

Case study:

Pilot to house a couple together where there is a known risk of domestic abuse

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Rough sleeping pathways and homelessness provision are in the majority focussed on services for 'single homeless' people, and most areas have few or no options for people experiencing rough sleeping who are a couple and want to be housed together. Couples are sometimes housed in the same service in separate rooms, however where this option is not available couples often choose to remain street homeless, to be together, or, in the case of couples where domestic abuse is occurring, a perpetrator may coerce their partner in to continuing to rough sleep with them if accommodation for both of them together is not offered.

It is especially difficult for couples where there is known domestic abuse taking place to access housing together, as providers are understandably reluctant to take the risk of domestic abuse occurring within the project. However, recent thinking in this area of work has highlighted that if couples where domestic abuse is occurring remain street homeless, it is likely to increase the risks to the survivor and make it even harder for them to access support. Similarly, it is extremely unlikely that perpetrators of domestic abuse will be able to engage in any kind of behaviour change unless their basic support needs are met.

In response to these issues, the London borough of Camden recently undertook a pilot to provide supported accommodation in the same service to a couple with known domestic abuse. The following case study provides an overview of the learning from this piece of work.

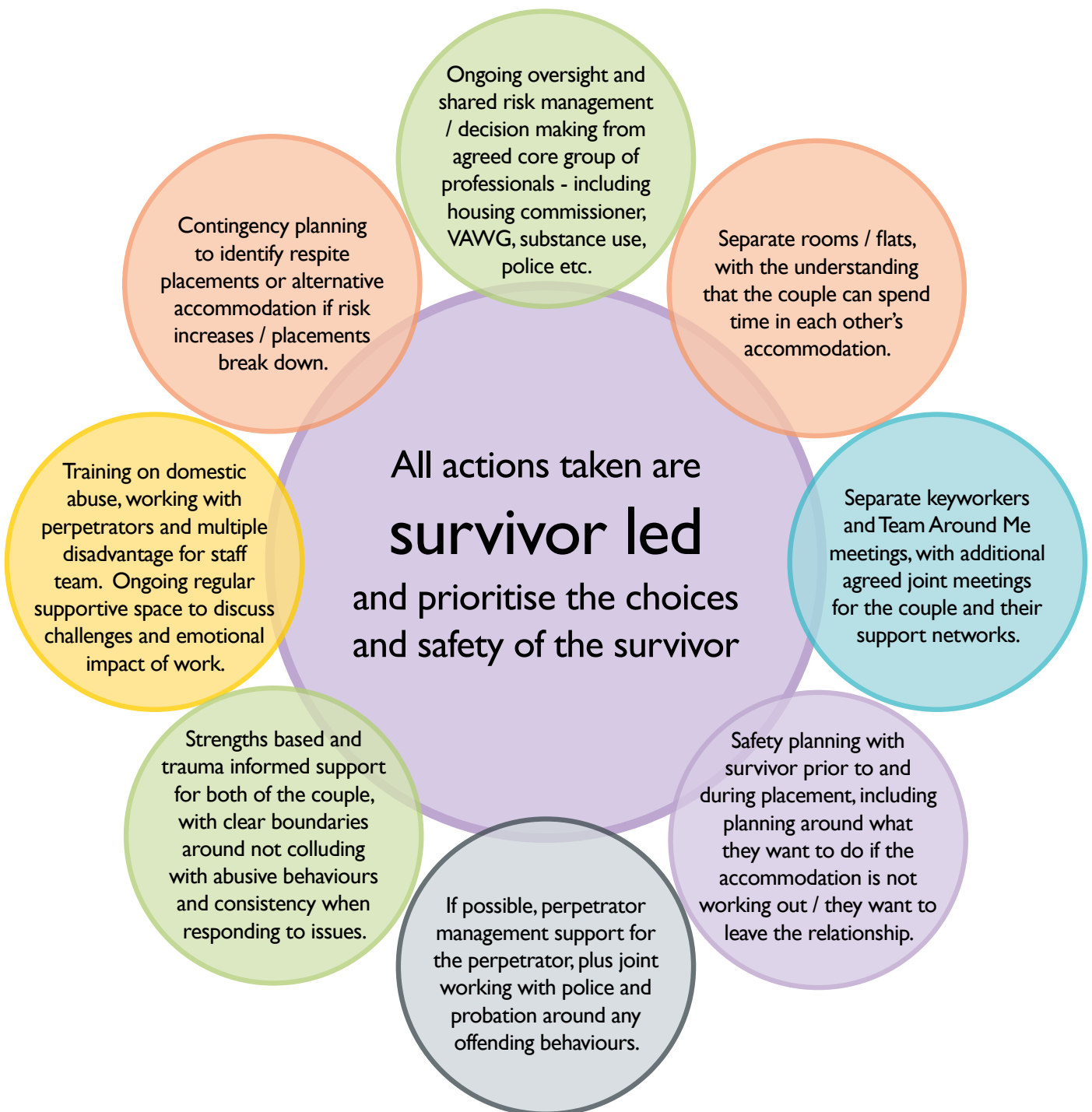
The couple

A couple T (male) and C (female), had been rough sleeping on and off for twenty years. Both T and C have complex physical health problems and use substances and alcohol. There had been multiple occasions of T being physically, emotionally, and financially abusive to C over the years, some witnessed by staff in homelessness and health services, and some disclosed by C. Many referrals to MARAC had been made, and on occasion T had spent time in custody due to domestic abuse incidents reported by staff members. DVPOs had been tried and breached daily. C had not been ready to leave the relationship, and had always stated she wanted housing with T.

