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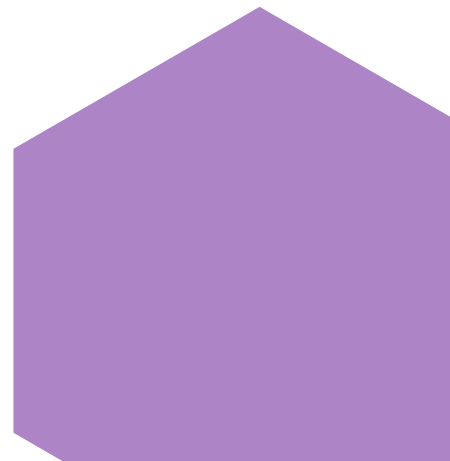
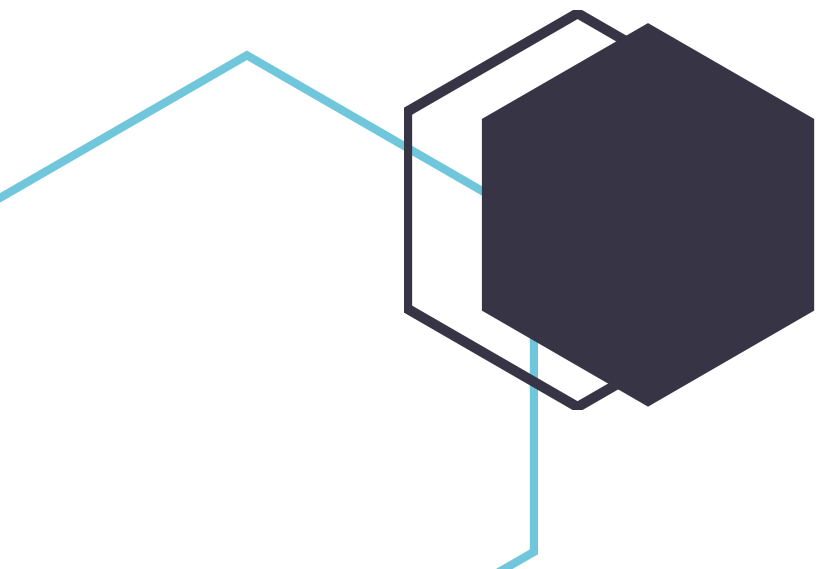


The Complexity of Housing for Domestic Abuse Victims

Social Research Report

A Qualitative Study attempting to understand how Domestic Abuse Victims with Multiple Complex Needs can have access to better accommodation options within East Sussex Region.

Study by Ana R. Cordeiro, May 2020



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Executive Summary

Overview

As a social program that supports people who are experiencing multiple and complex needs, Fulfilling Lives is a £112 million investment over 8 years and funds local partnerships in 12 regions across England. This paper focuses on *Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership*, which operates in Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne, and Hastings and is made up of four teams. **Frontline Delivery teams** that work directly with clients highlighting obstacles and challenges within current services whilst showcasing better practices and innovative ways of working. **Learning and Impact team** focuses on exploring and promoting better practices (including the ones highlighted by the Frontline Delivery teams) and sharing them through training, events, publications, and co-produced resources. **Service User Engagement team** consists of volunteers and paid staff with lived experience gather insight into the obstacles and challenges experienced by those with Multiple Complex Needs (MCN). Lastly, the **Systems Change team** works on a lasting level by attempting to change systems to enable people experiencing MCN to receive the support they need.



The project's four commitments for change within Domestic Abuse theme focus around appropriate accommodation and trauma informed response for MCN victims, offering one-to-one support from a specialist domestic abuse service for high-risk victims with MCN, victims heard in MARAC risk meetings will have a robust multi-agency safety plan and that staff in non-specialist services supporting MCN victims will be equipped and trained to better respond to domestic abuse.

