



6th October 2011

Housing Benefit Reform - Supported Housing Consultation Eaves Response

About Eaves

Eaves is a London-based charity established in 1977, that provides high quality housing and support to vulnerable women. We also carry out research, advocacy and campaigning to prevent all forms of violence against women.

At Eaves, we put the needs of women first. We are determined to give a voice to the most excluded women in society and provide direct, innovative services to support and empower women to help themselves. There are different projects run by Eaves.

The Lilith Project

Lilith Research & Development have a wide remit ranging from research into various aspects of violence against women, to training and education for the women's sector, to lobbying for legislative change and to working directly with women who have experienced sexual violence.

The Scarlet Centre

The Scarlet Centre is an Eaves service providing advice and drop-in support to women who are affected by violence – including homelessness, rape or sexual abuse, prostitution or domestic violence – and the consequences of violence – including mental health and/or substance misuse problems.

The Poppy Project

The Poppy Project provides support, accommodation and advocacy for women trafficked into domestic slavery and sexual exploitation in the UK. We have 15 bed spaces and capacity for 50 outreach cases per year.

The Serafina Project

Formerly Eaves Women's Aid, The Serafina Project provides support and accommodation for women (and their children) fleeing domestic violence. We provide bed spaces in Westminster in comfortable and safe environments where

a full range of support provided, including help accessing benefits and legal advice.

The Sojourner Project

The Sojourner Project is a pilot scheme run by Eaves and funded by the Home Office. It is for women with no recourse to public funds, who entered the UK on a spousal or partner visa and are eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) under the Domestic Violence Rule.

To find out more about our work please visit our website on www.eaves4women.co.uk

Introduction

Eaves currently administers the Sojourner Project providing housing for women with no recourse to public funds who are victims of domestic violence. We run five other refuges and we run the Poppy project for victims of sex and labour trafficking. More information about our work and the services we offer to women experiencing violence is attached at the end of this response to the consultation.

We are pleased that this consultation does appear to recognise that vulnerable people in supported housing have additional needs that could incur greater costs and that the consultation claims not to be seeking to cut costs.

We do not necessarily feel best placed to address each of the questions but we have points we wish to make and where possible we will indicate which of the questions they most refer to. In preparing this response we have had reference to the work of others in both the VAW and Homelessness sectors notably Refuge, Women's Aid, Homeless Link, St Mungos, Shelter and the Housing Federation.

Q1

We broadly support the approach that groups types of supported housing on the basis of needs, client groups and types of service provider. However, this is an ever-evolving sector particularly when strapped for cash and seeking innovative means to survive and new partnerships and mergers arising all the time which can lead to different models of service delivery, Therefore any categorisation needs the flexibility to incorporate the range of services as they change over time.

Q2

Yes there should be different rates for different types and locations of supported housing as the range and level of need and investment to deliver the service effectively for the wellbeing of service users and for a lasting recovery will vary and this also reflects the reality of housing and standard of living variations around the country.

Q3 and Q4

It is important to be able to make assessments according to the case as presented and this will mean involving specialist expert support workers who understand the different issues in question whether it's ex-offenders or violence or whatever. There would also need to be a transparent process and criteria and ability to challenge or appeal.

Domestic violence crosses borders and sectors and consequently effective working means management and support workers often participating various local and sub-regional and occasionally national bodies and strategic partnerships like MARACs, safeguarding, or justice boards and stakeholder groups.

It is very hard, perhaps inappropriate, to come to a flat rate as typical of supported housing – it will vary depending on the support needs of the individual(s). This could include different levels of care and adaptations for disabilities, it could include counselling, social interaction skills, group work, skills for living or reintegration training including budgeting, welfare benefits and re-education or training, advocacy and assistance with social services, legal aid and child custody or contact issues, youth offending, probation and other justice measures, it could include translation and interpretation, it could include substance abuse issues, it could include security features or staff, it could include facilitating access to other services be it transport, medical or legal support, it could include out of hours physical and or telephone help, it could include unusually high levels of maintenance, wear and tear and upkeep.

Points arising from paragraphs 54 – 62 and referenced in questions 5-10:

It is mooted that “customers” apply to separate (supported housing) fund to meet additional housing costs. We have grave concerns over this proposal. First of all we would refer to the individuals not as “customers” but as “service-users” which more accurately reflects the relationship, needs, rights and services in question. Service users in need of supported housing already are having to deal with innumerable complex, time consuming and bureaucratic procedures, applications and general upheaval in their and their children’s lives. They have a broad range of needs as indicated at questions 2-4 inclusive above. They are commonly people facing challenges who may have chaotic lifestyles, may not be in full control of all aspects of their lives, may lack self-esteem and confidence, may have poor levels of education are both time and money poor. It is not appropriate or efficient to ask them to make additional separate applications and may not be the right time to expect them to manage finances. They may well need to go through additional assessments, retelling difficult personal histories and possibly having to appeal against wrongful initial decisions. They may still need a great deal of one-on-one supportive work and skills training before they can exercise

full independence and decision making and choice. It is also likely that this added procedure would increase administrative and bureaucratic costs to the state

Assessments around additional needs or service charges would need specialist input - that is not merely housing or social services – it would need specialists working in that particular area of need - be that disability, VAW, substance abuse, ex offenders etc etc. Such experts from these specialist sectors should be equal partners in the decision making process but there are serious questions over their time and resources to be able to participate as would be necessary and indeed increasingly an actual shortage and inconsistent availability of such specialists.

