and organisations to ensure that a range of comprehensive services are in place.

## Housing

Local authorities have the responsibility for the provision of housing for households who are unable to provide accommodation from their own resources, including victims of domestic violence. The provision of local authority housing is financed under the Public Capital Programme through the Department of the Environment and Local Government. Local authorities may regard persons who are unable to occupy, or remain in occupation of, otherwise suitable accommodation due to violence, as being homeless for the purposes of the Housing Act, 1988. Victims of violence may have their housing needs assessed under the Act and be allocated suitable housing subject to availability. The Task Force Report on Violence Against Women (1997) recommends that local authorities should make special provision in their scheme of lettings for women homeless due to violence.

In a survey of six local authorities in the Eastern Regional Health Authority carried out by the Sub Committee on Refuges and Housing in the Eastern Regional Planning Committee on Violence Against Women (forthcoming), the following findings emerged:

None of the six local authorities had a policy on domestic violence. In their approved scheme of lettings, they all allocate priority to those who are assessed as homeless, however, the extent to which women out of home because of domestic violence are assessed as being homeless varied greatly from council to council. One commonality which did exist was that all of the local authorities considered a woman to be homeless if she was living in a Refuge, a homeless hostel or a Bed and Breakfast. The majority of the authorities did not consider a woman homeless if she was staying with others such as family or friends however, two said that if a woman was “involuntarily” in that position they would consider her as homeless.

Local authorities also varied in response to a question on whether or not they would give a woman tenancy if she had a tenancy with her abusive partner or husband or shared ownership. If councils gave temporary lettings, there was a possibility they would allocate one to a woman in this situation whilst her previous housing was being sorted out through legal means. However, one authority responded that they would not do this until all other means had been exhausted such as applying for barring, safety and protection orders.

The councils were asked if they would sever a tenancy if the remaining tenant had a barring order taken out against them. Under the 1997 Housing Act, councils have the power to evict someone for anti social behaviour. The Act does not specifically name domestic violence as a form of anti social behaviour and so a number of the councils found a difficulty in using the provisions of that Act to evict a person who has engaged in violent behaviour to a joint tenant.

Three councils said that their homeless section would take referrals from women’s Refuges in the Eastern region and only two said they would take referrals from outside of the region. One would only take referrals from the refuge in their county and one council, which had no Refuge in the county, would take no referrals from refuges. In three of the

councils, there are plans for the provision of new women's refuges, which would bring to six the number in the Eastern region. Only two of the six councils have transitional housing for women and children out of home because of domestic violence.

## Homelessness

The Housing Act 1988 provides the definition of homelessness. It states that if a person "may not reasonably continue to occupy" their home, that person should be considered as coming under the definition by their local housing authority as homeless. Local Authorities are required by the government to develop and implement in agreement with relevant voluntary and statutory bodies, three-year action plans on homelessness with the ultimate goal of eliminating homelessness by 2010.

The Homeless Agency in Dublin was established as part of Government strategy on homelessness. It works as part of a partnership structure bringing together voluntary and statutory agencies with responsibility for planning, funding and developing services to people who are homeless. The first three year action plan in the Dublin area covered the years 2001 to 2003 and the second three year plan "Making it Home" (Homeless Agency 2004) was launched in July 2004. This covers the period 2004 – 2006. The focus of this plan is on the prevention of homelessness. Key strategic aims include reducing the number of households who become homeless, increasing housing supply for single people, reducing the duration time that people are homeless and ensuring that quality standards are operated in all homeless services. The focus of the plan is on single people and as a result, the specific circumstances, experiences and needs of women and children out of home because of domestic violence are not addressed to any great degree. The plan states that good quality social housing is the key to solving homelessness but also acknowledges that housing will not by itself prevent or solve it and that there are a significant number of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness who require ongoing or periodic support to enable them to sustain tenancies and avail of services and that provision should be made for such responses. The plan contains individual action plans for each of the four local authorities in the Dublin area and both the Fingal and the South Dublin County Council local authority action plans contain goals to establish a Women's Refuge in each area. All counties are required to have a Housing Strategy within which provision for homeless persons is made.



## Section 2 Sonas Model of Work<sup>8</sup>

### Introduction

In this section the Sonas model of work is described through the words of women who have accessed supported transitional housing in Sonas. In addition, twenty-five case reviews were carried out and workers were interviewed in order that each key area of work was explored and documented.

### Sonas Housing Association

Sonas Housing Association's mission statement states that they exist:

*'To provide good quality safe accommodation for women and their children made homeless primarily by domestic violence, and to provide a holistic support service to empower women and children to regain control over all aspects of their lives. Furthermore to influence housing and social policy and decision making as it relates to women and their children out of home due to domestic violence'*

Sonas Housing Association was incorporated as a company in 1992. Most of the personnel involved in setting up the housing association were working in Women's Aid at the time of its establishment and had first hand experience of the need for a continuum of support for many women who had fled from domestic violence. It was agreed that a separate organisation should be formed to operate independently as a supported housing provider.

The 1980's saw no growth in public housing provision and as one consequence, the numbers of homeless people were increasing. Women using the Women's Refuges and who could not return home were forced to stay in emergency accommodation for long periods, while those women who needed to access the Refuges could not do so because of this "bottle neck" in emergency provision. In 1991, legislation was introduced which allowed the voluntary sector access funding for the provision of social housing. This enabled the establishment of Sonas and the development of a focussed support service for women provided within a transitional housing context.

The development of organisational structures and policies was facilitated through consultation with Cymdeithas Tai Hafan, Carmarthen, Wales (1999). This was the only housing association in the UK providing the same type of service envisaged by Sonas. It identifies its statement of principle as "..... building better opportunities for women by providing safe, quality housing throughout Wales for women with or without children who are vulnerable and in need of support"

In co-operation with Dublin City Council, Sonas opened its first housing complex in north Dublin in 1996. The principles underlying the service from the outset have been centred on

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<sup>8</sup> See page 8 for a description of the methodology used for this study.

the needs of the service users and all changes to procedures, protocols and policies are based on the identified needs of those using Sonas supported housing.

Since 1996 Sonas has opened four further housing complexes in the Dublin area, and pursues an active development programme. In 1998 it was the lead agency in the creation of the Sonas Housing Partnership when it joined with Dundalk Women's Aid, Mayo Women's Support Services and Meath Women's Refuge to replicate in their counties the service developed in Dublin.

The funding for Sonas Housing Association is channelled through the Homeless Agency by the area health boards and county councils in Dublin. Funding for the Sonas Housing Partnership is made available through, Dundalk Town Council, Mayo County Council and Meath County Council. Core funding of €595,000 was received by Sonas Housing Association in 2003.

**Table 2: Description of Sonas Housing Association properties and opening dates**

Council Area	Property type	Bed spaces	Opening date
Dublin City Council	25 houses – 10 made permanent since 2001	45	February 1996
South Dublin County Council	5 houses (1 permanent) 4 apartments	35	September 2001
Dublin City Council	4 apartments (1 permanent)	14	June 1999
Dublin City Council	2 houses 2 apartments	15	August 2002
Dublin City Council	7 houses, 3 apartments	35	May 2004
<b>Total</b>	<b>Housing Units: 52</b>	<b>144</b>	

### Criteria for tenancy

Priority is given to women who have been forced to leave their homes because of domestic violence. Applicants must be eligible for local authority housing and have been referred through an agency with whom they have been in contact for at least one month. Women are interviewed by a Sonas worker who assesses the woman's needs and suitability. A woman is offered accommodation where there is a demonstrable need for supported housing and where the woman can agree to work to the Sonas model of support.

## Data on applications, tenancies, referrals and move ons

### *Applications and tenancies*

Data from Sonas Housing shows that they have had 166 applications for supported transitional housing since they opened in 1996. Of these, 108 women were offered and have taken up tenancies in Sonas Housing Properties, two women refused tenancies and two applications are still pending a decision. Of the remaining applicants, thirty-five were refused a tenancy and twenty-three applications were withdrawn. 185 children have lived in Sonas during this period. This does not include properties managed by the Sonas Housing Partnership.

Reasons women were refused a tenancy included that the level of present risk was too high, Sonas could not provide the level of safety required. There were inappropriate referrals where women who had not experienced domestic violence and some cases where women had not finished the relationship with the perpetrator.

Referrals to Sonas came from a variety of sources. Figures from 2002-2004 show that the most common referral agency was women's refuges (30). The next most common referral agency was the health board (15) and local authorities made nine referrals during this period. Other agencies that referred women to Sonas included homeless organisations, counselling services and community groups.

During this period thirty-nine women accessed permanent housing through local authorities and six women moved on to permanent housing provided by other housing associations. Four women went to live with other family members and two were offered permanent housing in Sonas. Five women were given notice to quit Sonas and six other women went to a variety of other locations.

### **Interviews**

Eleven women who live or have lived in Sonas Housing Association properties were interviewed for the research. The focus of the interviews was to gain information and insight into women's experience of violence and abuse, their experience of homelessness and the response of Sonas Housing Association.

### **Women's experience of violence and abuse**

All of the women experienced multiple forms of abuse at the hands of their male partners or husbands. Only one of the women did not experience physical violence from her husband. Ten women described long histories of severe physical and/or sexual violence, abuse and intimidation.

## Physical violence

Ten of the women experienced many forms of physical violence from their husbands or partners and in all cases the violence was reported to be of a severe nature. In the majority of cases women incurred serious injuries as a result of the violence including multiple bruising, broken noses, broken arms and hands, head injuries and broken teeth. Women described being thrown against objects, weapons being used and having objects thrown at them. In one case, the violence started during the woman's first pregnancy and two other women reported being assaulted whilst pregnant. As Irene stated:

*“He was alcoholic, drug addicted, extremely violent and violent throughout my pregnancy. I constantly had black eyes – he used to hit me with a wet towel across my face.”*

All of the women reported being in fear of serious injury and five of the women expressed fears about themselves or their children being killed by the perpetrator. These two women's accounts illustrate the severity of the violence they were subjected to and the level of risk they lived with:

*“I experienced physical abuse from my husband throughout our thirty year marriage. The beatings resulted in injuries to my face and head. Once he beat me up very badly because my mother had gone ahead and insisted on him being charged after a serious assault which resulted in me having a broken arm in three places. He got six months in jail and served three and it was me he punished when he got out. He threatened to kill me and I was afraid that he would do it one day.” Cliona*

*“I was married for twenty-nine years. My husband was always violent. He has beaten me with hammers and as a result opened my head and knocked out my teeth. I have a large scar on my head and marks all over my body. My husband would actually put on his boots so that he could kick me harder.” Juliette*

## Sexual violence

Four women spoke directly of experiences of sexual violence. In one case the woman's husband tried to have sex with her and when she refused he gave her five or six violent punches to the head resulting in head injuries. All four of the women reported that they had been subjected to awful sexual violence and that their husband or partners raped them, were sexually very abusive and did degrading things. Deirdre said:

*“I suffered horrendous violence and abuse at the hands of my husband all throughout our marriage. The abuse was physical, emotional and sexual and I was subjected to a lot of sexual abuse and violence. This was the worst experience for me. I had a dreadful time, it was awful. He used to keep me awake all night and he physically assaulted me and raped me many times.”*

## The multiple and overlapping nature of the violence and abuse

In all cases women experienced emotional abuse and reported being consistently put down and undermined by their husbands/partners. This undermining was compounded by the fact that in all cases, husbands or partners took no responsibility for household chores or childcare and the majority of the women reported that their abuser controlled all of the money and contributed little to the family upkeep. Consistent accusations of infidelity and obsessive monitoring of the women's movements were also commonly experienced. The following examples illustrate the multiple and overlapping nature of the violence and abuse.

*“He was always very sexually and physically violent. He had no interest in the children, no communication. When we were out, if he thought I was looking at anyone, he would pick a fight. I used to find a picture on the wall to stare at for the evening so as not to be accused of looking at men. One time he cut his wrists in front of the children, the kitchen was like a butcher shop.” Juliette*

Only one woman out of the eleven interviewed did not experience physical violence. However, she experienced multiple forms of emotional and financial abuse:

*“I left my husband because of mental cruelty. I worked and had to pay for everything. He was on social welfare and refused to look for a job. He gave me £20 a week to pay for everything. I have a physical disability and still I had to do everything in the house. He would lie in bed all day and not do a thing. He sometimes would give me the silent treatment for a week at a time.” Emer*

## Tactics of control

Ten of the women reported that their husbands or partners were extremely controlling. Men employed a multiplicity of tactics to exert control over their wives and partners.

The most common tactic women reported was that the men were obsessively jealous.