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Major Impact

This study focuses mainly on Fulfilling Lives' 1st commitment for change within Domestic Abuse theme. This commitment is that women with MCN that are homeless and experiencing domestic abuse should receive a trauma informed response which is appropriate to their needs, including access to appropriate accommodation.

Through the dedication and hard work of Fulfilling Lives South East, this study highlights how the organisation is meeting its commitments in this area. The project focuses on raising awareness of victims' needs and challenges, and how to give better support to victims with MCN through providing training on providing a trauma informed response.



Introduction

Domestic Abuse as a Problem & its Consequences

Domestic abuse is commonly understood as controlling, threatening, degrading, and violent behaviour patterns (also includes sexual violence) by a partner, ex-partner but also a family member or carer. This is an important issue that has persisted worldwide and has existed for many generations (Brown et al. 2009). Research into the effects of domestic abuse has increased with the public interest in this topic (Smartt & Kury, 2007). Consequences of abuse have the potential to adversely affect an individual's capabilities and daily life. These consequences are frequently profound (Helfrich & Rivera, 2008). They range from "occurrences of physical injury and emotional distress to the acquisition of permanent physical disabilities". Much of the emotional distress caused is often associated with mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, personality disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and suicidal and paranoid ideation (Mayer & Coulter, 2002).

Mental health problems can decrease decision-making and problem-solving skills, increase feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and lower self-esteem and self-efficacy (Moe & Bell, 2004). In addition to mental health problems, there is also a higher than average likelihood of substance misuse issues in victims of domestic abuse (Helfrich & Rivera, 2008). Taking into consideration this vicious cycle, it is easier to understand why victims often suffer functional consequences such as poverty, homelessness, loss of identity, loss of family ties, social supports, unemployment, loss of their children and institutionalization (Gerlock, 1999). However, Wetterson et al. (2004) point out how within the domestic abuse research there is a lack of focus on connections between intimate partner violence and the life skills that aid to sustain employment and stable housing for female victims of abuse. Consequently, without housing or employment, victims of domestic abuse often feel dependent on their partners to have their basic life needs met. It is also suggested by Helfrich (2001) that many female victims remain in abusive relationships as they believe or fear that they will not be able to provide for themselves.

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In addition, some abuse is inflicted to purposely prevent a woman from finding a job or education to avoid economic self-sufficiency (Riger, Raja & Camacho, 2002).

According to Kocot (2001) women are more likely to suffer from depression and or PTSD when experiencing domestic abuse. Due to their lower self-efficacy, self-esteem and other consequences that come with abuse, women tend to see themselves in a more negative way, displaying additional emotional, social and financial instability than women who have not suffered from domestic abuse (Huth-Bocks et al. 2004). Violence towards mothers can also significantly affect their parenting skills and in turn affect their children's development and participation in meaningful relationships (Waldman-Levi et al., 2015). Often this can lead female victims to be in a disadvantaged position in the labour market, with domestic abuse long being “recognised as a major contributor to homelessness” (Netto et al., 2009). This means it is particularly important to consider housing availability and access issues for all women who suffer from domestic abuse.

Housing for Domestic Abuse Victims

O'Campo et al. (2016) argue that probably the most significant obstacle faced by an individual that suffers from domestic abuse is where to live. The authors state that housing can shape people's experiences of health, family relations, partner abuse, and many other daily life factors. Furthermore, “women that had experienced IPV¹ had almost four times the chances of experiencing housing instability than women who reported no IPV” (O'Campo et al. 2016). According to “Mapping the Maze” research report (2017), 60.6% of local authorities in England do not have homelessness services specifically for women with multiple complex needs. The report adds how there is a severe shortage of emergency accommodation that includes safe and separate spaces for women who might suffer further if exposed to harm and abuse in mixed accommodations.

¹ Intimate Partner Violence.

