

Scottish Women's Aid Briefing: 'Sanctuary' Schemes'

Sanctuary schemes as defined by the Department for Communities and Local Government are an 'innovative approach to homelessness prevention' in England. These schemes provide security measures so a woman can remain in her home if she chooses to do so, where her partner no longer lives in the home. The security measures fall into two categories:

Sanctuary: where the door to a room, generally a bedroom, is replaced with a solid core door with a reinforced frame and a lock system with steel hinges and bolts and a door viewer. Window and front and back door locks, plus fire safety equipment, are also provided.

Sanctuary Plus: Includes the above plus window grilles, reinforced doors to the front and rear of the property. Additional fire safety equipment which includes fire seals in the sanctuary doors, smoke detectors, break glass hammers, emergency lights and fire blankets.

These measures are intended to transform a bedroom into a 'sanctuary' where women and children can lock themselves in and call the police if a violent ex-partner breaks into or forces his way into their home.

The development of sanctuary schemes

The development of sanctuary schemes in England has been driven by the Government's homelessness prevention strategy which has set local authorities a target of halving the number of families in temporary accommodation by 2010. In 2005 more than 12,000 households were accepted by local authorities in England as being owed a homelessness duty as a result of domestic violence. This represents 13% of the total number of households accepted as homeless in England in 2005.¹

Sanctuary schemes also provide substantial cost savings for local authorities, as additional security measures can be supplied at an average cost of £750 - £1,000. In Barnet the sanctuary scheme in 2004/5 resulted in a 40% decrease of families in temporary accommodation as a result of domestic violence; an estimated saving of over £600,000.²

Further pressure on local authorities to establish sanctuary schemes comes through meeting the requirements of best value performance indicators. In order to score fully on the best value performance indicator (225), which measures the overall provision and effectiveness of local authority services designed to help victims of domestic violence and prevent further domestic violence, local authorities need to have a Sanctuary Scheme in place. This requirement, plus additional government funding, has resulted in 171 local authorities in England operating a sanctuary type scheme and 90 with plans to do so according to the latest figures.³

Measures to improve the security of women's homes involving the local authority or housing association and the police are not unfamiliar in Scotland. However, this happens in the context of women choosing to remain in their home, with an assessment of the potential risk of doing so. None of the initiatives in Scotland include the use of 'panic rooms'.

¹ Options for setting up a Sanctuary Scheme Department of Communities

² Options for setting up a Sanctuary Scheme Department of Communities

³ Homelessness Statistics June 2007 and Local Authority Survey of Homelessness Prevention, Department for Communities and Local Government: London June 2007.

The development of sanctuary schemes in England has not come from an informed and integrated policy response to tackling domestic abuse but is driven by the need to reduce the cost of temporary accommodation. The outcome is a response to domestic abuse that not only finds it acceptable for women and children to have to lock themselves in a room for their own safety but promotes the means of them doing so.

This results in a number of specific concerns about the implementation of the scheme itself:

- There is anecdotal evidence from Women's Aid groups in England that coercive practice at housing options interviews results in women having to accept sanctuary schemes and preventing them from getting a homeless interview and accessing temporary accommodation.
- Women and children's safety can often be more at risk outside the home. Appropriate measures need to be in place to allow them to feel safe and secure in their communities, not only in their own home.
- There is a conflict of interest in local authorities carrying out risk assessments for sanctuary schemes and their own need to reduce the cost and use of temporary accommodation.
- Risk assessment is focused only on the property and not on the risk from the perpetrator outside the home e.g. on the way to or from work or school. Appropriate safety planning to manage risk needs to include plans for both women and children.
- The focus in the guidance is on physical security measures with little reference to support for women and children.
- A co-ordinated multi-agency response needs to be in place not only for the women and children but also the perpetrator of the violence.
- The Fire Service has raised concerns that additional security measures can hinder the means of escape from fire adding significantly to the time it takes to rescue someone⁴.
- Evaluations of the scheme to date have focused on the efficiency of its implementation e.g. the number of days it takes to install satisfaction with contractors and cost savings. An independent evaluation needs to include the views of women and children who have used the scheme including the psychological impact of living with a panic room in their home.

In Scotland the national domestic abuse strategy with its focus on prevention, protection and provision has been key to an integrated policy approach to tackling violence against women. Additional security measures are one small component of what must be a wider, coordinated community response which addresses the perpetrator of the abuse as well as responding to those who experience it.

⁴ West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Services; Domestic Premises Providing Sanctuary Schemes Ref: FS – PAN001
June 2007