

Sonas Housing Partnership

**A partnership of services responding to women and their children
who are out of home because of domestic violence**

October 2004





In this publication the voices of four women who have used the services of the Sonas Housing Partnership are heard.

We would like to acknowledge the generosity and courage of these women in their willingness to talk about their experiences of domestic violence, their consequent homelessness and their journey back to safety and independence.

Sonas Housing Partnership Steering Group

Ann is twenty-five years old. With two children, she was living with her partner for two years during which time she was prescribed anti-depressants by her GP who made contact with Meath Women's Refuge.

While in Refuge, Ann applied to the Courts for Safety and Barring orders which she received, but due to her fear of continuing danger Ann remained away from her partner feeling it too unsafe to return home. She needed to be away from the area in order to start again. After six months in Refuge, feeling safe and secure, Ann requested more information on the possibility of obtaining a Sonas Housing Partnership house. While she wanted a house she felt that the reality meant she couldn't be safe there. Ann was reassured by the staff regarding her safety and a safety plan was put in place for her by her Support Worker.

Ann, describing herself as a "a lonely frightened woman," moved into her transitional house. Her level of nervousness was such that she wouldn't open any of the windows and kept all the doors bolted for the first month. During this period her Support Worker, using her experience in working with the traumatic effects of violence, introduced the concept of the agreed support contract. This method of working allows the tenant identify the steps needed to progress to independent living.

Ann is now one year on and says she has achieved so much; she is driving and took her two children on holiday this year. She is employed with FAS on a Community Employment scheme where she is training as a care assistant. She hopes at the end of the scheme to gain full time employment in this field. Ann will be with Sonas Housing Partnership for another while but looks forward to being permanently housed by the local Council. She says she has a lot to look forward to now. She sees a safe and happy future for herself and her children thanks to all those who supported her on her journey.



Sonas Housing Partnership

Introduction

The Sonas Housing Partnership (SHP) was set up in March, 1998, to provide supported transitional housing for women and children made homeless as a result of domestic violence. The option of remaining or returning to their own homes must be open to women and their children without ongoing fear of violence or the threat of violence. This, however, is not always feasible. Without adequate resources and when going home is not an option, women are vulnerable to being homeless and experiencing recurring homelessness. A supported transitional housing option can provide the support, space and time women need to address their issues and move on towards independent living.

The initial objectives of Sonas Housing Partnership were:

1. To provide a minimum of four units of housing in each of three local areas: Ballina, Dundalk and Navan.
2. To develop a model of supported transitional housing based on the existing Sonas Housing Association (SHA) model.

These objectives have been achieved. In 2004, through employment of a variety of strategies, four units of housing are in full use in each of the above areas and a model of supported transitional housing has been developed using both the experience of SHA itself and that of the new partnership.

Noreen had been married for twenty years, she was living in an isolated area with her four children. She left the family home suddenly with her children.

The previous year she had lived in crisis accommodation for three weeks, recognising for the first time what domestic violence was, because of the abuse from her husband. She went back to him because there was no suitable accommodation free in her area, except a mobile home, to which the children would not move. She decided to try to make another go of the marriage after her partner said he would get help. It was very difficult for the year after she went back. Noreen and her children were subjected to ongoing abuse and threats and felt as though they were continually walking on eggshells. She tried hard to make things work.

After she left home, each place she rented was temporary. Her children had no base. Her husband was put on probation for criminal damage towards her property but she felt secluded in a remote part of the county and unsafe. She obtained her legal separation but was still frightened of her husband.

The Mayo Women's Support Services outreach service referred her to Sonas Housing Partnership. When she moved to supported accommodation, it was there for the first time that the children lived without chaos, the house felt safe.

The Support Worker accompanied her to Court when she applied for custody. This was when she started with her Support Worker to evaluate where she was going in her life instead of just existing and fielding off attacks from her ex-partner. The Support Worker helped her link up with other agencies like Money Advice Bureau Services (MABS) and supported her in her dealings with Department of Social Welfare. Using her support contract she named her goals within a timeframe and from the proceeds of the family home, along with a mortgage, she was able to buy her own home.

At present Noreen is finishing a diploma and has just started employment in work that is of special interest and importance to her.

Background

Sonas Housing Association (SHA)

SHA (Sonas) was established as a social housing provider in 1992 to develop supported transitional accommodation for women and children made homeless as a result of domestic violence.