They went everywhere with women and tracked and monitored their movements. Women were accused of having affairs with men even though many of them never went anywhere. The following three accounts illustrate the extent to which abusive men tried to control women:

*“He went everywhere with me, I was never on my own. Even when I went to my mothers, he would wait outside for me. He insisted I give up my job and would not mind the children or help pay for childcare. I had to give it up and he gave up his job so that he could stay at home and keep an eye on me. He also wrecked my car.” Aoife*

*“My partner was extremely possessive and jealous, he was even jealous of the first baby, saying ‘he was here first’. When he was in prison for drugs I was forced to visit him every*

*week and he would threaten me if I didn't. He controlled what I wore; I was not allowed to wear short skirts. I did all the housework, he never did anything. I suffered constant criticism, no matter what I did it was never enough. He also got me hooked onto heroin."*  
Lucy

*"He never left me alone and watched me all the time. He accused me of looking at other men and there was all kinds of awful name calling. The only time I had peace was when he was asleep. He used to lock all the doors and windows to stop me going out ... he controlled all the money."* Sarah

Women also commonly reported being blamed for everything by the man. They were responsible for all housework and childcare and their partner or husband made no contribution to domestic chores. In most cases, the man controlled all of the money. As stated:

*"I spent all of my time looking after the children and the home and doing housework and cleaning. I never went anywhere but just the same he'd accuse me of being unfaithful and was obsessively jealous. He never gave me enough money so I was always struggling. As long as he had enough of what he wanted he was satisfied. He didn't care if I did not have enough to feed the children. He blamed me for everything. He insisted that he was the boss and that his rules had to be abided by. He was mean to me, and the children, but outside of the house people thought well of him. He wasn't mean to anyone else. The children were all afraid of him and some of them still are."* Cliona

Men also targeted women's families and friends with the intention of isolating women from their sources of support. In one case the woman's husband beat up a good friend of hers who used to visit the house and after that she was afraid to have anyone in to the house. Another man constantly threatened violence against a woman's family because they were helping protect her against him.

In three cases, the women reported that their partners got them hooked on drugs and in one case a woman was forced to drink with her husband and subsequently developed a drink problem.

### **Children's experience of witnessing or experiencing violence**

All ten of the women who had children reported that their children had witnessed some of the violence and/or abuse and threatening behaviour. In some cases, the violence children witnessed was of a severe nature. In one case, the woman reported that her husband deliberately beat her up badly in front of the children to make the situation even more distressing for her.

*“I remember one incident when I was cowering in the corner and he was beating me and beating me and I could see the two children literally trying to climb up the walls to get out. He was pelting me with a hurl and there was blood everywhere, but my worst memory was of the children scratching and trying to climb out, like a cat, to get away from it. Once in front of them he threw an ashtray at my head, screaming that the food was only slop. I remember struggling not to faint so as to be there for the children.” Juliette*

Men also used children to control the woman in other ways. In one case, the man stripped the children to stop her going out with them. Another woman reported that her husband was very manipulative and used money to buy the children’s silence and co-operation.

### **Impacts on women**

Women reported multiple impacts as a result of the violence and abuse to which they were subjected. The main impact that women talked about was that they felt they had no confidence. Women talked about feeling as if they could do nothing for themselves. They felt hopeless and were terrified all of the time. The impacts lasted for a long time. For example, one woman said that she still lives with a lot of fear even though her husband died some time ago. The restriction of women’s movements by perpetrators resulted in women finding some places and tasks particularly challenging. Two women reported that they could not go into town on their own when they first left their husbands. Another woman stated:

*“My partner used to always come shopping with me and control everything. For a long time after I left him I could not go and do the shopping on my own and I still find it very hard. I have to push myself to do this and each time I make myself go for a little longer. I still look over my shoulder expecting to see him there.” Aoife*

A number of women have ongoing health impacts as a result of the abuse and in some cases these have been very debilitating.

*“As a result of the beatings he gave me, I have developed an eye condition and have lost the sight in one eye. I also have an ongoing stomach condition which causes me a lot of trouble.” Deirdre*

*“He beat me in the chest all the time I developed a heart condition. I had constant menstrual bleeding also from kicks in the stomach. I was admitted to hospital many times. In the end I just wanted to die. Lying in the bed after a blood transfusion he assaulted me. The nurse was really helpful. “ ‘She said’ “you don’t have to go back to him’ ” Sarah*

The impacts of men’s attempts to consistently undermine, degrade and humiliate women resulted in women experiencing feelings of low self-esteem and a lack of confidence.

## Impacts on children

Ten of the eleven women interviewed had children between the ages of a few months and early forties. There were thirty-nine children in all and of these, four of the children were in care. Women expressed concern and regret about the impacts of the violence and abuse that children experienced. The fear children experienced as a result of witnessing and experiencing men's violence and aggression is identified as a major impact. Aoife states

*“I left when my baby was six months old. This child is now three years old and she still remembers some things. She would not go near any man for two years after I left and is very angry sometimes.”*

Adult children continue to experience long term impacts even though they had lived away from the abuse for many years and had made lives of their own. One woman spoke about the regret she had about how her relationship with her adult children had been affected by her ex-husband's abuse.

*“One sadness for me is that my children do not acknowledge what happened. Two of my eldest did begin to, but the others don't want to talk about this at all. This is very tough for me. I think one of the reasons they can't talk about it is that he always bought them off with money and was very manipulative.” Deirdre*

One of the most devastating consequences for two women was that they lost their children into care.

## Women's experience of homelessness as a result of leaving violent partners and husbands

All of the women had made numerous attempts to leave violent and abusive partners and husbands. The women's accounts illustrate not only their experience of homelessness but the extent to which they continued to live at risk of violence from the perpetrator. In many cases, husbands and partners escalated the level of threat, aggression and violence and this often extended to family, friends and other sources of support the woman had accessed. This resulted in women returning to their homes and an increasing sense of powerlessness and of his control over her

## Women’s experience of homelessness

**Table 3: Location and incidence of homelessness and route to Sonas**

Woman	Family/ Friends	Refuge	2nd stage refuge	Homeless Hostel	Bed & Breakfast	Private Rented	Location prior to Sonas	Period of time in last accommodation before Sonas	Referred to Sonas by
Aoife	1	1					Refuge	8 months	Refuge
Belinda	Multiple	1					Refuge	5 months	Refuge
Cliona	Multiple	1					Refuge	8 months	Refuge
Deirdre	Multiple					1	Social housing scheme	Approx 1yr	Sonas Board member
Sarah		1		Multiple	Multiple		Refuge	8 months	Refuge
Lucy	Multiple				Multiple		B&B	2.5 years	Focus Ireland
Hannah	Multiple			Multiple	Multiple		B&B’s	15 months	Focus Ireland
Irene		1		Multiple			Refuge	10 months	Refuge
Juliette	1			1			Family	Unknown	Dublin Corporation
Karina		1	1				Refuge	8 months	Refuge
Emer							Own home		Voluntary organisation

In attempting to access safety, the majority of women had left their homes a number of times and lived in a variety of locations whilst homeless. As the table indicates, women went to family and friends, Women’s Refuges, homeless hostels, Bed and Breakfasts and the private rented sector. Six women went to family and friends and of these, four women went many times to different members of their family including adult children. Four women had been in homeless hostels, three on multiple occasions. Three women had been in Bed and Breakfasts on multiple occasions. Women were in Refuges for between five and ten months prior to being housed in Sonas. For the two women who had been in Bed and Breakfast prior to coming to Sonas, one woman had been in B&B’s for two and a half years and one had been in B&B’s for fifteen months.

Women’s accounts of these different accommodations illustrate the varying degrees of support and safety that they were able to access.

### Women’s experience of going to family and friends

Family and friends were the most likely place that women went to when seeking protection and support. Family members attempted to provide safety and protection over many years and on many different occasions. However, despite these efforts, family and friends could not provide any long term safe outcome for women as illustrated by the following accounts:

*“I went to my family on a number of occasions to get away from him. They were sympathetic but they always told me to go back to him because they knew he would be at their door causing trouble. I went back and forth like that for years.” Cliona*

*“I had left many times over the years with the children and I would go and stay with family. Once I took the children and went to my sister’s in the UK and stayed with her for five months. I always had to go home though. I couldn’t stay with family for long because they did not have room and there was nowhere else to go.” Deirdre*

*“I tried to leave him a few times and each time went to my family who tried to protect me and the two children. For three months I went back and forth between him and my family but each time I went back to him the threatening behaviour would start again after a few days. My partner began to threaten to do terrible things to my family. The threats became relentless and a daily occurrence. In December I decided that it was time I took control of the situation. I went into the Refuge in January and got a house in Sonas in May of that year.” Belinda*

### **Women’s experience of homeless hostels**

Four of the women had experiences of living in homeless hostels. Their experience was largely negative. Factors contributing to this experience that were common to both hostels included:

- Lack of safety and security
- The proximity of the women’s hostels to male homeless hostels
- The level of drug and alcohol abuse in the hostels amongst other residents
- The lack of workers with a specialised understanding of the risk women lived with and of the trauma of violence and abuse

Women acknowledge however that in the hostel run by the Health Board that individual staff were supportive and sympathetic and attempted to find suitable accommodation for them. Women’s experience of the biggest women’s homeless hostel which is run by a religious organisation was overwhelmingly negative. These experiences included:

- Being locked out of the bedroom all day
- Being confined to a communal area with no privacy
- No facilities for children
- Insisting on an older boy being placed in a men’s hostel
- The absence of understanding of the women’s situation and any form of support

Two women gave details of their experiences in hostels:

*“I tried to leave many times but he found me and I went back. The places I was in were awful... hostels and B&Bs. I saw so much drugs. There were needles everywhere. I was terrified and went back.” Sarah*

*“The hostel was a dump. You were locked out of your room from twelve- thirty ‘til seven, so you had to just sit in the dining room with everyone else all day. Women in there were on the game and women on drugs, it was really tough.” Irene*

### **Women’s experience of bed and breakfasts**

Three women had multiple experiences of bed and breakfasts. All three women had been in many different B&B’s for prolonged periods of time and described their experiences of this form of emergency accommodation as frightening, abusive, inadequate and highly stressful. Key issues identified were:

#### ***Lack of safety and risk of further violence***

- High levels of drug and alcohol abuse
- Unsafe cooking areas
- Security men having access to bedrooms
- Mixed genders in the same B&B
- Violence and verbal abuse among male residents
- Men known to be violent being given jobs as security men on the door. In one case one was the women’s ex-partner.

#### ***Stressful and inadequate conditions***

- Cramped and overcrowded conditions
- Sharing facilities such as bathrooms with others
- Being made to leave the bedroom during the day
- Children having no play areas and not being allowed play outside the room

#### ***Invasion of privacy***

- Security men having access to bedrooms
- Welfare officers coming into women’s bedrooms
- Women’s mail being opened by the owners and managers

### **Control of managers and landlords over women and children's lives**

- Being moved from place to place overnight
- Losing possessions due to sudden moves and stealing
- No visitors allowed
- Landlords and managers making any rule they like about women and children
- Being punished by being sent to a worse location or smaller room if children break the rules.

*“My experience of B&Bs was awful...the landlords and owners and managers can make any rules and let people in or not... they can have all kinds of rules about the children playing and if your child breaks them you can be punished by being sent to another one overnight. You have to move all your things or they will be thrown out. The owners, who are all men, can go into your room when you are not there. They open your mail. It is degrading. There is all this roaring and shouting which is very frightening for children. There is no space for your things or theirs... they are all in other people's houses.” Lucy*

*“.. they (landlords) got 52 euro a night for me...they have access to your bedroom at all times. You're not allowed have things there of your own... even a chair.” Hannah*

### **No support**

- Preventing support workers such as Focus Ireland from entering the premises
- No support from workers in B&B's
- Workers not having any experience to equip them to work with women and children

*“I spent fifteen months in B&Bs, it was really hard. You get no support and no visitors are allowed in. A lot of people in B&B's are on drugs. A lot of women who have had awful experiences, like been raped by fathers and step-fathers, end up homeless. You have no human rights in those places.” Hannah*

*“I was living with the four children in two rooms on the North side of the city. I took the children to Shankill every morning to school where they had been when I was with my mother so that they would at least be kept in their own school...I would sit in my mother's or sister's till seven o'clock every evening and then go back to the B&B...I had to be in by nine o'clock and was always worried about making it.” Lucy*

## Women's Experience of Refuges

Women were overwhelmingly positive about their experience in Women's Refuges. The key elements that women identified as contributing to a safe and supportive experience included:

- The level of safety and security that they and their children experienced whilst in Refuge
- Staff who understood the trauma of abuse and violence and were able to support women to deal with the impacts of this
- Advocacy with and for women particularly with the legal system
- Supporting women to seek the protection of the Gardaí and to proceed with cases
- Clear guidelines and rules in relation to drugs and alcohol which helped women and children feel safer and more secure
- Being with women who have experienced violence and abuse resulted in women feeling less isolated and able to identify the commonality of their experience of abuse and the tactics of abusers
- Support for children through play activities and other supports from children's workers
- Access to accurate and expert information and time to consider options.