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Numerous victims of domestic abuse have multiple complex needs such as homelessness, mental illnesses, and abuse of substances including alcohol (Fulfilling Lives South East, 2019). According to Fulfilling Lives experience, it is frequent for women who suffer from domestic abuse and have complex needs to not receive services that reflect an understanding of the complexities, dynamics, risk issues of domestic abuse, resulting in a response which is not trauma informed². The project states that women feel they are often presented with rigid and limited accommodation offers and, as their needs are not always considered, they can experience the process of finding appropriate accommodation punitive and re-victimizing.

The aim of this study is to understand how Fulfilling Lives might advocate for better services for victims of domestic abuse in housing and accommodation around East Sussex, more specifically Brighton, Hastings, and Eastbourne. The research question for this study is: *“How can Fulfilling Lives help improve the housing services experience for domestic abuse victims with multiple complex needs?”*.

“Women that had experienced IPV¹ had almost four times the chances of experiencing housing instability than women who reported no IPV”
O’Campo et al. (2016)

² Trauma informed response refers to being aware victims have experienced high levels of trauma throughout their lives and having a response that prevents distress and promotes well-being.



Methodology

The Purpose of The Study

This research was carried out by a Community Psychology Masters student from the University of Brighton. The purpose of the study was to better understand how Fulfilling Lives South East (FLSE) could advocate for better housing options for their clients who suffer from Domestic Abuse.

Aims

- ✚ Understanding how FLSE operates when helping MCN DA victims finding accommodation.
- ✚ Investigate how FLSE can advocate and help improve services regarding housing to MCN DA victims.
- ✚ Understand which projects/models/strategies are out there that provide "appropriate accommodation".

Methods & Participants

During April 2020, two semi-structured interviews were carried out with Fulfilling Lives South East staff members. Workers were invited through an e-mail that explained the purpose of the research and asked if they would like to participate. Despite having different job descriptions, both have in-depth knowledge and experience in working with domestic abuse and housing. It is important to note that this study was carried out during the unprecedented situation caused by COVID-19. The researcher attempted to cause the minimum disruption possible to the organisation to make sure clients would get their full attention and time.

Interviews were carried out individually by telephone, were recorded, and lasted for an average of forty minutes. The researcher also partook some meetings with the organisation to gain a deeper understanding of how Fulfilling Lives operates and how it works with domestic abuse as a theme.

The interviews focused on how the organisation helps their clients who experience domestic abuse, but also more specifically in relation to housing. They were asked what

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the major obstacles clients, workers and other organisation faced when trying to access suitable housing, and what the possible solutions to these issues might be. This study was reviewed and approved by the Social Research Practice Ethics Panel of Brighton University.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through an inductive thematic analysis process designed for semi-structured interviews. It provides an in-depth understanding of the data by identifying patterns. These patterns are grouped into themes that can describe a phenomenon relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similarities and differences found within the analysis of the accounts helped assign perceptions, experiences, and beliefs of the participants into key components that developed the representative themes. These themes in turn allowed the researcher to have a deeper and richer understanding of how Fulfilling Lives South East may advocate for better housing services for victims of domestic abuse.



Findings & Discussion

The themes that emerged from the inductive thematic analysis were: **Fulfilling Lives as a Unique Service**, regarding the way the project advocates for better housing services for their clients; **Housing Obstacles & Rationales** regarding obstacles that clients tend to experience when trying to access housing and possible reasons for these; and **Improved Housing Access & Services** regarding how agencies that provide housing for domestic abuse victims who have MCN could improve their services.

Fulfilling Lives as a Unique Service

Both participants provided detailed information on how Fulfilling Lives attempts to improve the services that are available for domestic abuse victims. There are different workers and job designations within Fulfilling Lives such as Specialist Women's Workers (SWS) and the Systems Change Team (SC). Specialist Women's Workers tend to have more contact with victims and are particularly observant to their needs. As stated in one of the interviews, specialist workers help to navigate the complex processes and different agencies that provide support, by giving these agencies more insight into concerns and needs of the clients:

“Frontline workers would be having conversations with our clients and being vigilant for any domestic abuse concerns and raising those to relevant agencies. (...) And so, we will be raising concerns to the MARAC³ service and to the police and Adult Social Care if necessary. And that's what the frontline workers are doing as well as liaising with other services that support the client to make sure support is holistic.”