Q6

As indicated above at 2-5 there are a range of additional costs but a very major priority for us are additional costs around maintenance and upkeep specific to DV refuge provision:

In refuges, children are by far the largest number of service users; in our refuges when at capacity we have 35 women and 81 children. In our two largest houses we have 11 women and 18 children and 10 women and 22 children respectively. Any family with children will experience an increase in damage and wear and tear in the household. When those children are concentrated in a refuge environment and have been affected by directly experiencing or witnessing domestic violence, the level of damage to property becomes much higher; hence the need to replace furniture or decorate rooms more often.

Additionally, the families who come to refuges to escape violence suffer huge losses in what they have left behind. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that the environment we offer them, while not luxurious, is at least clean and homely.

Some children in refuges take out their frustration, (which they may be feeling safe to express for the first time), by breaking furniture or writing on walls, etc. Through the support that we offer the families, we work to prevent this from happening, however it cannot always be avoided. In such cases, it would be unfair to expect the next occupants of that room or flat, to come to live with the damage caused by the previous occupants of that unit, so we have to repair/replace furniture items or repaint the walls.

In general needs hostels, service users tend to stay on average two years, sometimes longer. In refuges the average length of stay is six months, we provide intensive support to enable families to move on quicker, so that they, especially the children, can return to normality and re-establish themselves in the wider community. The high turnover of service users results in a higher level of wear and tear.

An additional factor is that previously Registered social landlords such as housing associations used to make properties available to lease or loan to DV

providers for very low and reduced rents. The introduction of market rents and recent developments and trends in housing provision mean that this is no longer the case. Other adaptations sometimes relating to security and safety and to disabilities are not always covered and can also increase costs.

Q8

We are not sure how best to answer this question, supporting people teams have been very useful in the past but as this is no longer ring-fenced it is hard to say. The reality of VAW generally and particularly for BME community is that most women may need to move, often several times and often over very considerable distances and often very quickly, in order to flee violence and continue to evade their abuser. This means that effective provision for VAW requires very rapid, effective, confidential working across any number of geographical and administrative boundaries. Often women fleeing violence may not have any, or at least immediate, access to all the documentary evidence and finances that might normally be needed but they may need to move fast to stay safe. Constant arguing over who has jurisdiction, who has to foot the bill, whether or not she has a home address, how to access her medical and benefit records etc jeopardises confidentiality, jeopardises her and her children's safety and is ineffective and dangerous. Whatever and whoever is the structure responsible – it needs to have immediate safety of women and children first and systems flexible, adaptable and sensitive to these cases.

Q9

It may be that local authorities housing departments are the remaining or only structure – however there is insufficient understanding of the specialist needs of survivors of violence against women, different authorities have different priorities for housing and use differing and ever narrowing definitions of violence so as to gate-keep provision and there is no ring-fenced funding. Commissioning and procurement that fails to understand or build in costing around the specialist needs of VAW survivors and relies on lowest unit cost, private sub-contracting and generic service provision is disastrous for the sector.

Points arising in paragraphs 63- 67 incorporating questions 11 and 12

Personal Budgets have both strengths and weaknesses in that ensuring individuals can take control of their own care, in principle, recognises agency and autonomy and in this way may be particularly appropriate for those with physical disability for whom other mental and decision making capacities are in no way impaired or impeded.

However, there are concerns that the system can disadvantage some claimants as they may not be well able to identify or articulate their own needs, identify what is available, make a convincing case through the procedures, be taken seriously and respected by officials, and do not always have access to an advocate on their part – indeed ever less so in this climate - and so can result in

failing to access their rights and needs. Being able to challenge and rectify such decisions is already hard but will be a great deal harder now that equalities obligations have been reduced and there are attempts to put vast areas of legal aid including regarding employment tribunals, family law, expert assessments and reports and housing disputes out of scope. As indicated in the preceding points, supported housing users are rarely in the best place to be able to navigate additional cumbersome applications and administration.