Of the seven women who went to Refuge, two women were in Refuge on more than one occasion. One of these women had been in Refuges many years ago when supported transitional housing did not exist as an option. When she left her husband for the final time, her stay in the Refuge led to accessing a house in Sonas. For five women, a single prolonged period in a crisis Refuge resulted in a direct route into Sonas. The following quotes illustrate the experience of these women.

*"When I left two years ago, I knew I would not go back. I knew I could not take it any more. I don't know where I would be were it not for the Refuge and Sonas. I have had very good experiences of both. When I went to the Refuge first I thought I would not fit in because I was older than most of the women there who were all quite young. I got on really well though and liked being there. The staff were great. They referred me to Sonas and went with me to the interview." Cliona*

*"I stayed in the refuge for eight months. There were rules around drugs and alcohol so I felt safe. My key worker was wonderful. When he (ex-partner) found out I was there he would threaten me over the phone and leave notes in but he was afraid to cause trouble at the Refuge because he knew they would call the police." Sarah*

## Private rented

One woman was in a number of private rented accommodations after she left her husband and continued to experience intimidation, threats and assaults from him. She accessed the support of the outreach service in one Refuge and they accessed housing for her in a social housing scheme. However, the scheme was not designed for women leaving violent men and her husband continued to harass and threaten her. It was not until she was able to access housing in Sonas three years after she had left her husband, that she finally felt safe from his violence and abuse.

*“A friend got me a flat in a house her daughter owned. It was just one room and it was awful. I was very unsafe throughout this time. My husband constantly harassed, threatened and followed me. On one occasion he broke in the front door of the house I had the room in. My husband often accosted me on the street and I was always looking over my shoulder. I was terrified all of the time” Deirdre*

## Women’s Experience of Sonas

A key focus of this study was to explore women’s experience of the Sonas model of supported transitional housing. In the interviews women were asked to describe how Sonas had responded to their needs and to the needs of their children. Women were asked to outline what they thought the outcome had been for them and their children as a result of coming to Sonas. The critical needs and aspirations women identified that they had when they came to Sonas were complex and multiple. The following describes how those needs and aspirations were met.

## Safety, protection and security

For the majority of women the primary need for protection and safety was met. Every woman had a risk assessment and safety plan worked out from the beginning with her key worker. In relation to the physical space women felt that their individual houses were of high quality and were safe and secure. The fact that most Sonas houses are located in a semi-enclosed private estate meant that men were far more reluctant to harass and intimidate women at their own homes. Women said that men realised that they were not alone and had the support of other residents and workers.

*“At first I thought it would be hard to be so far away from where I lived before but I think now that it is good ..he does not have a clue where I am and none of my children would tell him.” Cliona*

*“Then Sonas offered me an apartment... it is fantastic. I was very nervous at the beginning but now I love it . My support worker is there when I need help and I know the guards will be there immediately if he found me.” Sarah*

They felt that workers understood the long, difficult and often dangerous path that women had to travel to get away from violent partners and achieving safety. These three women's accounts demonstrate this difficulty:

*“When I was pregnant with this baby (from her new partner) he beat me up really badly. But since then I have stood my ground and gotten stronger and stronger. My key worker really understood that I was still grieving about the break even though I knew how violent he was.. and that this did not mean I had to or would go back.”*

*“I knew I would never get away from him without support. I was interviewed by Sonas but they felt I was still not sure about leaving my partner. I told them I could not do it alone and they agreed to give me a house but delayed the move in and supported me over a few months to make the final decision and then I moved in. It was fantastic support emotionally... he had been so controlling that I needed the workers support to get through it all. He tried to persuade me to let him in. At the beginning I was afraid to say how much he was coming there as I thought I might lose my house. I told my key worker and we worked together on building my confidence and strength and safety.” Hannah*

### Re-gaining power and control

The men also very quickly realised that Sonas had developed a close liaison with the Gardaí and solicitors, enabling women to avail of legal and Garda protection. Women with support were encouraged and enabled to follow through with prosecutions resulting in some sanctions of the courts. It is the combination of these factors which women identified as leading to safety for them and accountability of the perpetrators.

Ultimately Sonas was able to shift the power for some women in enabling them to make a stand against their abuser for the first time. One woman's story shows how living in Sonas gave her the courage to stand up to her husband.

*“My life changed from the first day I lived here. Since day one I was happy here, it is the only place that I have ever felt safe in and I know that the workers are always there to support me and help me to be safe. It has helped me fight back and stand up to him. It makes a difference to him too because he knows I am not alone and that I have people behind me. The fact that the estate is semi-private also makes a difference as he has come and stood across the road to intimidate me but he does not come onto the estate. One day he was across the road outside the shop and I went over to him and asked him what he was doing there. I told him if he came near me or my house that I would call the police. I could not believe that I stood up to him like that. Before that I had always been so scared.” Deirdre*

## Understanding and support in coming to terms with the trauma and impacts of years of abuse and violence

Most women had been subjected to years of abuse and violence. Many women described feelings of depression anxiety and fear. Some women had difficulties with alcohol and drug abuse as a result of coping with physical and sexual violence. Women's experience of Sonas was overwhelmingly positive. They described skilled, experienced and respectful workers who understood the complexity and pain of recovering from abuse. They consistently said workers were warm, kind and wonderful. Whilst Sonas workers offered ongoing emotional support they also accessed long term counselling and therapy where it was identified as a need. Women said that they had space and time to recover and overcome the impacts of abuse and plan for the future.

*"I can't say enough about Sonas. They are brilliant, they would do anything for you, When I came here I was broken. I was completely in bits. All the women who come here are broken but you should see them two years down the road, women are walking with heads held high. They have got jobs and bought cars and have their lives back, its fantastic what Sonas does. I honestly believe I would be dead if I had not come to live in Sonas. They really help women build up their confidence. They helped me access counselling and I have done lots of that which has been great, they gave me a lot of emotional support as well as practical support." Deirdre*

## Time and space to regain confidence, strength and independence

Women consistently talked about having lost all confidence and self-esteem as a result of being constantly criticised, undermined and terrorised. They felt that Sonas was a safe secure place to build their confidence slowly and regain a sense of themselves as independent women. They described how workers encouraged them to set personal achievable goals and supported them to take one step at a time. They were given time to look at options and make good decisions for themselves and their children. Juliette stated:

*"I cannot believe Sonas is so great...this time I will never go back. There were only two choices for me – a psychiatric hospital or Sonas. Now I have completed a computer course, I have made friends, I have so much more confidence. When I come home the house is quiet – we can have dinner when we want to. It's the little things that make me happy – like going to the shops on my own again, that my son and I can watch on Television what we want to. We can go to bed when we want to and not listen to him roaring. I feel so safe here, I would never have made it without Sonas – he would have bullied his way back in if I had been anywhere else. Now I am getting stronger and stronger."*

And Emer talked about her long-term plans:

*“ I am looking to move on and to get a two bed roomed apartment. I am looking ahead to my 60’s when I may need a personal assistant. I have applied to the county council and am on the housing list for a development near here.”*

### Support to access rights and entitlements

As a result of years of violence, abuse and homelessness, many basic rights of women and their entitlements have been denied them. In addition the impacts of violence resulted in women needing the support of various agencies. The key areas identified were in relation to the mental and physical health of both women and children, social welfare entitlements and housing. These two examples illustrates Sonas’s work in this area.

*“They have given me lots of information about the community and what is available. I am in a mother & toddlers group. They have got me a really good GP and a dentist to get my teeth replaced. The GP was very helpful with the baby who was very nervous, very small and had withdrawal symptoms from methadone when he was born. I don’t know myself.”*  
Irene

*“ I was sixty-three when I left and signed on in the labour exchange. When they asked me if I was available for work I said no as I have spent all my life at home looking after the children and I didn’t feel at this stage I would do this. They stopped my payment. My key worker helped me prepare and write my appeal and supported me to build the confidence to go back down to the Labour with it. They looked at the appeal and reversed the decision immediately and I got my payment.”* Cliona

Those women who had left Sonas or who had come to the end of their tenancy were supported or were being supported by Sonas to access local authority or housing association houses. Sonas liaised with the councils and housing associations, recommended them for housing and wrote references on their behalf.

### Developing independent lives

Women spoke with enthusiasm about how Sonas staff identified opportunities for training and education and actively encouraged women to return to the workforce and gain an independent income. The majority of women have participated in a range of courses and activities and have made connections with women’s groups, community groups and other community based services during the period of their stay in Sonas. The following four accounts from women illustrate how they have been supported to break the isolation they were experiencing to regain a sense of control:

*“Sonas connected me in with a lone parent’s centre in Coolock. They are fantastic, I would do anything for them. Now I am working for them with young girls who become pregnant, trying to help them deal with the responsibility of this...I am sure I will not let anyone control me now. I am working part time on a CE course and am going to do a family law course. I am saving for a car.” Aoife*

*I had to start again with just two bags of clothes...I lost everything but I am independent now and have moved on with my life. I have been housed near the Sonas development. While I was in Sonas I did lots of courses and got a job for one year in a community centre... I have just been offered a job in a school.” Hannah*

*“I have been shown all the things to do in the area. I have done two courses, one on computers and one on communications. I have met loads of people through the courses. I am much stronger in myself.” Sarah*

*“It has just been brilliant, the support has been great. I have done courses in stress management, computers, arts and crafts, alternative foods and nutrition. I am going back to education in September and then will look for work to support myself and the kids.” Lucy*

## **Trauma and abuse of their children**

Women with children consistently spoke with sadness and regret about the damage and pain their children had experienced as a result of their partners’ violence and in some cases because of their experience of homelessness. The fact that Sonas had a specialised service for children was of major importance to women.

They named the following things that Sonas provided as being important for their children:

- Safety and freedom for their children
- An opportunity for their children to be happy and have fun
- Support for themselves as mothers to deal with the impacts on them as parents
- Direct support for children in recovering and overcoming the impacts of both witnessing and experiencing abuse
- Linkages with schools and specialist support agencies for children

Lucy talked about the positive change she has observed in her children:

*“The kids are amazing they are getting first in their class the boys are doing really well in soccer and gaelic also. Their reports are excellent...they have prizes and medals for achievement. They are so happy also I think because they see me happy and laughing. This was the best Christmas we have ever had ... not fuelled by alcohol and his abuse.”*

Dealing with the long term impacts on older adult children and their difficulties in coming to terms with what happened was discussed by older women.

*“My son used to scream in his sleep, he was a bundle of nerves – now he is slowly getting better and has more confidence. He is in college and doing really well. Now my daughter and my grandchildren come and stay... its wonderful.” Juliette*

### Different levels of support needs

Women recognised the value of the Sonas model which offered different levels of support and contact based on each person’s needs at a given time. Women appreciated the need for intensive support at the beginning to establish a relationship of trust but that it was important to gradually lessen contact and have fewer meetings to build independence.

*“The staff are great, they leave you alone but they are always there if you need them. At first I saw my key worker every week and then every two weeks and now I check with her every month.” Belinda*

Belinda had always been very independent and she re-established this very quickly, however, she acknowledged that other women and children have much higher support needs than she does and than her children do.

### Moving On

There was a general view that the two year option was a fair and appropriate time for women to be in Sonas. Almost all women said they had fears and anxieties about moving out of Sonas and being on their own but they believed that for most women it was right. The timing and circumstances of the move was seen as critical and unique for each woman. Getting a permanent tenancy in a safe suitable area was of crucial importance. For some women the fact that they were re-housed in the area that Sonas was in was very helpful in terms of connections established in the community.

*“It was very hard to move on...I really needed the two years. I am glad now though. I thought I would like to go back to the northside of the city to be near my family but I am glad to be so independent and to have developed friendships and contacts myself here.” Hannah*

For Belinda her two years were up last May and she is currently awaiting word about an allocation in a housing association scheme.

*“I am really ready to move on now. There are restrictions here such as the no men rule. But I think this is a good idea. I appreciated this for the two years I was here as it gave me the space and structure that I needed but I am really ready to move on to my permanent home now.”*

### Permanent tenancy

While Sonas is a transitional housing provider there is provision for a smaller number of permanent tenancies which are made available to women who have completed a period of transitional housing and who do not require ongoing support.

Two of the women who were interviewed were permanent tenants and one was considering a permanent tenancy.