The couple were very well known to all homelessness services in the borough, and no service was willing to house them together due to the high risk of domestic abuse. They had been offered many individual placements over the years, but these had either been declined or had broken down due to abandonment or evictions. As a result, they continued to rough sleep. Agencies involved held different views on the best way forward, but the majority agreed that something different was worth testing.



Model for the couples pilot



Preliminary work

Lead outreach workers for each of the couple collated information on their needs and risks, both current and historical, to inform future conversations accurately. They then met with the commissioner for housing support services to discuss and agree the new approach for the couple, whereby they would be housed together with a strong, multi-agency risk plan in place and additional support for the accommodation provider.

An initial meeting was convened by the commissioner, bringing together hostel providers and other cross sector professionals who were involved in the support networks of either T or C. The couple were not named at this point, in order to try and avoid prospective housing providers making decisions based on historical information or their opinions on the couple. The leads for each of the couple presented on the couple's situation, the proposed pilot, and outlined an offer of support for potential providers. This support package included domestic abuse and multiple disadvantage training, 'Confidence in Complexity: Working with survivors and perpetrators of domestic abuse in homelessness settings' training, and the ongoing support and risk management of a 'network' for the couple: a group of cross sector professionals, led by the commissioner and the leads for the couple.

The meeting also included space to scope out possible problems that could arise, and brainstorm ways to deal with them. For example, thinking about other bedspaces within the borough where either the survivor or perpetrator could go for respite/space following an incident or relationship breakdown; considering if alternatives to eviction could be used if the perpetrator were to be abusive to the survivor; but the survivor remained adamant she wanted to be housed with him (for example, staff using the criminal justice system as a consequence to the perpetrators actions, but not making the perpetrator homeless as this would likely cause the survivor to also leave the project.)