As a result of the introduction, in 1991, of legislative provision for social housing by the voluntary sector, Sonas was enabled to provide a specialist supported housing service for women and their families who experienced domestic violence. Until then, women who experienced domestic violence and found themselves homeless were often stranded in Refuges and emergency accommodation with little hope of being rehoused. Such crisis accommodation, while essential in meeting the immediate needs of women, cannot resolve the complex and longer term effects that some women experience as a result of systematic violence and abuse. If these problems are not addressed, they may continue as an inherent part of family life and contribute to ongoing social exclusion and homelessness.

Supported transitional housing was developed by Sonas to address such needs. This entailed the provision of quality, secure accommodation with support for a period of time, with the aim of helping women and families to move to independent living with restored confidence and control.

Its first project in Dublin provided a model of service that had the potential of being replicated throughout the country.

Creation of Sonas Housing Partnership (SHP)

SHP had its roots in a TV interview in 1997 when the Director of Sonas introduced its new supported transitional housing project which had been developed in Dublin. She expressed the view that this model could be replicated around the country. A potential funder contacted Sonas and, following discussions, funding was secured to begin this work.

All members of the Federation of Women's Refuges (now the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services) were contacted and three services responded: Women's Aid, Dundalk; Meath Women's Refuge and Mayo Women's Support Services.

SHP was set up in March, 1998. Spearheaded by Sonas, its membership included representatives of the above three services who had expressed an interest in developing supported transitional housing in their own areas. Sonas itself provided the expertise and knowledge already gained in the work it was doing in Dublin.

Local organisation

SHP (through a dedicated Steering Group) met bi-monthly to drive forward the work in the local areas. Each of the three local partners set up working groups which included representatives from the community and statutory sectors in their areas. The inclusion of a range of local players broadened the experience and insights available to the groups. Members of the Steering Group brought back the experience and knowledge shared collectively in the SHP to their local working groups and local groups fed back to the Steering Group in a continuous cycle of learning and development.

Stages in the work

It was agreed that the project would have two phases:

Phase 1 would cover the work to pre-tenancy stage;

Phase 2 would cover selection and housing of tenants and continue with provision of support.

Evaluation

As Sonas Housing Partnership was a new initiative, there was agreement in the beginning to engage in a formative evaluation process. Two independent evaluators were employed to undertake this work.



Phase One

Providing Housing Units Locally

In order to progress the work of providing four units of housing in their areas, the partners adopted different strategies. Two worked in partnership with an existing housing association (Dundalk and Meath) and one worked in partnership with the local authority directly in purchasing and refurbishing premises (Mayo):

– Working in partnership with another Housing Association

This approach was adopted in Meath. The key partners were Sonas, Cluid (a general needs Housing Association) and Meath Women's Refuge. It was agreed that while Cluid managed the construction project on its behalf, Sonas would own four of the units being built as social housing provision. The four units became available in Autumn 2001 and are managed by Meath Women's Refuge.

– “Piggybacking” with another Housing Association

This approach was adopted in Dundalk. The key partners here were Respond!, a large general needs Social Housing Association, Sonas and Women's Aid, Dundalk. Respond! had acquired land from Dundalk Urban District Council for forty-five units of housing. Sonas entered into an agreement with Respond! and delegated management responsibility to Dundalk Women's Aid.

– Buying/Refurbishment

This approach was adopted in Mayo. Four units were bought by Mayo County Council and refurbished with funding from the County Council. The houses were transferred to Sonas ownership and became available in Autumn, 2001. They are managed by Mayo Women's Support Services.

Management Agreement

In both Mayo and Meath, Sonas, as a recognised housing provider, owns the housing units. In Dundalk, the houses are the property of Respond! In all cases a binding management agreement was made between the partners in all three counties and Sonas Housing Association. This details the rights and responsibilities of all parties. It includes staffing and employment conditions, allocation and move-on procedures as well as financial/accounting procedures.

Phase Two

Support in Transition

Not every woman leaving emergency accommodation needs transitional housing. Many families move directly to a new permanent and independent home. For others, without a period of focussed support, the issues which exist for the family as a result of systematic violence and abuse and the attendant problems of poverty and marginalisation will remain unaddressed and leave the families vulnerable to recurring homelessness.

Supported transitional housing provides a seamless continuum of support and care, beginning when women, who are unable to remain in or return to their own homes, are referred for housing. This short term housing supports women while they move towards independent living by giving them the time, space and help to address their needs.