*“I am hoping to get a corporation house nearer the city as it would be nearer a lot of my children and also my daughter that lives with me works in town. I am considering taking permanent tenancy in Sonas. I am looking forward to making contact with some older people’s groups in town so that I can meet people of my own age and go out and do things and have some fun.” Cliona*

Another permanent tenant said:

*“What I appreciate most about Sonas is that they gave me a lovely safe place to live and gave me the space and the peace to become myself again. I look around the house and realise that everything in the house is mine and I can hardly believe it. Before this I never had anything. There should be many more places like Sonas for women in my situation.” Deirdre*

### Difficulties of the Sonas model for women

All of the women were asked if there were any difficulties or challenges for them in living in Sonas and in the model of support Sonas employed. Only two of the women identified issues in this regard.

One older woman found that the number of older children congregating outside her house was a challenge and would like Sonas to build play spaces for them away from the houses. Another woman had some experiences of bullying from other women. The workers had intervened in this but she experienced it as a difficult time. She is not sure that having women who have experienced violence all living in the one area is a good idea, however, other women found this particularly supportive as residents understood what they had been through. An extension of the time children spend in children’s activities was also identified as something she would like Sonas to do.

## Sonas Housing Association Model of Work

### Case reviews

Sonas Housing Association works to feminist principles and practice guidelines as outlined in the Women's Aid Model of Work (O'Connor & Wilson, 2002). In order to document how this model of work was applied within the context of a supported transitional housing programme for women out of home because of domestic violence, a review of twenty-five case files for 2003 was carried out<sup>9</sup>. The researchers sat with each of the support workers who had active cases in 2003 and asked them to describe the needs of women living in Sonas during this year and of the response to those needs by Sonas. Twenty five files were reviewed under each one of the practice principles as documented in the Women's Aid Model of Work. The researchers did not see the files and asked general questions of the workers. No identifying details of women and children were shared. A summary of the demographic information is documented and of the women's experience of violence and abuse.

### Summary information on background of women who lived in Sonas in 2003 (whose case files were reviewed)

Table 4: Age range of women

Age range	Total no. women
18-25	2
26-35	15
36-45	
46-55	4
56-65	1
66-75	
Not recorded	1
Total	25

The following table indicates the number of women who accessed these emergency accommodation options, whether or not they were in multiple locations and the average length of time they were homeless.

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<sup>9</sup> There were thirty-two women living in Sonas in 2003 whose cases were defined as active. Of these cases, twenty-five were reviewed. Five of the tenants were past the twenty-four month transitional period and were deemed to have successfully achieved all goals in their support contracts and were awaiting re-housing. The three remaining reviews could not be carried out within the timeframe of the research.

**Table 5: Locations and average length of stay in emergency accommodation**

Location/s	Number of women	Average length of time
Family/friends & Refuge	3	9.6 months
Family/friends & B&B	3	22 months
Family/friends & Refuge and B&B	1	18 months
Family /friends, Refuge, hostel & B&B	1	Not recorded <sup>10</sup>
Hostel and Refuge	1	Not recorded
B&B and Refuge	1	Not recorded
Other combinations	3	18 months
Refuge only	9	6.7 months
Family only	3	17.6 months

The length of time that women were homeless ranged from three months to 2.5 years. Thirteen of the women had lived in multiple locations during their period of homelessness and twelve had been in only one location during this period. The places women and children lived in when homeless were with family and friends, homeless hostels, Bed and Breakfasts and Women’s Refuges.

Those women who had only accessed Refuge accommodation had an average length of time when homeless of 6.7 months. For those women who had first gone to families and then to Refuges, the average length of time homeless was 9.6 months, whereas those women who stayed with family throughout the time they were out of home because of violence were with them for an average of 17.6 months. Women who accessed a combination of emergency accommodation were homeless for an average of eighteen to twenty-two months.

### **Current housing status**

Fourteen of the twenty-five women whose cases were reviewed are still tenants in Sonas Housing and two of the women are permanent tenants. Of the nine women who lived in Sonas in 2003 who have moved on to permanent housing, seven women are in local authority housing, one woman is in a housing association and one woman was granted ownership of the family home and returned there.

### ***Length of stay in Sonas***

There were two permanent tenants in the cases reviewed. Of those tenants who have left Sonas, their length of stay ranged from three months to four years with an average length of stay being one year and ten months. Of those women who are current tenants, the length of stay in Sonas ranged from ten months to three years and two months. The average length of stay for these women is two years.

<sup>10</sup> This woman was in emergency homeless accommodation over a number of years and had been in Refuge on multiple occasions. On the last occasion she was there for two months before getting a house in Sonas.

The following is a documentation of the Sonas model of work as recorded in the twenty-five case files, which were reviewed for this study. The information recorded under key practice principles is as outlined in Women's Aid's Model of Work. These key practice principles are the same principles to which Sonas work in the supported transitional housing programme.

## **1. Maximizing women and children's safety**

All of the women had been subjected to physical violence and in fifteen cases the violence was described as being of an extreme nature. In three cases it was recorded that the abuser had attempted to kill the woman. Case files held some records of extremely violent incidents that women had experienced from their partner or husband, including attempted strangulation, serious physical assault and assault of the woman when pregnant. In seven cases the abusers were described as being obsessively jealous and controlling and women were constantly monitored when with the abuser and stalked after they left them resulting in head and other injuries.

Risk assessment is carried out with all women who come to live in Sonas Housing. For sixteen out of the twenty-five women whose cases were reviewed, there continued to be an ongoing risk of threats, harassment and violence. In the majority of cases, ex-partners and husbands were still pursuing women when they came to live in Sonas and women continued to be at risk in locations other than Sonas, such as when visiting family. In the cases in which men had not pursued women or did not know where they were, there was still a risk that the women could have been in danger should the men find out where they lived or if the woman met them somewhere else. In all of the cases where there was an ongoing or possible threat to women and children's safety workers carried out safety planning. This involved supporting women to think of situations where they might be at risk, to identify possible sources of support in that situation, to work through those scenarios with women so that they could visualise how they could reach safety. It involved identifying ways to ensure women had ready access to phone numbers of the Gardaí and any other relevant agency and to encourage women to ask for help from others when ever they felt under threat. In the Sonas estates, residents were aware of the need to watch out for each other and to report any suspicious activity, which they felt, might indicate a possible threat to a woman. In one case, they moved the woman and children back to a crisis Refuge whilst keeping her tenancy in Sonas, such was the seriousness of the threat to the safety of the woman and children

Some abusive men used the opportunity of access to children to continue to harass and abuse women. In this case, workers supported women to apply for a change in or termination of access arrangements and went back to court with the woman. Where men tried to take the children out of school without the permission of the women, who had full custody, workers liaised with schools to alert them of the danger to both women and children of this and advised and supported women to sign a form in the school

preventing personnel from handing the children to anyone other than the mother or someone authorised by her.

In three cases, other family members not living in Sonas were also at risk of violence and abuse from the perpetrator and in these cases, Sonas workers developed safety plans with these family members also.

## **2. Understanding the trauma of violence and abuse and supporting women's increasing autonomy**

All of the men employed a multiplicity of coercive and abusive tactics in order to control the women. Twenty-four of the women had been abused by intimate partners and one by a family member. All of the twenty-five women had experienced multiple forms of violence. Of these twenty-four women, four women had also experienced physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their fathers and in two cases were still at risk from them also. Many cases of experiences of sexual violence were recorded, including repeated rapes. Workers acknowledged that in most cases women are subjected to sexual abuse and violence in a relationship, however it may not always be recorded in the woman's case file. The majority of the men were described as being financially abusive in that they controlled all of the money coming into the household and refused to take any responsibility for childcare or housework, this was also reported as a common form of abuse.

In all of the cases, workers reported that women were suffering some impacts as a result of the violence and abuse. In the majority of cases (16) those impacts were significant and recovering and healing from them was very much the focus for those women when living in Sonas. Workers identified that the impacts that women experienced were very individual to them and often depended on factors including the age of the women, the length of time she had been in the relationship, the nature of the violence, the multiple and overlapping forms of violence that some women had experienced at different stages of their lives and the cultural background of the woman. In response to this diversity of experiences, workers identified that a core element of their response was to work at the woman's pace and from where the woman was. Whilst they had knowledge and information about trauma and abuse, they individualized their response to each woman.

Workers stressed the importance of building a trusting and open relationship with women. Women have feelings of shame about the violence they had experienced and where women had experienced violence and abuse as children or in multiple situations as adults, this shame was more deeply felt. In some cases, women did not disclose experiences of sexual abuse until they were some time in Sonas. Workers highlighted the need to focus on establishing a safe relationship with women thus creating the conditions for disclosure and possibilities for the woman to access support towards recovery from the impacts of men's violence and abuse.

The majority of women experienced some form of emotional distress or anxiety. In regular support sessions with their key workers, they were encouraged to express feeling and thoughts about this and were given time to talk about and reflect on the impacts of violence and abuse. Workers acknowledged the women's feelings of distress, depression and vulnerability whilst at the same time actively affirming the women's strengths and coping abilities. They helped women to see that what they experienced was understandable as a result of the violence and abuse but that there was hope for the future that they would recover from the impacts. Where women were more severely traumatised workers suggested counselling and therapy to women and where women chose this as an option, referred them to counsellors and therapists who understood the trauma of violence and abuse.

For five women, chronic health problems had developed as a result of the long history of abuse to which they were subjected. Workers supported women to access doctors and identified General Practitioners located close to the housing estates that were sympathetic and sensitive to the women's experience and needs. As many of the women had never had the opportunity to think of themselves first and to take care of themselves, workers encouraged them to take time out, to rest and to do things for themselves that they found nurturing and enjoyable. As one worker said:

*“The first year of living in Sonas is just about being. It's about taking care of themselves, resting and restoring health and well-being. I am careful not to push a woman to take on too much in this year but encourage them to take care of themselves and to enjoy the freedom of being here.” Kate*

Like other workers, this woman recognized that this does not apply to all women and that it is important to help women assess their needs at an early stage and on an ongoing basis.

### **3. Informed and knowledgeable about the rights, entitlements and options for women and advocating for women's rights**

The aim of advocacy is to facilitate women to access rights and entitlements and to support women to minimize or prevent any possible negative consequences as a result of interventions by other agencies. In this respect, workers ensured that they had access to accurate and relevant information in order to be able to support women to access these rights and to effectively negotiate with state agencies and institutions. In one case the woman had had a very difficult and strained relationship with social workers. Her key worker spent a lot of time supporting the woman to build confidence to negotiate a trusting relationship with them.

Where women were not accessing their full financial entitlements, workers supported them to do so by informing them of their rights, referring them to social welfare offices and helping them to complete application forms and appeals. They also liaised with social

welfare offices when necessary. Most of the women living in Sonas in 2003 were dependent on a One Parents Family Payment (a lone parent allowance). This resulted in some women finding it difficult to cope and survive on this amount of money. Key workers supported women by helping them access the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and the Post Office Household Budgeting Service. Both of these services helped women to manage on what was an inadequate income. Where women had arrears from previous local authority tenancies, workers agreed a system with them where they paid their Sonas rent plus a small amount extra each week thereby paying off their arrears. In this way, women were able to become debt free and to build up a small credit with Sonas which was used to pay outstanding bills when they left. In one case where there were major arrears on the house, Sonas went with the woman to meet the housing authority. The council put the abuser under pressure to pay the arrears and then the woman was able to go on the housing list.

Other agencies that Sonas workers advocate with include child protection agencies, the Gardaí, the courts, schools, family therapy services and local authorities. Sonas has a particular remit to ensure that women move on to safe appropriate permanent housing after their two year stay and therefore they work closely with local authorities to this effect.

#### **4. Recognising that the best form of child protection is woman protection**

Twenty-three of the women had children ranging in ages from a few months to adult. There were ongoing support and advocacy issues in relation to the safety and welfare of children. Sonas recognises that women, as the primary carers of children should be at the centre of interventions to address any ongoing safety or welfare issues. At the same time, they have developed responses specifically for children, which are designed to address some of the impacts of witnessing and experiencing violence and abuse.

A number of children are still at risk of abuse or intimidation from the abuser. In these cases, workers support women to return to court to have access terminated or supervised. They also support women to access the child protection services in the Health Board and accompany women to meetings.

One of the impacts of men's violence was the separation of women from their children, particularly older children. When women come to Sonas, every effort is made to provide appropriate accommodation so that women can be reunited with children by having them come live with them or by at least having them to visit.

