



Life in a Domestic Abuse refuge during the COVID pandemic



We have heard a lot in the press recently about the pressures facing many families who are experiencing domestic abuse at home during the current pandemic. The purpose of this briefing is to give an overview of the experiences of women being supported in Domestic Abuse refuges in County Durham during the COVID pandemic. Healthwatch County Durham contacted 4 refuges in the county to talk to frontline staff and clients about how women were being supported at the present time.

What we were told;

- ☼ The overriding message from the refuges is **“it’s business as usual”**, with extra measures brought in to protect staff and clients. Referrals into the refuge are still coming from the local region and out of area.
- ☼ Isolation is the biggest issue identified by the support staff for clients, they are already isolated due to leaving homes and neighbourhoods to come into the refuge, but this is compounded by the self-isolation in place because of the virus. Normally there are chats with other families and regular visits from health visitors and social workers among others, but this has mainly stopped. Health and Social Care professionals are only visiting when necessary and are telephoning clients instead. Refuges are used to running lots of interactive activities such as, breakfast clubs & coffee mornings, where clients and staff could have informal “get togethers” and clients are missing this.

Tip: Some refuges have provided activity packs for the women, which include colouring books, pencils notepads and also for children with pads, pens and age appropriate small toys or games – These are well received by everyone

- ☼ Staff are making sure they are reinforcing with clients the need to maintain safe contacts within the refuges. Some have set up rotas for clients to access communal spaces and gardens. The refuges are ensuring there is hand sanitiser available at their entrances
- ☼ In some refuges accessing supplies from foodbanks has been more challenging because foodbanks are also under pressure with an increase in people accessing their support. However there were many instances of community groups and organisations making donations of food and other goods to refuges




- ☼ Provider organisations are making sure staff are supported, both supplying the physical resources such as PPE, but also checking their mental health and wellbeing

Our conversation with Kate (name changed)...

Kate entered the refuge during the national lockdown for COVID. She was made very welcome by staff and supported, making sure both she and the staff stayed safe. Shortly afterwards Kate developed symptoms of the virus and had to be admitted to hospital, the staff at the refuge did a fantastic job supporting Kate emotionally and practically, they provided some nightwear and toiletries as well as keeping in touch while Kate waited for the ambulance, was in hospital and at discharge. Thankfully Kate was discharged after one night in hospital and the staff have continued to support her. They have organised shopping and have regular contact, as well as showing kindness, for example leaving small gifts for her to make the self-isolation more bearable. Kate feels they go “above and beyond” what they need to do. Although Kate is on the mend physically and mentally she still feels it will be a while before she will be able to leave the refuge.

Kate said about the support staff *“I can’t speak highly enough of them, I really feel they have saved my life”*

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- ☼ It was said by the refuges that most of the other professionals entering the building do have the appropriate PPE. Where they don’t then they maintain safe distances
 - ☼ Home schooling can be a challenge for many women in the refuges, who are struggling to cope with their personal circumstances. Many of them do not have access to electronic equipment so cannot easily access online lessons. Local schools have provided resources and they are encouraged by their support workers to continue educating their children. Some refuges have access to a children’s support team within their organisation and where this is the case they are continuing to support families, but maintaining social distancing

 Tip: One refuge had managed to get donations of electronic tablets for residents, these can be used for online resources and for having visual contact with family and friends

- ☼ All the refuges we spoke to were at capacity. We were unable to measure if there had been an increase in referrals to refuges, as they all have differing pathways, however it was noted in most of the refuges that there was an increase in self-referral and a decrease in referrals from other agencies. This was put down to the fact other agencies such as health visitors or social workers were making fewer visits into client’s homes. We were told of some extreme cases where clients had locked themselves into a bathroom or bedroom and were telephoning the refuges for someone to come and get them



Our conversation with Sam (name changed)...

Sam entered the refuge before the national lockdown for COVID-19. The staff made her feel very welcome and when the new procedures came into place following lockdown they ensured both she and the staff stayed safe. The support team now phone her every day and she can pop down to the office, although, if she does then she needs to keep at a safe distance.

Sam uses the local foodbank for groceries and she said this has been working really well, she has also received vouchers from the refuge for Sainsbury's which was great.

Sam is ready to move-on from the refuge and had a flat lined up with the Council, but unfortunately this has been delayed by the current situation, but she's keeping in regular contact with the housing department.

Sam receives help from external support agencies, they no longer visit, but they keep in contact by telephone. She said it's not as good as meeting and having a chat, but she still feels well supported.

Sam was struggling with her mental health and missing contact with family and friends. The refuge has provided Sam with a tablet which now means she can speak and see family and also watch things like Netflix, which has made a great difference to her. She also contacted her local surgery about her low mood and they arranged telephone appointment with her GP who changed her medication, which she collected from her local pharmacy. Already Sam feels the change in medication is helping.

Sam said *“Although things are different I still feel supported and safe in the refuge”*

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- ☼ Move-on at the appropriate time was still taking place and housing providers were giving priority to domestic abuse victims moving out of the refuge. One refuge gave particular praise for their local housing officer who was doing a great job to temporarily rehouse families. Being able to access move on accommodation is really important to keep the refuge operating effectively. Some services have their own outreach support for clients to transfer to and others are using the Domestic Abuse Navigator support service to ensure clients continue to receive support. One provider also talked about support from the complex families floating support service.

A shout out from the team leader, for Jo Walker from Housing Solutions “who has been doing a great job providing assistance in re-housing clients from the refuges in Peterlee and Durham City!”



- ☼ Due to the configuration of one of the refuges there had to be a reduction in the capacity. This was to ensure they could maintain social distancing. There are financial implications that come with the decision, so it will be hard to know what a long term solution might be
- ☼ One refuge had difficulty accessing early help for a mother that was struggling with childcare. The local team said initially that the refuge should contact the area that the client had moved from, but that was many miles away and was not a practical solution. This was eventually resolved by the support worker
- ☼ Some shops and services, such as taxis has imposed a limit of 1 adult and 1 child. For women in refuges this was a problem if they had more than 1 child, there were different solutions in different refuges. In one, the refuge had contacted the shop concerned and explained the situation allowing the women to go shopping with her whole family. In another refuge they had set up a temporary system of supervising children to allow for essential visits, such as to the GP
- ☼ One of the team leaders talked about staffing challenges, with some staff members shielding due to their own or children's health, self-isolating, bereavements etc. She said - our staff have had to lone work more often than usual which has an impact on what can be achieved/done in one day. Even throughout COVID-19, safeguarding concerns don't go away, in some cases they increase and staff have been able to identify concerns and escalate them appropriately despite staffing and logistical challenges. Staff have remained positive and resilient throughout this time and have consistently delivered a high standard of service to the families they support
- ☼ Some of the staff feel that there will be a surge in women and families seeking help once the current lockdown is relaxed. They think there will be many women who are finding it difficult to access help now, but as soon as they are more mobile, they will seek support from refuges
- ☼ One of the refuges was really positive about the way in which safeguarding is being managed during the lockdown. Safeguarding strategy meetings are still going ahead using Microsoft TEAMS and this is working well

Refuges are having to change the way they do things for now, but the services & staff are flexible and resilient. They all stressed that their main focus remains the importance of ensuring the women and children still feel welcome and well supported during their stay at the refuge. This includes all the small practical things living away from your normal home as well as supporting them through their domestic abuse journey, including their health and wellbeing.

Thank You to the women who took the time to talk to us and all the staff working in the domestic abuse refuges in County Durham, keeping women and children safe