Being in close contact to the victims, Specialist Women's Workers understand better how to help their clients and how to navigate the different agencies that are

³ Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) is a victim focused information sharing and risk management meeting where agencies discuss risk of future harm to victims of domestic abuse, drawing up action plans to help manage this risk.

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necessary when helping people with MCN, especially when trying to voice the clients' concerns and needs whilst attempting to keep them safe from abuse:

"The people on their (SWS's) caseload have complex needs, so, they are all homeless or have insecurity at home, they all pretty much got a substance or an alcohol abuse issue, mental health issues and also most of them have been involved in the criminal justice system. So, it is part of the whole picture, (...) the whole person and their whole life. The key thing for them (SWS) is to keep the woman safe. So, they would try and find out who is involved with them. Are they engaged with a specialist in domestic abuse service? If necessary, the worker will refer it to the

MARAC where it can be discussed. And if necessary, they will raise a safeguarding alert with the local authority if they think they are at immediate risk and they need to be held by the local authority as a safeguarding risk."

"THEY CAN FACE STIGMA AND BEING JUDGED (...) BUT ABUSE STILL GOES ON, WHETHER THAT IS PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, EMOTIONAL..."

As domestic abuse victims with multiple complex needs, it is necessary to go through long processes with different agencies to

receive support. All these agencies follow their own systems, which the System Change team attempts to improve. They do this by increasing awareness of legislation, and providing training sessions about domestic abuse and its consequences for people with MCN:

"(...) We are trying to improve the systems that women experience when they're experiencing domestic abuse. (...) We have identified quite a few things that maybe need changing. And so, we try to work alongside agencies such as the MARAC, with the Housing Department, and with other outside agencies to improve the systems and services that women come into contact when they are experiencing domestic abuse. And a lot of that is around a lack of understanding, which is why we have the training. We recommend training and upskilling around an acknowledgement of an understanding of what domestic abuse means for people who do not really understand and that is really important because they (the victims) can face stigma and being judged."

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Training sessions and bringing awareness to other services are significant strategies adopted by Fulfilling Lives, as according to interviewees, victims experience stigma and judgement around their experiences:

“Specialist workers, particularly the women’s workers, will have a lot, quite a few of their clients experience domestic abuse. And I suppose some people might find that difficult to understand, particularly as they are sort of top street community. But, you know, abuse still goes on, whether that is physical, sexual, financial, emotional, all of that stuff goes on within those communities as well. And so, (...) special service workers have to deal with that on a regular basis.”

Fulfilling Lives understands how domestic abuse victims need their voice to be heard. The organisation applies efforts to advocate for their clients’ needs and their work is trying to bring a holistic support system for DA victims with MCN. However, to make a lasting impact, the system used throughout the UK regarding domestic abuse support for victims (with MCN) would have to be reevaluated.

“We (SWS) would be collecting data on what services and support those clients have received during a period of time. And we also have a working group that is looking at temporary accommodation. So again, we would be briefly collecting data on our clients that have been placed in temporary accommodation or refuge placements. And feeding that back to the Systems Change team, who would then look for any trends or changes in the way our clients have been dealt with and see if anything has changed along the lines: has different guidance comes out from the government? And, also, we would be looking for patterns. So if the same situations were coming up in the same areas, we may look to contact those local services, the Systems Change team would discuss the procedures that that organisation might use to see if there is anything that could be done differently or done in a more trauma-informed way.”


Both participants referred to how they have had previously encouraged clients to engage with specialist domestic violence or abuse support, and how they did manage to get positive outcomes through connecting clients with services in several cases.

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Fulfilling Lives operates on different levels. One level has direct contact with the clients and agencies. Specialist Women's Workers try to understand what can be done to improve their clients' well-being and allocate them to agencies that can provide the appropriate support. On another level, the organisation focuses on understanding how

the support system may be improved by analysing data from their clients, voicing their problems and pointing out strategies that work and strategies that do not.