Children experienced ongoing impacts as a result of witnessing and experiencing violence and abuse including becoming withdrawn and silent, acting out aggressive behaviour, being clingy and frightened, being depressed and in some cases trying to overcompensate by always being good and taking on responsibilities beyond their years. Where these behaviours were identified as a problem, children's workers and women's workers worked to support them to address these problems. If the issue required expertise beyond that

held in Sonas housing, families are referred on to family therapy services. The work of the children's workers is documented later on in this section.

## **5. Being committed to ensuring justice for the victim and accountability of and sanctions against violent men**

A critical part of Sonas' work is to ensure that the civil and criminal justice systems are effective in delivering protection for victims and sanctions against domestic violence offenders. If there was a high risk that a woman would be re-victimised, workers actively liaise with the local Gardaí, introducing the woman to them and encouraging the woman to build good relationships with them. This results in prompt Garda action in most cases and in women experiencing an effective response from them when an abusive or violent incident occurs.

Where women were harassed, accosted or assaulted, again workers actively liaise with the Gardaí, supporting women to make statements and to press charges against the perpetrator when possible. They support women to apply for court orders and accompany women throughout the legal process. In most cases there are numerous hearings and appearances in both the family and criminal courts.

## **6. Supporting women to move from crisis to safety and independence**

A primary focus of Sonas's work is to support women to restore control and autonomy. Workers identified that there are a diversity of needs in this respect. Many of the women whose cases were reviewed were able to establish independence in a relatively short amount of time. They did access support from workers in the initial stages of their time in Sonas, but quickly accessed courses and jobs and were able to reconnect with family and friends. Workers reported that some women seized the opportunity of the safety and support they were experiencing and enthusiastically enrolled in courses and made connections with community and women's' groups.

For some women however, this task was more of a struggle as a result of the deep trauma and devastating nature of violence and abuse they experienced. This seemed to be particularly so for older women who had been in relationships with violent men for many years. Workers reported that women who had been subjected to violence and abuse over many years were terrified when they first came to Sonas. Women were afraid to stay in their house or apartment on their own, to go outside the Sonas estate and they doubted their own ability to take on simple tasks such as taking a bus into town or going shopping on their own. In these cases, workers ensured that they provided consistent, frequent and regular emotional and practical support to the woman. They helped women identify achievable short-term challenges and step by step encouraged women to move forward towards greater independence. One worker characterised the work of Sonas in this area as follows:

*“Women will survive, they will go on to move on in their life anyway whether or not they come to live in Sonas. I feel my job is just a drop in the ocean in comparison to the work the women do themselves. It really is awesome to see the changes in the women, to see how powerful a woman can become and how much a woman can become herself. This has to be acknowledged with women and part of my job is to reflect back what I see to the woman. Women will get there through a long route or a short route. Sonas gives women the opportunity that the journey doesn’t have to be so long or lonely. Women get the opportunity to regain a sense of themselves much more quickly than if they were trying to do this on their own.” Kate*

The workers in Sonas help women identify more long-term goals in terms of accessing work and education and connecting women into courses in community groups, through FAS and other educational institutions. Workers felt it was important that women access these services outside of Sonas and that they made connections with other women’s and community groups in the area as they stated that these organisations would be important to women when they left Sonas.

Accessing safe, appropriate, permanent housing is a key area of work in supporting women to re-establish safety and independence. In every case Sonas works to negotiate a suitable move on with local authorities.

## **7. Addressing additional barriers and discrimination that women experience**

Some women had to cope with additional barriers and discrimination as well as overcoming the trauma of violence and abuse and working to move towards autonomy. For some this resulted in drug or alcohol problems. Workers responded to these additional needs by in depth work with women themselves and close liaison with locally based psychiatric and mental health services.

All but two of the women left their own homes because of the violence and abuse. Two women were homeless with their partners as a result of the partner’s anti-social behaviour. They were living in bed and breakfasts and during this time sought to get away from their violent partners and went to other emergency accommodation.

Women who had been in bed and breakfasts described the experiences as dreadful. They were overcrowded and in both cases the women’s partners pursued them there and they felt unsafe. In one case a woman was living in grossly overcrowded conditions with a family member for six months.

Three of the women were from countries other than Ireland and for one woman in particular, experienced racism as a daily occurrence. Emotional support to deal with the impact of this was integrated into the worker’s regular support sessions with the woman. When one woman experienced discriminatory practice from an organisation because of

her ethnicity, her key worker actively intervened by contacting the institution and challenging these practices. This resulted in a reversal in their practice and the woman being able to access their services.

Workers reported that cultural differences meant that the way of working and addressing situations in Ireland was not familiar to some women and that therefore this presented additional challenges for both the woman and the worker. For example, one worker reported that for some non-national women she worked with, talking about personal issues with a person outside of their family was very difficult. In this case, the worker let the women know that she respected and valued the different ways women had of dealing with difficult personal issues, but consistently assured the women of ongoing support should they need it. They explored different options with women such as providing information on and connecting women in with organisations of women from their own culture and/or country.

In an interview with the Director of Sonas, the services manager and a project leader, information in relation to Sonas's work under the following two practice guidelines was gathered.

## **8. Engaging in action for political and institutional change**

One aim of the Sonas mission statement is to influence decision making in relation to housing and social policy, specifically as it relates to women out of home because of domestic violence. Sonas is affiliated to the Irish Council for Social Housing, the National Network of Women's Refuges & Services and is represented on the Board of Women's Aid. Members of management, staff and board sit on various fora in both housing/homelessness and violence against women sectors. The organisation has been instrumental in ensuring that these conjoined issues are kept active on the agendas of agencies with statutory responsibility in this area. Sonas provides a resource for the community and voluntary sector with specialist knowledge and experience in the issues of women's homelessness because of violence.

## **9. Encompassing feminist principles within the philosophy and ethos of the organisation**

Sonas is committed to maintaining a high standard in employment practice. This includes an induction period of at least one month and ongoing training for all staff. Sonas aims to provide at least one training module per year in which the entire organisation participates, as well as training for individuals and teams. There is a consultation process so that staff are involved in the development of policies and procedures which helps ensure that current and emerging issues for women and children inform practice and

policies. The provision of support and supervision is a key principle and all support staff meet for this purpose with their line manager monthly. Access to external supervision is limited by resources, but is available to all of the support team on three occasions per annum. External supervision is provided by therapists experienced in addressing the issues faced by staff working with women who experience violence, and who understand the gendered nature of such abuse.

*“One of the most difficult aspects of the work for all of us is the fact that we are operating in the dual role of landlord and support staff. There can be a tension between matters of estate management and support, and we must maintain an awareness of the rights of an individual and the common good. We work within a structure wherein we must be aware of the imbalance of power in our relationships with tenants, and aware of their past experience of those dynamics existing in past abusive relationships. Our role is to support women maintain their tenancies and address their personal support needs, while at the same time ensuring each complex runs smoothly. We therefore may have to address issues of conflicts with neighbours in a way which is fair to all concerned, and empowers individual tenants to address such difficulties also. We must strive always to be aware of our authority without being authoritarian. Good communication between staff is essential, and to that end we have daily briefings, weekly local team meetings, and monthly support and organisational team meetings.” Mary.*

### **Sonas Housing Associations’ response to children**

Sonas Housing employs three children’s workers and provides specific activities for children resident in three of their four housing developments in Dublin. In a group interview, workers were asked to share their knowledge, views and perspectives on a number of issues in order to illustrate some of the experiences children have had before they have come to Sonas, the needs they have when they arrive and the workers’ response to them.

### **Children’s experiences of violence and abuse before they came to Sonas**

Children’s workers stated that children generally don’t want to talk about their experience of witnessing or being subjected to violence and abuse when they come into Sonas. In the experience of the workers, they are protective of the past and cover up a lot of what happened. Workers would generally have an indication that children have experienced something traumatic by the way in which children sometimes act out by being aggressive or abusive to others. If a child does talk about their experience, they are more likely to do so when they are doing something else. A child might be playing and say something out of the blue about seeing their mother hit or intimidated in some way. Some of the children left when they were very young and will have little or no memory of why they left. This is a worry for some of the women who worry about what they are going to tell them when they get older.

Workers are aware that for children who have been living in Bed and Breakfasts before they came to Sonas, they are coping with a set of different experiences, as well as that of the violence and abuse. They have seen violence and aggression and have lived in very difficult conditions.

### The impacts on children of living with violence and abuse and being homeless

Workers stated that children are affected by violence and abuse in so many different ways. Each child is unique and will react in their own way. Children who have lived in Sonas have experienced a range of impacts including acting out what they have seen through being angry and aggressive, becoming withdrawn and trying to hold everything in, trying to overcompensate by trying to control as much as they can or be as good as they can or by excelling at schoolwork and suffering depression. The impacts on children are affected by what they saw, their age, their gender and their personalities, amongst other things.

### Needs children have when they come to Sonas

When families first come to Sonas, women are asked what they think are their children's needs. The primary need stated by women was their children's need to live in safety. This is not only in relation to escaping from the risk and threat of violence when living with the perpetrator of domestic violence but for also in relation to children's experience of homelessness in Bed and Breakfasts.

From the workers' point of view safety was also the primary need children have when they come to Sonas. They also need to have consistency, stability, structure and routine. The situations they have come from have often been really chaotic especially if they have been in Bed and Breakfasts. Workers stated that the children need to have fun, to relax and be children. They need reassurance about a number of issues and they need to know that it is not normal to hit another person and that no one has the right to abuse them or their mother.

Children's education has often been severely disrupted and affected because of their experiences and therefore support for women and children in relation to educational needs is also a priority issue for many families. Women also express concern over their children's behaviour and would like some help to address this. In some cases, the children and women's relationship can be disrupted because of the violence and homelessness and women express a need to re-establish good relationships with their children .

Workers have observed that children need to know that it is alright to make mistakes. They may have experienced severely negative consequences when they made mistakes before so workers reassure them that it is okay to do this. The building of trust with the

workers and sometimes with their mother is also a primary need for many children. Their trust has been so abused before and workers understand that it really takes time for children to start trusting others again. Children's workers stressed the importance of understanding that every child and every family is different and that it cannot be assumed that the needs they have are all the same.

### The role of the children's worker in Sonas

The children's workers roles span a number of areas. Firstly, they have a role to welcome the children to Sonas when they come to live there. They show them around the estate and facilities. They tell them about what it is like to live there and introduce them to other children. They sit with the children and try to learn a bit about them and their families and they introduce the children to the clubs and group work.

Children's workers run activity clubs for different age groups and homework clubs during term time. During term time, the clubs often involve issue-based workshops looking at issues such as bullying and conflict resolution. In the summer the focus is on fun, play, outings and activities. Workers also work one to one with children. They help them express feelings they may have or to address any problem they may have.

Workers also have a remit to work with women in relation to the children's needs and in this respect they liaise with relevant agencies and organisations. In most cases they provide women with information about the agencies and support them to contact them themselves. However they recognise that not all women are able to do this at first, and if a woman is finding it very difficult they will make the contact for her or accompany her to the agency whilst at the same time supporting women to restore their own independence in this respect. The agencies they liaise with include child protection social workers, teen counselling services, disability services, schools, family therapy services, public health nurses, summer projects and the Gardaí.

### Children's experiences of Sonas

The workers' views are that children have mixed experiences of living in Sonas. When children come to Sonas with their mothers there can be a mix of different emotions. They can be excited and fearful all at once. Workers feel that the most positive experiences that children have of living in Sonas include having a normal life after the chaos of living with violence and homelessness, having the security of having a home and knowing that their mum is going to be alright when they come back from school.

Whilst they love the freedom it gives them after bed and breakfasts or Refuges, and the safety they experience, some children have to deal with the stigma of being in Sonas. Unfortunately, in one community, some children are known as the children from the battered women's estate and have been teased and bullied about it. There also seems to

be a lot of scrutiny from the community. People are very quick to complain if anything goes wrong or if a child does something they don't like. There isn't the same level of scrutiny of the rest of the community. Workers feel that being in Sonas seems to give other people the permission to expect more from the Sonas children.

Children do not have this experience in another Sonas Housing project where houses are in separate locations rather than together in a mini estate. Families are not so visible as "Sonas" families and women say they really appreciate this. However there is a disadvantage to this "pepper pot" development in that both children's workers report that children and women have experienced a lack of safety. If there is a problem with a neighbour or children who are not from Sonas, Sonas has no power to do anything whilst if this happens in a Sonas estate, the workers can address intimidating or bullying behaviour. This lack of safety recalls previous experiences children have had and compounds the impact of violence and abuse.

Some children have seen horrendous things and they are still dealing with the issues when they come to Sonas. The workers hope that they can change some things for the children but they know they can't change everything. Even when families are leaving Sonas, workers know that some of the problems children have are still there. The workers do their best to make some positive difference in the children's lives.