Many supported housing users need supported housing because they lack or struggle with control and choice over elements of their lives and decisions. They may be making a transition from substance abuse where money was the route to instant gratification, they may be coming out of a violent relationship where they had no financial control, they may still have caring demands to children or relatives here or overseas, they may be recently released from Prison where they may not have had control of budgets or other decisions. They are increasingly unlikely to be able to access one-on-one advocacy and support to help them in these processes as this climate has seen huge reductions in such services. Quite apart from the difficulties of navigating the bureaucracy it may not be appropriate to expect them to manage budgets and prioritise. Should they then fail to use the money as it is intended it could lead to exacerbations of existing problems and conditions and in some cases to eviction and an analysis of them as “intentionally homeless”. Personal budgets would therefore not seem appropriate for this group.

Paragraphs 68 – 74 including questions 13-15

Service charges – supported housing may have increased service charges for very good reasons – see above re maintenance. A high turnover in premises, a mix of service users who may be recovering from substance misuse, or behavioural difficulties or mental health issues, a mother sharing a room with her young children – any number of scenarios could result in excessive wear and tear on rooms, excessive demands for refurbishment, replacements, breakages and redecoration, heavier than normal use of laundry services or utility bills, increased security and health and safety costs and emergency call-outs. This will rarely be adequately understood by non-specialists but inappropriate cuts could have drastic effects on standards of living and mental and physical health and security. A failure to properly provide for service charges could result in deterioration leading to health and safety and wellbeing issues, disputes or eviction.

Rent officer referral does not adequately address the specialist issues in question with supported housing and as indicated above – experts working on the particular support need should be equal partners in decisions and there should be transparency and appeal routes.

The categorisations that are listed in supported housing do not necessarily reflect the complexity of the sector. In some cases there may be a registered social

landlord providing accommodation but little or no actual support or buying it in, in some cases there may be a registered provider who rents the property, sets the rent and supports the service users. Therefore it would not seem appropriate to treat them all the same way since the way they work, the arrangements they have, the levels of support they provide are different.

Q16 new rules introduction

We share the concern of our partners in the sector that removing housing related support from housing benefit risks a massive reduction in outreach services, service levels, quality of service and safety and recovery of women. Any proposal to remove it must incorporate some alternative that is viable in the view of the women's sector. This means it cannot add new bureaucratic, cumbersome, time consuming layers of applications and scrutiny and proof and special pleading for often chaotic, time and money poor women in crisis who are coming out of painful, humiliating and controlling relationships. It means also that any alternative cannot be merely optional or recommended otherwise it will not happen, and women will not be supported and safe and able to rebuild their lives. This is particularly the case in a climate of cuts where public services – police, health, social services, legal aid, equalities, children's services, vulnerable adults services and lots of supportive NGOs - CAB, BME specialists, women's, youth and reoffending, and substance NGOs are all shutting down or reducing. The only people who would be in a position to say they can "support" these complex victims will be lowest unit cost, generic providers who actually provide only the "Roof over the Head" – like housing associations and RSLs whereas lasting and effective recovery is a great deal more than a "Roof over the Head".

Transition: We would not support the separation or reduction of housing support but if it is determined to go forward then proposals need ring-fenced allocations otherwise they will not happen and transition needs to be long enough to build in training, transparency, appeal and accountability mechanisms for public sector staff and some allocations for refuge case workers to be able to have the time and capacity to advocate and support through these additional hurdles and to provide expert input to the public authorities to minimise ignorant or unfair gate-keeping decisions that harm women.

Other

1) Shared Accommodation rate

While we realise that this issue has already been discussed, we are taking this opportunity to highlight once again how inappropriate, ineffective and indeed in some cases dangerous this can be.

Many of those in hostels or supported housing recovering from complex needs may have challenging behaviour, chaotic lifestyles or be particularly vulnerable to abuse and unable or frightened to socially interact. Single under 35 year old women are a significant proportion of those fleeing violent and abusive partners

and families. It is not appropriate to require them to share and can create or exacerbate mental health issues and put them at increased risk of further abuse and exploitation indeed it could result in them returning to or not leaving an abusive situation.

There is also a shortage of shared accommodation, single lets and bedsits in the private sector especially for those on benefits and so it is harder for people to be moved on and can result on people ready to move on being unable to do so and blocking supported housing and hostel spaces.

Vulnerable people with support needs sharing accommodation with others can create tensions and lead to tenancy breakdown and homelessness.

2) Benefit Cap

As has been pointed out in articles and blogs by Inside Housing among others there are additional problems for DV victims and for refuges and homeless families units presented by the proposed benefit cap of £500 or £350 for couples or singles. Alongside other benefits to which a person is entitled the rent for refuges which is often higher for perfectly good reasons as this consultation acknowledges would push people over the benefit cap. This cap will render refuges and HFUs non viable in many cases and will lead to selective access to such services or rejections leading to homelessness and/or violence.

3) Proposed removal of several areas of legal aid from scope, reduction in equalities obligations, attempts to reduce other protective measures in employment, housing etc. These proposals, reductions and exemptions mean that the most marginalised and vulnerable are both at increased risk of discriminatory, negligent or malicious treatment and have significantly reduced routes of access to justice to enforce their rights.