A decorative purple graphic element on the left side of the page, consisting of a vertical bar with a white diagonal line that tapers to a point at the top and bottom, creating a triangular shape. The text is contained within a purple rectangular box that overlaps this graphic.

“They do not want to move out there because they will be on their own completely, and that is even more scary for them.”

Housing Obstacles & Rationales

According to the interviewees, there are many factors that can prevent a victim with MCN from getting appropriate housing. Domestic abuse services are often bureaucratic and do not provide accommodation options which are not suited to victims' needs. Agencies are sometimes not prepared to deal with multiple complex needs as they often can only address one problem at a time. Victims may find the process of going through multiple agencies confusing and not helpful at all. It is also necessary to note that many victims with MCN

are also experiencing co-dependent relationships and might not be financially independent or able to move away from their networks. Adding these factors together, victims show often show interest in staying with their abusive partners, rather than risking homelessness and other scary uncertain situations (Helfrich, 2001):

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“(…) So, if the victim did not stay with the abuser, if the victim ended the relationship she would then be vulnerable on the streets by herself. So, the victim would get quite scared of that, because she is worried if she would be more vulnerable from another person, another male (…).”

“A lot of our clients are quite codependent with the abusive partner which does make it very difficult because in their eyes, they know what's going on isn't right, but they think it will be potentially worse if they were to end the relationship and then set into the unknown.”

When finding appropriate accommodation, victims might be stigmatized and judged, and they can often feel as if refuges and temporary housing do not accommodate all their needs. For example, the staff might not be aware of how to approach and deal with substance misuse, which according to Helfrich & Rivera (2008) is a common situation amongst DA victims. The refuges themselves might also not be appropriate if the victims leave their houses with their children and or pets or suffer from any substance abuse that in turn can often lead to the accommodation's staff feeling pressured to inform the police or evict them. The lack of appropriate conditions in refuges and lack of trained staff is not necessarily the housing service's fault, they may lack funding for facilities that accommodate the needs of different women that suffer abuse – from mothers to single women, to people in active addiction.

“So, one of the things they can face is being judged and facing stigma, maybe in the Housing Department. You know, we have heard things in the past, like, because if a woman leaves the house, she can be called intentionally homeless because she has left her house. So, the department, the housing worker, has been known to say – well, you need to go back because there is nothing for you, you have made yourself intentionally homeless, and so, we do not have a duty to help you. I do not think that happens anymore. I really hope not. There is a lack of accommodation, there is a lack of options. And for complex needs clients' refuge, the general refuge system is not accessible by our clients, usually. Especially if they have a substance misuse issue. They will not be allowed to stay there. Because of the nature of the refuge with women who may have children, they feel uncomfortable as you can understand they share accommodation. And that is not refuges' fault. That is just the service they deliver. So, it cannot really be accessed by a lot of our clients (…) It is hard enough to get into refuge without having complex

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needs. So, their (victims') options are limited. You know, they can be put in temporary accommodation. They can be offered accommodation outside of their area. And that is another issue, sometimes the housing department assume, that women, if they are experiencing domestic abuse, would like to move away from the area, you know, they think that is what they need. But for a lot of women, it is not because they have a network there. They have some services there. (...) They do not want to move out there because they will be on their own completely, and that is even more scary for them."

The obstacles to accessing appropriate housing range from institutional and systematic problems to beliefs, concerns and victim's experiences. Given that many refuges and accommodations options are underfunded, understaffed or with staff not specifically trained in MCN, the services given to the victims are not appropriate, which in turns turn can make victims believe they would be better off staying with their perpetrator instead of facing additional problems of homelessness (Helfrich, 2001; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003). Many victims also have multiple complex needs and most accommodations or agencies that provide such services can only work with one need referring to the victim.