### Challenge of the "move on" period

Workers stressed the difficulty for many children associated with the fact that families have to move from Sonas after a two-year period. Children appreciate the freedom they have in having their own home and own front door when they first come, but workers have observed that they can almost immediately express fear and anxiety about when they have to move on. This is particularly so for children who have been in bed and breakfasts before they came to Sonas. Children's workers have had the experience of children worrying a year before they leave about where they are going to live, what school they will be going to, what class they'll be in, and what classmates and neighbours will be like. They find that it is very hard to reassure the children and to get them to stop worrying. This fear does not seem to be as prevalent or as intensely felt for children who came from a refuge and some children are quite happy to move on. On reflection, the workers felt that it seems to be much more of an issue for children who have been living in B&B's.

### Working with other agencies

In general the children's workers find that the response from other agencies is quite good. In many cases, the response women and children receive is down to the practice of the individual practitioner. Within one agency workers have found that one person may understand what domestic violence is about and will be sensitive to women and children's needs and experiences and that another person does not understand and

suggests solutions or does things that do not work for women and children. Workers stated that some of the locations of these services make them very inaccessible and that it is hard for women to bring their children to them. One community is great in this respect because everything is in the same area and it is much easier for women to bring their children to appointments and services. Another community is very difficult in this respect in that it is very isolated and the bus service is not good. Workers have found that sometimes people from other agencies expect Sonas workers to deal with everything. They come to them with all sorts of problems, requests and issues in relation to the women's and children's lives and workers have to explain to them what their role is.

### **Karinas story**

*Karina came to Ireland four years ago. She met her husband when she was a student – he was a neighbour, fifteen years older than she and in a professional position. From the beginning he was controlling and sometimes violent – she didn't tell anybody as she didn't want to upset her parents. Also, he told her that if she tried to leave him he would take the children and she didn't know of anywhere to go as there was no support or Refuges where she lived.*

*When they came to Ireland she was very isolated and had three young children under five. He continued to be abusive. She did all of the housework and childminding yet he constantly criticised and abused her. In 1999 he had to have major surgery yet he slapped her in the hospital two weeks later. She did everything for him when he came home, she looked after him, looked after the children and still he continued to abuse her. He punched her and hit her with a stick on the head. One day he was really violent. She ran onto the street and went to the Health Centre. She saw a poster of the Women's Aid Helpline – they put her in touch with the Gardaí who helped her take the children from him and brought her to a Refuge.*

*He had access to the children once a week. One weekend in March the baby was sick and Karina was attending to her, he took the other two children, a girl aged four and a boy aged three, and disappeared with them. The Gardaí checked the airports but couldn't find him. They were gone for nine months. He used to phone the Refuge and say she would never see the children again. Once he said her daughter had had an accident. Finally in December the Gardaí contacted the Refuge and said they had had a tip off that he was in Dublin. The Gardaí arrested him, found out where the children were and brought them back.*

*The children were very distressed, particularly the little girl – she had a very bad scar on her face. She said she had asked him for sweets, he threw a jar at her and had split open her lips and nose. The children's workers were really helpful when the children were very*

*distressed and sometimes angry. They have now been two years in the Child Guidance Clinic and they have also been linked into an Art Therapy by Sonas which has also been really helpful.*

*She moved into second stage Refuge after nine months but she had to go to Refuges in other parts of Ireland at times when the Gardaí believed that he was a particular danger to her and the children. When she got her tenancy in Sonas it was fantastic – the support worker helped with everything, practical and safety issues. She was so frightened at the beginning, always sleeping with the light on, checking the doors and windows three times. But because the estate is enclosed her feeling of security grew and the other women would look out for her as they knew he was really dangerous. The children settled into school, she got a job and one of the other women minded her baby. Life was improving until he found out where she lived.*

*She came under constant threat and intimidation. The workers have documented over fifty incidents of threats and abusive behaviour by him to her and to the children. He has stalked and threatened them at home, at her workplace and at the children's school. She has had to attend the family court on over twenty occasions to seek protection and stop him having unsupervised access. There have been forty-five incidents in which the Gardaí have been involved, both the local station and the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Investigative Unit in Harcourt Square. They have been very supportive and recognise how serious a risk he poses to her and the children. Constant court appearances have been an ordeal and one needs so much support to get through them. The workers in Sonas always came to court with her, they organized child care and safety plans. They were aware that he would know that the children were alone as she was in court and might use the opportunity to take the children.*

*She has a three year barring order and full custody of the children but he has breached the order four times. He was convicted, but the first two occasions this only resulted in a 60 euro and a 200 euro fine. One of the most frightening times was when he followed her on to a bus, the two children were in school but she had the baby – he said he had a gun that he was going to shoot her and that the children would have no mother. Someone called the Gardaí and he ran. The Gardaí got a search warrant and they found an air gun in his flat. In some ways this frightened her more because she thought he was bluffing when he said he had a gun.*

*The Gardaí went to court again with a number of charges and he finally got a four month suspended sentence with two years bound over to the peace. This is the first time it has worked in keeping him away from her because he knows if he breaches the order he will be put in prison.*

*She lives in constant fear. She talked a lot to her key worker about whether to run again to the country but she knows he will find her eventually. They felt the safest thing was to make a stand in a place where there was support and the protection of the Gardaí who know her situation.*

*Moving on from Sonas was really hard but Sonas and the housing officer got her a really safe house in a small estate nearby. The Gardaí have said that she can call them any time and have been really supportive. She knows he watches the house, he is always present. She has worked out a routine with the children that they have to be very careful that they cannot be alone and that they are not to ever approach him alone. He went to the school pretending to be a parent, enquiring about sending his children there and asking what time they left school. It was only afterwards that the principal realized who he was. The school is very supportive and they watch the children carefully.*

*She believes it is extremely difficult for women coming to live in Ireland to get information and that it can be very frightening to go the Gardaí because of being an immigrant. There is also the barrier of language. She now works with women at risk and would love to be involved in translating information and leaflets for women who have no English.*

## **Learning, issues and challenges identified by Sonas workers**

As part of the process of reviewing case files and in individual and group interviews with Sonas workers, a number of key learning, issues and challenges in this work were identified. Some of these issues and challenges are intrinsic to the complex nature of the work itself, some are issues and challenges for Sonas as an organisation to address and some are challenges to other agencies and institutions in relation to their response to women out of home because of violence.

### **Issues intrinsic to the work of Sonas**

#### **Dealing with fear and men's violence**

Responding to the level of trauma that women and children experience has major impacts on workers who are hearing this every day. Women who work in solidarity with women at risk from violent men, are also often in frightening and dangerous situations.

Furthermore workers need a wide range of skills and expertise in order to respond to complex issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and additional discrimination. Workers recognise the continual challenge that this presents to Sonas in providing adequate and consistent support and supervision.

Sonas has recognised the critical need to have in-depth assessment and appropriate referral systems. This is in order to ensure that the women who come to Sonas have the best possibility of a positive experience and outcome. Workers understand the pressures on other agencies when they are trying to find safe accommodation for women who have a multiplicity of issues to deal with. However, inappropriate referral has resulted in negative outcomes for some women because Sonas is not in a position to respond to their needs.

Workers realised that it was not possible to accommodate some women with multiple problems of trauma and drug addiction in either refuges or Sonas. This resulted in the most marginalised women being left in B&B's and hostels with the least intervention and support services. They felt there was a need for a high dependency unit where women with severe mental health and addiction issues can access safe, supported accommodation.

### **The difficulty of being a support worker and a landlord all at the one time**

Workers identified the challenge inherent within a model of supported transitional housing. On the one hand they are positioned as advocates and supporters to women. On the other hand they have a responsibility to ensure that women do not breach their tenancy agreement. Dealing with anti social behaviour and non payment of rent are two examples of where workers may have to challenge women in a direct and honest way. A major issue identified is where workers suspect or know that an abusive partner is visiting or staying in a woman's house. Workers recognise that abusive men will often attempt to come between the woman and Sonas by for example threatening the woman that she will lose her One Parent Family Payment or be evicted if anyone knows that he is there. Workers stressed the importance of building trusting, open and honest relationships in this respect:

*“It is important in the early stages to build an honest and open relationship with the woman. I let her know that as long as we can be honest with each other, that there is very little that we can not work out together.” Kate*

### **Responding to the compounding impacts of homelessness**

Workers identified that there is a problem when women come straight from home, traumatized and distressed into B&Bs and hostels. In this case there is no specialist service or workers in relation to crisis work on violence and abuse. Women get lost for months and even years in B&B's, in complete chaos with no support and no opportunity to look at any of the issues. They arrive in Sonas with none of the crisis work done, compounded by all of the additional problems because of having been in multiple B&B's and hostels for so long. The children are also very distressed and sometimes have been in anything up to ten locations. They have been out of school, terrorized and in over

crowded conditions. Not only have they experienced the violence but now they have additional problems because of where they have been.

### **The tension between the sometimes conflicting interests of women and children**

Workers identified that there were particular challenges in responding to the sometimes conflicting interests of women and children. Women's workers focus on the women's needs and children's workers focus on the children. They acknowledge that there is a need for Sonas to develop an integrated model of family work which recognises that providing support for the primary carer ultimately produces the best outcomes for women and their children.

*“A woman may be struggling to see herself as a human being not as a punch bag or a sex object. She has had years of criticism and being put down. She may have no confidence in herself as a woman or as a mother. Focussing on her parenting when the issues are to do with her own abuse can seriously undermine her... Sonas needs to focus on building her confidence and increase her capacity to parent well.” Brenda*

### **The fears and distress that women and children have about moving on**

Workers identified the challenge of supporting women and children through the stress of the move on period. The experience of moving on can be affected by a number of different factors and workers stressed the importance of being needs-led and to respond to the unique situation of different women and children. In particular, they felt that some women and children who had been in B&B's experienced a greater level of distress and worry at the idea of another move and needed additional support.

*“ They are here two years and another move is extremely difficult for women because their house becomes their home and they form an emotional attachment to the place, especially if they have been out of home for a long time and in multiple locations. The house for some women who have lost contact with family it is often their only stable attachment. They may have had so many moves and no stability so this is often the first experience of safety, security and belonging. The children are in schools and play schools and clubs. Some children get very nervous and distressed at the idea of moving again.”  
Fran*

Sonas is aware that having the choice to stay in a particular house or neighbourhood can be the best option for a tenant. Further provision of units and a variety of support models are seen as the best response to tenants' varying needs.

## The importance of having support workers on site

Workers stressed the necessity of ensuring that there are workers on site to support women and children. The one location that did not have on site support was not safe or effective. As this location did not have an office, workers met women in their homes. They believed this was inappropriate and invaded tenants' privacy. Sonas had therefore decided to make these four units into permanent housing.

## Women's experiences of mental health services

Some women have had negative experiences of mental health services and this has primarily been due to the focus on prescribing medication as a primary response to women. However in one mental health service there have been positive outcomes for women due to a multi-disciplinary approach including individual therapy, group therapy, anxiety management and an emphasis on reducing medication.

## Key challenges in the external environment in which Sonas operates

### The legal system

In order for Sonas to provide safety and protection for women and their children the civil and criminal justice system must be effective. Workers report that in general the Gardaí have both been sympathetic and proactive in terms of protection, arrests and prosecutions. However, where the family courts fail to recognise risk to women and children and where the criminal courts fail to sanction violent perpetrators, women continue to be at risk of serious violence.

### Housing

For transitional housing to work for women there must be an adequate provision of social housing. Sonas works with local authorities to develop agreed nomination systems for the woman moving into the permanent housing. Workers recognise the positive outcomes when housing officers understand that women need to access safe, appropriate accommodation. However, the main barrier to this is the lack of social housing provision and in some cases a lack of understanding of what the women needs.

*“We recognise that there is a huge demand for housing but we have to ensure that the housing officials understand that women cannot accept accommodation where they would feel unsafe. In one case an offer of housing was made which would have put our tenant beside an abusive perpetrator. Some housing officers really understand and will not make an offer if they know its not going to be suitable for the woman. They have worked closely with me to ensure the offer would be safe, secure and appropriate.” Loretto*

Finally the following quote from a worker encapsulates the nature of an integrated, holistic response to women out of home because of violence.