During this period of housing, women are actively engaged in safety planning and in identifying their own needs, goals and the support that they require. The type of support given promotes personal growth and the development of self-confidence. The principles of respect, empowerment, equality, accountability and inclusion underpin the support work which is undertaken with both the women and the children. The support work also includes practical assistance including court accompaniment, liaison with school, medical and legal personnel, rent payment, budgeting and identification of training needs and opportunities. A further vital element of the work is the negotiated agreements with local authorities and other housing providers to ensure a flow of long term housing for tenants.

Developing a model of work

Sonas Housing Partnership works from a human rights based approach to the issue of violence against women. A feminist analysis of the causes of violence against women is central to the work. This analysis recognises violence against women as a gender based crime and the ultimate expression of the unequal position of women in society.

The main features of Sonas Housing Partnership support work

- *Referrals*

These may come from a variety of sources, for example, Refuge or other emergency accommodation services, health or welfare services, local women's services. Applicants must be eligible for local authority housing and be referred through an agency or individual with whom they have been working for at least one month.

- *Interview and allocation of tenancy*

The type of tenancy offered by the SHP is centred on support. A woman who is referred for housing to any of the partners will have been identified as needing ongoing support and she herself agrees that this type of housing service is appropriate for her. A staff member from the referring agency attends the interview with the applicant. The SHP uses a system of risk assessment to evaluate the level of safety and type of support an applicant will need.

- *Pre-tenancy support work*

Pre-tenancy support work is undertaken with women before they move in. This enables the SHP staff to make sure the tenant understands the conditions of her tenancy, to gain more information about the woman and children's situation and needs before the tenancy starts and further safety planning happens at this stage. One of the distinctive features of a SHP tenancy is that it is a sole tenancy and no other adult may live in that house. This condition is to take the onus off the tenant in her effort to maintain a safe space for herself and her children, if any. The first of the pre-tenancy meetings takes place between the referring agency's staff, the relevant SHP support staff and the tenant. The reason for this is to make sure that the transfer from the referring agency to the housing provider is as smooth as possible.

- *Moving-in period*

This is a very practical and task oriented time with lease signing, advocacy to community welfare personnel, securing of school places, setting up of the home and, where necessary, reviewing the safety plan.

- *Assessment of support needs*

Providing and accessing support is a condition of the lease a woman signs when she accepts a tenancy with the SHP. The support contract is a tool used by the woman and her Support Worker, to keep track of her goals and achievements.

- *Review and Evaluation*

Review and evaluation happens at intervals throughout the tenancy, and formally at eighteen months and twenty-four months.

- *Completion and moving on*

Ideally, when the tenant has completed her period of supported tenancy, she will move on to permanent housing. Permanent tenure is the aim of the SHP, for all its tenants, on completion of the period in transitional tenancy. With that in mind the housing partners negotiate an ordered move-on system with local authorities and other social housing providers.

Bernadette came to the Dundalk Women's Aid Refuge having been subjected to abuse, both physical and mental for many years.

She had three children with her and was referred to the service by the social services who had issued her with an ultimatum to either leave her violent partner or have the children taken into care. The social services had child protection concerns about one of the children who allegedly had been physically abused and there was a question of sexual abuse also. Her partner of fourteen years had a previous conviction of a sexual offence against her own sister on an earlier occasion.

Bernadette had used the support service prior to this, but resented having to leave her home and community and relocate to another place. At the risk of losing her children to care, she left her home. She stayed in the Refuge for four months and was then referred to the Sonas Housing Partnership. The Refuge staff recognised that in order to maintain her own and the children's safety, she needed longer-term support and accommodation. Bernadette had not completed her education, had gone out to work at fifteen and was lacking in confidence. She had a lot of problems dealing with budgeting and was in debt.

In time and with a lot of support she is no longer involved with the child protection team. The children are all doing well. She has returned to education and has successfully completed her first year FETEC examinations. She is continuing to study and is getting on with her life. She is no longer in debt, manages extremely well and has some savings for the first time ever.

The local authority has agreed to house Bernadette in an area away from her abuser.

Conclusion

The Sonas Housing Partnership is based on a shared vision and feminist philosophy of working in a particular way with women and their children made homeless because of domestic violence. It has achieved its objectives of providing four units of housing in each partnership area and developing a model of supported transitional housing. In the Dublin region, Sonas provides forty supported transitional units and permanent houses or apartments. Since 2001 the SHP has provided supported housing to over 100 women and approximately 150 children.