Improved Housing Access & Services

According to the interviewees, improvements to housing access and services would come mainly from more funding and skilled, trauma-informed workers that provide specific support for victims. With more funding, it is possible to create refuges that have more diverse options of placement for different needs. It could also allow for the creation of additional secure places for victims to be able to feel safe and escape abuse (Clarke & Wydall, 2015):

"I think there need to be more placements (in refuges) available for people who are experiencing domestic abuse. And different types of placements: if you are a family, a mum with children, or a single person. (...) In temporary accommodation, I think they need to be more maybe trauma-informed, but again, they are employed, just to provide accommodation for homeless people. They are not there to support them. So, it is very, very tricky... But if there was lots of money then perhaps the government would say that all hostels and temporary

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accommodation places have to have staff who, who are aware of domestic abuse, what to look out for what to report and how to keep people safe within the building to the best of their ability, such as having an entry system or having adequate security or including people and staff around as well as CCTV and, and certainly pin codes and things like that to access the building (...)"

It is important to fund agencies that are lacking resources and staff, in order to provide appropriate services and support. Often agencies have their resources stretched causing them to have such an overload of cases, meaning that they simply cannot attend everyone's needs. Workers may also need emotional support themselves as they have often to handle upsetting situations. The lower resources are, the more fatigue workers feel. Therefore, raising awareness about the need for more adequate funding is necessary. One of the interviewees illustrated this:

"There is a massive lack of funding by the government (...) and emotional fatigue on behalf of workers that you come into contact with. As things are stretched, people are having to do more and more casework, I guess. So, for example, the specialist domestic abuse service in Brighton, I know they do not have a huge amount of funds. They have limited time. And so, one of the things that people have often complained about them is that they will prepare a process where they will contact the victim to try and engage with them three times. And if they do not get back to them, they will drop the case. People criticize that. But they have such a high caseload and so many referrals coming in. What else can they do? You know, they are limited on what they can do."

Other ways to improve services would be to provide free online training for workers to improve their trauma response or simply bringing awareness to the issues surrounding fleeing domestic abuse as someone with MCN. Maintaining good relationships with other organisations, sharing knowledge, and working with them towards shared commitments can significantly change the response women experience. Letting government entities know where communities stand and what is necessary to bring change is also a positive strategy.

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“(…) We don't charge for the training we do. So, we can do that and there's also online learning that can be done. And we were working with Brighton and Hove Council on their training, and they have got a lot of online e-learning, which people can access. So that is a solution. Things that do not take so long, so shorter, maybe 20-minute sections that they could do, so does not take so much time. And they are free as well. So that would be a solution, I think. (…) I think we have developed good relationships with the councils, and we are keeping those really good relationships with the managers there. Which we do really well, I think. And then working alongside them suggesting ways that we can help them whilst achieving our commitments as well. So, they are actually really interested in having some domestic abuse training (…) and in the benefits of taking a trauma-informed approach.”

These comments show that many solutions are already in place through the Fulfilling Lives South East project. From advocacy to training and community work, Fulfilling Lives is putting an effort into making changes within Domestic Abuse services. However, many solutions also depend on reevaluated funding and legislation to better resource agencies which in their turn will be able to give better and more personalized services to domestic abuse victims.



Concluding Remarks


Fulfilling Lives' Impact

Women specialist workers have a deep understanding not only of their specific clients' needs but also the community where they belong. They are able to recognize signs of different types of abuse their clients may be experiencing, and support them through not only notifying the relevant agencies, but also to help clients to be more self-sufficient. If a victim of domestic abuse has more self-sufficiency, the probability of leaving the abusive relationship are higher and thus significantly improving their well-being (Helfrich, 2001).

Throughout this study, there is evidence that Fulfilling Lives South East meets their clients' needs. Advocating for their clients is a significant aspect of FLSE's work, as often victims of Domestic Abuse are stigmatized and misunderstood.