*“There should be a seamless and flexible response to women who experience violence between Refuges, outreach services, short term housing and long term housing. All responses must be needs-led and this requires an in-depth assessment at the earliest point of intervention to look at the needs of the woman and the children. This is what happens in Refuges and women need this crisis support to look at all their options, their fears, whether they are ready to take legal action or go back to him with a safety plan before they decide or we can decide that they are ready to move into Sonas. During this period of crisis support in a Refuge there should be high security, a focus on safety and the trauma experienced. Possibly women will move to a second stage Refuge providing more independence when awaiting legal action so as to prevent women being too long in the Refuge. The model should also be flexible, not linear or one directional, so for example if a woman is at high risk of violence at a particular point she could go back into Refuge for a period of time. Then, if it is needed the woman moves into transitional housing like Sonas. This is support with a house – not a house with optional support.” Michelle*



## Section 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

Women's stories and case reviews in this study reflect the body of evidence, research and testimony which demonstrate the extreme levels of physical, sexual, psychological violence and abuse that women experience within intimate relationships with men. The tactics of coercion, intimidation, threats, financial abuse and violence that men use to control their partners are consistently described. The impacts on women and their children of constant fear, physical injury, and mental health consequences emerge throughout all of the stories documented here.

The uniqueness of male domestic violence is that the woman's home becomes the most unsafe place for her and often for her children. Whilst recent policy developments and legislation have been based on the basic principle that victims of domestic violence should be enabled to remain safely in their own homes, this study yet again demonstrates that the reality for many women is that despite this, the civil and criminal justice systems are not providing effective protection for women nor adequate sanctions for perpetrators. This results in many women being forced to make themselves and their children homeless in order to access safety.

The women's movement's response to women out of home because of male violence has been to provide safe supported crisis accommodation along with a range of specialised supports for women and children. This study reaffirms that Women's Refuges are critically important as the first frontline response to women's entry into homelessness because of domestic violence. The study clearly highlights that Refuges provide a focus on women and children's safety, based on their knowledge that the point of attempting to leave and post separation are often the most dangerous times for women, resulting in escalated violence, sexual assault and homicide.

Access to workers with expert knowledge on risk assessment, safety planning, the trauma of violence and the complexity of women's struggle to leave a violent relationship enabled women to make informed decisions for the safety of themselves and their children.

In contrast is the experience of those women who were accommodated in other forms of temporary accommodation. Making themselves homeless did not result in accessing safety. Whilst they were at an increased risk of threats, intimidation and violence from ex-partners and husbands, women were at the same time exposed to a lack of security and safety because of the locations and conditions in which they were forced to live. Returning to the primary family often resulted in both the woman and her family being threatened and at risk. Homeless hostels, whilst they provided some form of physical protection for women and children, were not equipped to respond to the risk and trauma that women and children experienced.

Women's accounts clearly illustrate that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, over prolonged periods of time, not only greatly increased the risk to women and children, but also compounded the impacts of violence and abuse that they were struggling to overcome. A key factor that contributed to this overwhelmingly negative experience was that bed and breakfasts are privately run by landlords, managers and security staff who are predominantly male and who have control over and access to vulnerable women and children in crisis. The findings reflect all other studies which have examined B&B usage which show that families are being forced to live in severely overcrowded accommodation lacking in any adequate facilities. Women and children are often moved from one location to another and living in B&B's denies them any form of stable, safe and normal family life.

This research demonstrates and reflects findings in other studies that shelter and accommodation is only one aspect of meeting the needs of women and children homeless because of violence and abuse. Such is the nature of men's violence to women, that by the time women have the courage to leave in crisis they will have been subjected to many years of systematic cruelty at the hands of their husbands and partners. Where women's bodily and sexual integrity has been consistently violated it is critical that all responses are informed by the expertise of domestic violence services and rape crisis centres. When women take that first dangerous step to leave immediate intervention prevents re-victimisation and provides short term and long-term opportunities for women to heal and recover. Many children will also be experiencing deep trauma as a result of witnessing and being subjected to violence and abuse and services must incorporate specific responses to them.

Frontline services working to address violence against women are responding to multiple and additional discrimination including poverty, disability and discrimination against ethnic minority women. The over-representation of Traveller women in Women's Refuges poses a serious challenge to all those responding to violence against women and highlights the need as outlined in other reports for an in-depth exploration of Traveller women's needs and experiences. In addition, overlapping issues for women including drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution and loss of children into care result in a complexity of needs that demand intensive and specialised work that has high resource implications.

The findings of this study reflect evidence and knowledge, which show that without this integrated response of crisis Refuge and transitional housing that many women's chances of escaping from violence and abuse, are greatly reduced. Furthermore, the risk of incidences of repeat and prolonged periods of homelessness is greatly increased. This study confirms research in the UK in recognising that a critical time for support for women is the first six months or year when they are housed and that without this many women go back to violent partners and re-appear as homeless following a further incidence of violence. The Draft Action Plan of the Homeless Agency (2004) also states that while housing is the key to solving homelessness, a significant number who are homeless or at risk of homelessness require ongoing or periodic support to enable them to sustain tenancies.

What Sonas offers women is an integrated holistic specialised service, which incorporates support and safe accommodation. Women's stories and the outcomes for women and children clearly illustrate the effectiveness of the Sonas model of work. The key factors are high quality safe secure homes, a trusting and healing relationship with workers over a long period of time, specialised children's work and the ability to understand and respond to the complexity of the impacts of violence and abuse on women.

Sonas Housing has built and sustained positive working relationships with a number of key agencies, which this study clearly demonstrates, has resulted in positive outcomes for women and children. Sonas is responding to women who have histories of severe violence, who are attempting to overcome the extremely damaging impacts of that and who may also be struggling with the complexity of additional discrimination and other issues. This presents many challenges for Sonas that were identified by both women and workers interviewed for the study. Despite this, Sonas' core belief is that women have the capacity to build free, independent happy lives and this study concludes that their goal to support women to regain control and autonomy in their lives is being consistently met.

The findings of this study demonstrate that there exists a model of work that results in long term positive outcomes for women and children out of home because of violence. Crisis Refuge, the Sonas model of supported transitional housing and permanent safe appropriate social housing are the three core elements of this integrated response. To ensure that all women have access to this we propose the following recommendations.

## Recommendations

### The Legal System:

- ***Ensuring safety and security for women in their own homes.*** Women who are being subjected to violence by their partners must be given the maximum support and protection to remain in their own homes. Previous studies have highlighted the ways in which the civil and criminal justice systems fail to deliver adequate protection for victims and effective sanctions for domestic violence offenders. Recommendations are in relation to ensuring consistency of best practice by the Gardaí; that family court hearings focus on the safety of the victim; that the criminal courts deliver appropriate sentences for domestic violence crime. These must be urgently implemented. The National Domestic Violence Intervention Agency must be adequately resourced to support the realisation of these recommendations (see Appendix 1).

- **Amendments to the Domestic Violence Act 1996.** Of particular relevance to the needs of women in Sonas is the recommendation of the Law Reform Commission to review the Domestic Violence Act in relation to the criteria for applicants seeking protective orders. Currently such applicants have to demonstrate that they have lived with the respondent for six or nine months (depending on the order) of the previous twelve in order to be eligible. This qualification is not required of married persons but only those who are co-habiting. The law therefore does not provide adequate protection to all women. Many women in Sonas tenancies are excluded from applying for orders because of these provisions. Furthermore, the fact that having a child in common is not grounds in itself leaves victims open to constant harassment from the fathers of their children. The Law Reform Commission and Women's Aid have called for an amendment to the Act that would extend the criteria for eligibility and this report further demonstrates the need for this change and recommends its urgent enactment.
- **Criminal charges.** Where there is sufficient evidence the Gardaí should charge Domestic Violence offenders with the most serious offences contained within the Non-Fatal Offences against the Persons Act 1997. Of particular importance to women in Sonas is Section 10 which pertains to Harassment and Stalking offences.
- **Legal Aid.** The reinstatement of the Legal Aid Board's Private Practitioner's scheme is urged. Having access to the courts is vital if women are to maximise their rights. The suspension of the Private Practitioner's scheme which allowed for solicitors to be contracted to work on the very extensive workload of the Legal Aid Board has resulted in serious delays in having cases handled by the Board. Delay in access to remedies that can keep women and children safe is dangerous. On a practical level the sooner legal questions are concluded the quicker other matters such as housing arrangements may be settled.

### Crisis Refuge Provision

*All women who are out of home because of violence should have access to safe secure crisis Refuge accommodation. In order to ensure this the following actions need to be implemented*

- All local authorities should assess/count women living in Refuges as homeless
- An assessment of need of Refuge provision agreed by policy makers in the UK and USA is 1.7 refuge spaces per 10,000 population. A target to achieve this in Ireland should be agreed and set. Homeless Fora established in all counties should ensure that such provision is part of their local area plans.
- Where targets have already been set such as in the Homeless Agency Plan for Homelessness 2004-2006, financial and technical resources should be planned and implemented to effect achievement of those targets.

- Women’s Refuges should continue to actively advocate for the re-housing of women who are homeless as a result of domestic violence.
- Additional resources must be provided to existing Refuges to upgrade their conditions and to meet basic minimum standards of accommodation.
- The Prizeman, 2000 recommendations need to be implemented.
- An expert working group should be convened by the National Steering Committee on Violence against Women to look at Refuge provision and occupancy. This expert group should comprise the National Network of Women’s Refuges and Support Services, Refuge managers and members of the Traveller organisations. This would enable the development of consistent policy and practice in relation to the optimum use of Refuge spaces. It would also lead to delivery of outcomes of increased level of safety for women, a minimum period of time in homelessness and enhance the possibility for women to leave violent partners.
- A high dependency unit for women with drug and alcohol issues should be established in Dublin and additional resources should be provided to all Refuges to enable them to further examine and develop responses to this vulnerable group of women. The research and experience as developed by the Saol Project (Saol and Kelleher Associates, forthcoming) in Dublin should inform these responses.

## The Homelessness sector

### *Discontinue the use of bed and breakfasts for women forced to leave their home because of violence*

The use of bed and breakfast as a form of temporary accommodation for families, except for a very short emergency time, has been recognised by the Homeless Agency and in many reports, as inappropriate. It must also be acknowledged that it is especially unacceptable for women fleeing violent partners. This practice should be phased out as quickly as possible and targets, such as those set in the UK, of a maximum period of time of two weeks stay in B&B’s should be set for families with children. Resources must be allocated by Government to ensure these targets are achievable.

### *The situation of women and children currently in B&B’s needs to be urgently addressed.*

An immediate assessment of each family should include:

- Safety planning and risk assessment based on an agreed protocol utilising sensitive questioning.
- Ensuring women are not placed alongside abusive men in any location as recommended in the Report to the Deputy Prime Ministers Offices (ODPM 2002) on accommodation and support to households out of home because of domestic violence.
- Immediate plan of action towards transitional and long term housing.

Minimum standards should be set and monitored in relation to the conditions of the accommodation and should include:

- Adequate space and facilities for each family
- Accessible support services
- Appropriate provision suited to the needs of the family with attention given to the age and gender of children
- Access to services which respond to children's physical emotional, health and educational needs
- Specific attention to the needs of women who have drug and alcohol problems.

*Risk assessment and safety plan protocols should be developed and agreed for use by all practitioners and agencies with which women encounter when they leave home.*

This is to ensure consistent, effective and earliest possible responses in referring women to appropriate accommodation and support services. All personnel should be trained and supported in 'sensitive questioning'. The Homeless Persons Unit should have a dedicated domestic violence worker who can ensure women at risk are appropriately referred.

#### *Documenting and data recording*

In order to gain an accurate assessment of need, systems of recording data consistently should be implemented. Recording should include:

- The complex factors leading to homelessness
- Multiple incidences and periods of homelessness
- The levels of risk and violence experienced by homeless women
- Referral destinations of women.

#### *Assessment, recording, appropriate placement of offenders*

A protocol should be developed where there is evidence that the person seeking accommodation has a history of physical and sexual violence to women and children. This protocol should be developed in cooperation with social services, the probation service and the Gardaí. The protocol would include directions for all relevant personnel in relation to:

- Safe appropriate placement
- Monitoring and tracking of offenders
- Safety audit of locations to protect vulnerable women and children.

## Transitional Housing

*Local authorities should set a target in each area for a number of Sonas developments*

The Sonas model of supported transitional housing should be resourced to develop and expand. Not all women who leave home because of violence need transitional housing. However, this study clearly demonstrates that many women need a period of support and safety following crisis accommodation. This study shows that a longer period in supported housing can act as a brake on recurring homelessness and is a crucial element in any housing strategy. Each local authority should co-operate with Sonas Housing and Women's Refuges to ascertain the level of need in their area and to take steps to resource adequate provision of transitional supported housing.

## Housing

*Domestic violence must be recognised as a key factor in precipitating homelessness among women and children. Legislation, policy and provision should be proofed in relation to domestic violence. This would include:*

### Legislation

There is scope in existing legislation for both local authorities and health boards to take action to protect women and children experiencing violence in the home. While provision exists in legislation, it could variously be amended or interpreted to provide greater protection. The following are examples:

- The 1988 Housing Act provides that where someone cannot “reasonably occupy or remain in occupation” of a home they can be considered homeless.