In each of the partner areas, local services are well-established and working effectively – all based on the SHP model of supported transitional housing. Each partner has successfully built up working relationships with local authorities, service providers and other housing providers.

SHP has valued greatly the different experiences of the four partners. Sonas Housing Association was the lead agency in driving the first objective – the provision of four housing units in each of the three local areas. The three Refuges/support services have brought vast experience in delivering services to women and their children experiencing

domestic violence. The model of supported transitional housing developed as a result of this partnership is invaluable for further developments in the three areas and also provides guidelines for initiatives in other parts of the country.

The formative evaluation process in place from the beginning of the partnership has supported and facilitated it in ensuring clarity of purpose, assessment of progress and identification of challenges.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges now facing SHP these include:

- Identifying sufficient resources to maintain and further develop the model of supported transitional housing in current and other areas of need.
- Identifying how to successfully transfer the model of work to new areas and projects.
- Devising strategies to engage Government and other bodies in the process of developing policy from practice and in this model of service provision.
- Ensure acceptance by statutory and voluntary housing providers of the right of women and children who have experienced domestic violence to a permanent home of their own.
- Ensure that agreed processes for facilitating a move to permanent tenancies are in place. This will mean that supported transitional housing can be effective in bridging the gap from emergency to permanent housing.
- Sonas Housing Association has shown that an integrated model of support for mothers and their children is the most logical and effective way to address the complex traumas resulting from experiencing and witnessing violence.
- Sonas has Childcare Support Workers who work as a team with Women's Support Workers, to respond to the needs of both the women and their children. The effects of violence and abuse on children, their development and relationships with family and friends, is all too often ignored. The other partners to date have not been allocated adequate funding to follow this aspect of the model of work. Such provision is vital in any development of the service.
- Refuge and supported transitional housing providers are key players in developing responses to women who are out of home. In 'Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy' (Department of the Environment, 2000) it states that all counties should set up a Homeless Forum combining local authority, health board and voluntary service providers. This was seen as the appropriate multi-agency approach that can analyse need and devise suitable responses to homelessness in every county. To work, these fora need to be active and inclusive to utilise the combined experience of personnel involved in the development and delivery of services.

Lucy had been in a relationship with her partner for over ten years. Throughout that time he was very possessive. He was a drug user and got Lucy onto drugs also. His control and abuse got worse and worse and he became physically violent. Lucy decided to come off drugs and with the help of her family she succeeded. Lucy, her partner and their four children became homeless because of his drug use and ended up in a Bed and Breakfast (B&B). She was in the B&B for two and a half years with her partner and pregnant with her fifth child when she decided to leave him. She went to another B&B which had strict security on the door, so she thought she would be safe from him. However, the B&B employed her partner as a security man and so she had to leave and go to another B&B.

In this other B&B the experience was awful. The managers and owners made all sorts of ad hoc rules about women and children. If a child broke a rule, the family could be punished by being moved on or by being given a smaller room. The owners and managers who were all men who would come into womens' bedrooms at any time to inspect them. It was degrading. Throughout her time in the B&B, Lucy's ex-partner continued to harass and threaten her. Focus Ireland workers were brilliant. They insisted on being let into the B&B's to offer support to women even though a lot of landlords tried to prevent them doing so.

It was Focus Ireland who referred Lucy to Sonas Housing Partnership and she got a house there. Sonas has been great for Lucy. They helped her work out a safety plan and linked her to local Gardaí. This helped her maximise her safety for herself and her children. She has received excellent emotional support that helped her overcome the impacts of violence and abuse and a previous drug addiction. Sonas helped her to connect into a number of organisations in the community that has enabled her to do a number of courses, eventually she plans to get work to support herself and the children.

For Lucy, one of the most important outcomes has been the positive change in the children. From coming from a chaotic lifestyle in Bed and Breakfasts they are really settled for the first time. They are getting first in their class in school and doing really well in sports. Lucy thinks that one of the reasons they are happy is because they see her happy for the first time.



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The support work in all four partner services is undertaken by skilled and dedicated Support Workers; to them we offer our sincere thanks for their contribution to our understanding of how the service can develop. That knowledge in turn comes from listening to and working with the women who access our services.

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