Despite the existence of resources and agencies that provide help, many of these services can lack a proper understanding or ability to provide a safe space that covers all needs of a domestic abuse victim. These problems could be related to current legislation and funding for the domestic abuse support system. The Systems Change team at FLSE does positive work by raising awareness of these issues, and also by researching and understanding what is working and sharing these findings widely.

Community change takes a significant amount of time (Kaufman et al. 2016) and despite Fulfilling Lives being an 8-year program, the strategies used by the teams are proving to be efficient. The main obstacles highlighted in the findings refer to other services which support victims that would benefit from increased resources.



FULFILLING LIVES STRATEGIES ARE
PROVING TO BE EFFICIENT AND
HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON THE
COMMUNITY



MCN and Trauma-Informed Responses

As mentioned by Moe & Bell (2004) and Helfrich & Rivera (2008) and highlighted by the findings, many victims do not suffer only the abuse itself but also from substance misuse, homelessness, and mental health issues. The idea of a victim having to cope with many issues at the same time is called Multiple & Complex Needs. Surprisingly, services provided to victims often do not fully understand this concept even though it is highlighted by many authors. Fulfilling Lives works hard to showcase to agencies and communities the need to further understand and explore the concept of Multiple Complex Needs, as its deeper understanding would create more trauma-informed responses by agencies such as housing services.

Many victims have multiple complex needs due to a lifetime of traumatic experiences. As mentioned by Brown et al. (2009), the consequences of abuse are psychological, physical, emotional, financial, and social. Victims often cope with these issues with mechanisms such as substance misuse. It is important then to understand how services can be improved and acknowledge that victims with MCN need more specific care.

Innovations on Housing Services

There are few innovative projects which aim to provide alternative housing options for domestic abuse victims. One particular project "Safe at Home" (Breckenridge et al. 2016) addresses the stress victims can feel when move away from their home and networks by attempting to evict the perpetrator instead. However, this particular project may not ensure the safety of the victims as the perpetrator knows where the victims is staying, knows other ways to access the house and is known on the community thus not raising any alarms if they should return. A solution for this problem could be police protection, however this could be costly and not very practical if the police do not have enough resources to allocate to these types of project.

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The most effective way of innovating housing services still appears to be improving the services that already exist. This allows better conditions for victims and ensures that the staff are receiving training and practicing more trauma-informed responses. However, further research on positive alternatives and innovation in housing services are vital, as this area is currently under-researched.

Independent Recommendations

Following the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested to further enhance the support provided by Fulfilling Lives South East:

- Fulfilling Lives to **continue advocating** for victims of DA with MCN, especially by raising awareness of key issues and the stigma victims face
- **Empower victims** with digestible training sessions or workshops which provide insight into legislation, navigating agencies and mental health services, so victims can feel less confused about the process of receiving appropriate support
- **Promote training** for both specialist and non-specialist workers who provide support to victims. Training should be accessible and not very time consuming so any worker can easily improve their skills.
- Attempt to get **funding for academic resources access**, to aid the Learning & Impact team provide more diverse empirical evidence
- Use art-based tools (such as videos, paintings or photos) to **promote community debates** on the topic of victims of DA with MCN, **to ensure stigma and prejudice are being fought** and help victims are being understood
- Promote the **introduction of new statutory duties** for local authorities to commission specialist accommodation-based domestic abuse services which are inclusive of DA victims with MCN
- Invest in **collaborative partnerships** with local authorities, agencies and councils as it allows for services to be more receptive to FLSE's insight of victim's needs
- Exploring whether a **support group** for clients could give them a deeper sense of community and help them feel more understood and consequently seen and heard

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- **Encourage more empirical studies** that further understanding of domestic abuse and housing services for victims with MCN in the UK. Up-to-date empirical studies are also necessary to ensure that services are referring to the latest best practices.

Alongside these recommendations, Fulfilling Lives South East continue to raise awareness to the lack of funding in housing services, the lack of training of many workers, and the lack of appropriate conditions many refuges and temporary accommodation options present for victims with MCN currently.



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