This act could be further strengthened by providing, as does the UK Housing Act 1996, where it further explains the meaning of whether it is reasonable to continue to occupy by stating that:

*“it is not reasonable for a person to continue to occupy accommodation if it is probable that this will lead to domestic violence against them.”*

The same Act provides for the repossession of Council property in the event of domestic violence. The Act states that a Council may repossess a property if -

*Ground 24 (b) one partner has left because of violence or threats of violence by the other towards (i) that partner or (ii) a member of the family of that partner who was residing with that partner immediately before the partner left and (c) the court is satisfied that the partner who has left is unlikely to return.*

- A further method of protection against a violent partner could be through the tenancy agreement. All tenants would be informed in their tenancy agreements, as in the UK, that domestic violence is grounds for eviction. A local authority could have a clause inserted in its conditions that where evidence of current court orders or criminal charges of assault victims of domestic violence exists, it is grounds for terminating a tenancy. A joint tenancy severed in such a manner could then revert to a sole tenancy to the remaining partner. The offender would have to apply for another tenancy and housing stock would be better utilised for families. This would also be a clear message that the crime of domestic violence is being treated seriously.
- The 1997 Housing Act covers anti-social behaviour of tenants in local authorities and other social housing providers. The definition of anti-social behaviour in the Act can be interpreted in such a way that violent behaviour includes violence against a person on the tenancy and therefore gives grounds to local authorities for exclusion and eviction of the perpetrator. This is a strong measure but one which takes the onus off victims to remove the offender from the home.

## Policy

Local authorities play an important role in the lives of women who are unable to provide accommodation from their own resources or in the case of domestic violence, are unable to return to their own homes. In order to ensure that their role is used to maximise women and children's safety, it is recommended that in conjunction with the health boards, policy guidelines be developed. These could be modelled on the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities in the UK (ODPM, 2002).

While it is acknowledged that the structures in Ireland differ greatly to the UK, a multi disciplinary approach to this issue would be of optimum benefit to women presenting with housing/homelessness issues resulting from violence.

Taking a corporate approach to potentially life threatening issues such as domestic violence and racist harassment helps to ensure that all departments work to the same objectives and provide complementary and effective services.

The value in a centrally devised set of guidelines is that women presenting to local authorities/health boards in any part of the country should expect a similar approach to be taken to her circumstances. While resources vary, the principles underlying the attitudes adopted by personnel to the issue of homelessness because of domestic violence would be informed by common guidelines.

These would include:

- Definitions of domestic violence
- Clarity on the role and responsibilities of local authorities including homelessness assessment
- Guidelines and training for staff in responding to victims
- Relationships and networking with specialist accommodation providers
- Cross authority referrals
- Guidelines in relation to the proportion of financial settlements recouped post legal separation
- Equality guidelines with particular reference to traveller women, women from ethnic minorities and women with disabilities.

## Provision of social housing

### *Level of social housing provision*

It is not within the remit of this study to assess social housing provision and make recommendations on required levels; however, the lack of housing has emerged as a key barrier to the effective implementation of this integrated model. Therefore, recommendations made in other studies and documents are supported by this study.

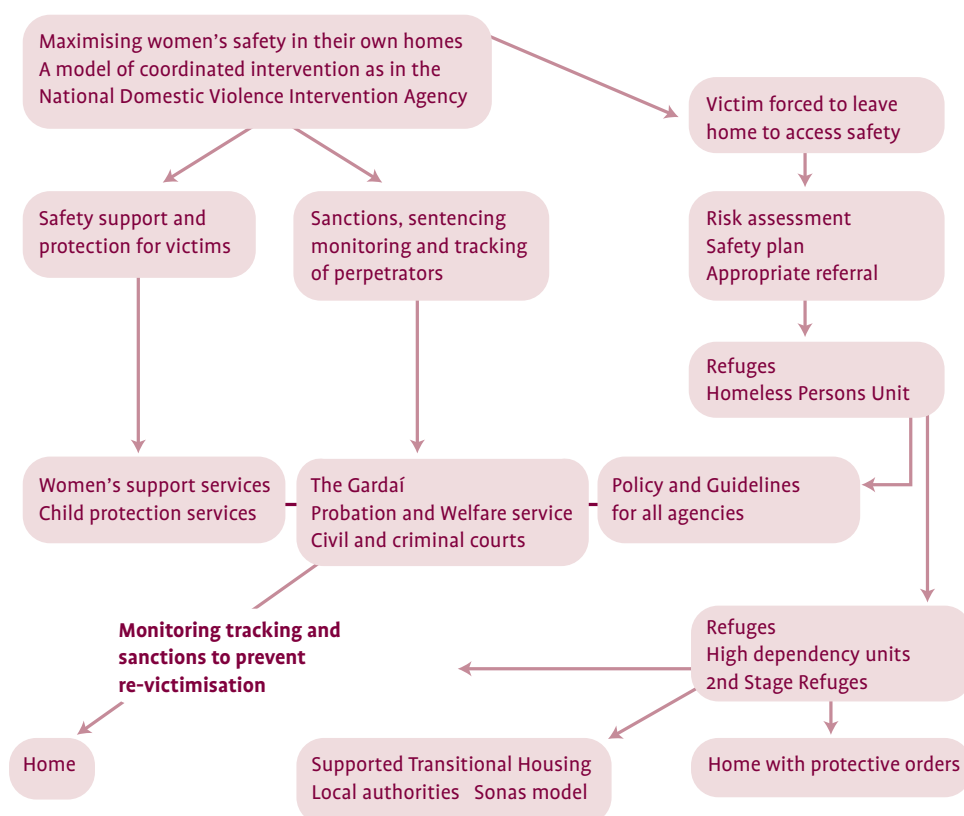
## Private rented sector

It is outside the remit of this study to examine the role of the private rented sector in accommodation provision. However, a key issue that emerged is the introduction of the six month rule. This requires people to be resident in private rented accommodation for six months before they can get rent supplement. This is a further deterrent for women leaving home because of violence and this study concurs with other demands of other organisations such as the National Women's Council of Ireland and Women's Aid to reverse this decision and discontinue this practice. Where women do get private rented accommodation, because they are not considered homeless, they may have to go into a hostel or B&B to place themselves on the homeless list.

## Integration and co-ordination of responses to women out of home because of violence

- The role of Sonas should be recognised as pivotal in all sectors responding to women out of home because of violence.
- Policy formulation and decision making fora on homelessness should include representation from Women’s Refuges, outreach services and rape crisis centres.
- Research and policy development in relation to homelessness should be informed by the body of knowledge on violence against women and their children.
- A coordinated approach involving local authorities, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector which has been demonstrated as the most successful strategy in the UK ODPM report (2002) should be adopted.

## Framework For responding to Women Out of Home because of Violence



The above framework illustrates a co-ordinated approach which focuses on the safety and protection of women and children. It involves immediate assessment, early intervention and appropriate response and referral at every stage.



## Appendix

### National Domestic Violence Intervention Agency

#### Background

The National Domestic Violence Intervention Agency (NDVIA) is a new agency funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to respond to the crime of domestic violence. It aims to ensure that victim safety is maximised by institutionalising policies and practices in the civil and criminal justice systems, which have the responsibility to provide protection for victims of domestic violence crime and hold perpetrators accountable.

The approach of the NDVIA is a new departure in responding to domestic violence crime and has the support of all the key agencies involved. It was developed by the NDVIA following years of experience by the Cork Domestic Violence Project working to support victims and intervene with perpetrators of domestic violence, plus liaison with the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in the USA who have pioneered this approach.

The NDVIA is running a pilot project in the District Court areas of Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, and Bray, Co. Wicklow. It is set up to work from the victim's point of view and its work is informed by their experiences. In this regard the work of the NDVIA is twofold. It works directly with the Gardaí, Probation and Welfare Service, Social Workers, the Judiciary and the courts in co-ordinating their response and in building on the good practice that exists to ensure all responses prioritise victim safety.

The NDVIA also provides a direct service for victims that is linked to the Courts where a Safety or Barring Order has been issued. While it will engage with both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, its work is first and foremost about victim safety. Where a court order ensuring the safety of the victim is in place, the NDVIA offers the court the option to send the perpetrator for risk assessment. This will enable the system to monitor the perpetrator's behaviour. Due to the seriousness of the crime existing, whether physical or sexual, the threat to the victim and the capacity of the perpetrator to engage with the programme, e.g. because of drug abuse can vary so, many perpetrators may not be eligible for perpetrators programme and will need immediate stronger sanctions e.g. custodial sentence.

In line with international research, a follow-up research study of the Cork Domestic Violence Project found that intervention projects such as theirs remain limited in their potential for effecting social change and maximising victim safety while they are not formally linked with the judicial system. Thus a key current focus of the NDVIA is to ensure that those links are made.

## Framework of an Intervention Project

### *Civil Systems:*

When citizens seek redress through the civil courts and the legal system they are looking to the courts and the judiciary to issue orders for their protection. There are over 5000 applications each year. It is the responsibility of the State to consider the needs of all those applicants for the protective measures that are within the powers of the Judiciary to issue e.g.: barring orders, safety orders; and to issue sanctions against perpetrators.

### *Criminal systems:*

There are over 10,000 domestic violence call outs each year in Ireland. It is the responsibility of the Criminal Justice System and the Gardaí to protect the victim and control and sanction the perpetrator through the powers of arrest, charge, prosecution and sentence, whether there is an order in force or not. A graded system of sanctions from community service to prison is available at present to the Judiciary.

**Perpetrator programmes must only ever be envisaged as a back-up to an effective system.** The NDVIA is in agreement with experts in this field that the methodologies for intervening with perpetrators of domestic violence must be similar in design for treatment protocols for working with sex offenders.

NDVIA work with perpetrators is focused on risk assessment report compilation for the courts.

**Perpetrator programmes do not have the power to stop perpetrators re-victimizing, only the civil and criminal judicial systems do.** Individual practitioners working in isolation from a framework of monitoring and sanctions cannot ensure safe outcomes for victims. It is neither appropriate nor sufficient that in the case of a repeated physical or sexual assault the only sanction is to stop seeing clients or put them off a programme. This is deeply offensive to victims of horrific abuse. Where the original application by the victim was to the courts or the Gardaí, it is also a complete failure of the State to provide adequate protection to victims, and hold perpetrators accountable and prevent them from re-offending.

The NDVIA believes that an intervention is only successful where the victim is safer as a result of it. It also believes that all responses to domestic violence, all interventions, must be informed by victims and held accountable to them and that perpetrators must be sanctioned and held accountable for their behaviour. Since no agency on its own can guarantee victim safety **and** perpetrator accountability, it is essential that individual responses are coordinated and cooperation between agencies maximised. This is the role of the NDVIA.

## What the NDVIA Hopes to Achieve

Quite simply, the NDVIA aims to reduce recidivism, increase victim safety and perpetrator accountability and develop a model of intervention work which maximises victim safety, perpetrator accountability, and the accountability of the system to victims.

The NDVIA approach is a multi-agency approach and, in conjunction with key agencies, it aims to establish the future conditions in which integrated intervention programmes can be initiated throughout Ireland.

To date, the NDVIA has worked closely with all the key agencies in setting up a framework for a coordinated community response:– An Garda Síochána, the Judiciary, the Courts, the Probation and Welfare Service, support services for victims, East Coast Area Health Board, Legal Aid Board, family law practitioners, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Each key agency is represented at both local and national level by key individuals who inform the work of the NDVIA. As mentioned above, the NDVIA approach is being piloted in the District Court areas of Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin and Bray, Co. Wicklow.

## Accountability

In terms of measuring success, the only valid criterion for measuring the success of any intervention in cases of domestic violence is if the victim's safety has increased as a result of the intervention.

It is central to the work of the NDVIA that it is informed by the experiences of victims and the services working to support victims. All aspects of the NDVIA's work, and indeed of all agencies who respond to domestic violence, must be held accountable to victims in terms of their safety, as defined by victims.

Any research into domestic violence intervention in Ireland must take the entirety of the response into account. In order to effectively and accurately assess whether victim safety is increased as a result of an intervention in domestic violence crime, research must evaluate and monitor the capacity, resources, procedures, awareness, and means of the civil and criminal justice systems in responding to this intimate crime against the person.

The NDVIA has actively sought feedback regarding all aspects of its work from all individuals, services and agencies it has come into contact with and is privileged that all victim services and statutory agencies have agreed to monitor its work and inform the development of its service. Their monitoring forms the basis of the NDVIA's ongoing internal evaluation.

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