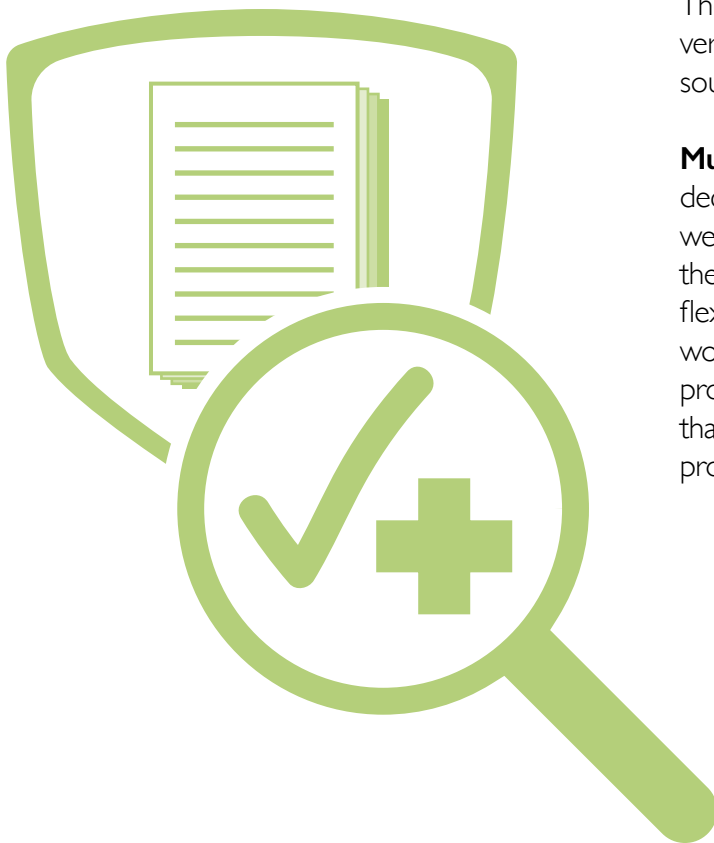
At the end of the meeting, three services put themselves forward to potentially offer the couple accommodation. This was extremely positive, as no project in the borough had previously agreed to house the couple together.

Offering the couple supported accommodation

Firstly, T and C were spoken to separately by their workers to confirm that they still wanted to be placed together. As the survivor, C was asked first, on two occasions, and confirmed this was what she wanted, before T was asked by his worker. Both T and C confirmed that they wanted to go ahead. They were then offered the choice of the three hostels that had agreed to be part of the pilot – this was positive and empowering for the couple, as previously they had both been rejected by services on a number of occasions due to perceived risk, and had had very little choice in what accommodation they could access. Once they decided on a hostel, they were offered a flexible assessment process, in order to give them the best chance of engaging. The hostel manager made a number of appointment times over the course of two weeks available to them, and they were able to present together, and then have short, separate assessments, before having a conversation jointly with the hostel manager.

Safety planning

- **Physical safety:** T and C were given separate rooms. C could access T's if they wish to stay together, but C's was on a women's only floor so she could have a protected space if she needed to.
- **Support:** T and C were given separate keyworkers and regular separate Team Around Me meetings, but were also offered regular joint meetings if they wished. The hostel manager was transparent with T and C from the outset that staff were aware of the previous risks around domestic abuse, and that abusive behaviours would not be tolerated.
- **Safety words:** C worked with her outreach IDVA to come up with two phrases which could tell staff she needed help after an incident or that she wanted to move out.
- **Back up hostel:** A plan was made in case either of the couple needed to be rapidly rehoused due to an incident.



Outcomes from the pilot

Reduction in rough sleeping: T and C used their bed spaces consistently for a period of 9 months – this was extremely positive and the first time this had happened after many years of entrenched rough sleeping.

Engagement with services: T and C both sustained good levels of engagement with their outreach workers, substance misuse service, and C with her outreach domestic abuse worker.

Domestic abuse: Workers supporting C noted that she was engaging with them around how she felt in the relationship, and C said that being in accommodation had given her the opportunity to reflect on the realities of the relationship, whereas on the streets in survival mode it was more difficult to be reflective. C made disclosures to staff about T's abusive behaviours, and following a physical assault, asked for hostel staff to support her to call the police, which they did. She then engaged further with hostel staff and the police about the incident the next day. Though she decided not to take further action, it was very positive that she had disclosed the abuse and sought help.

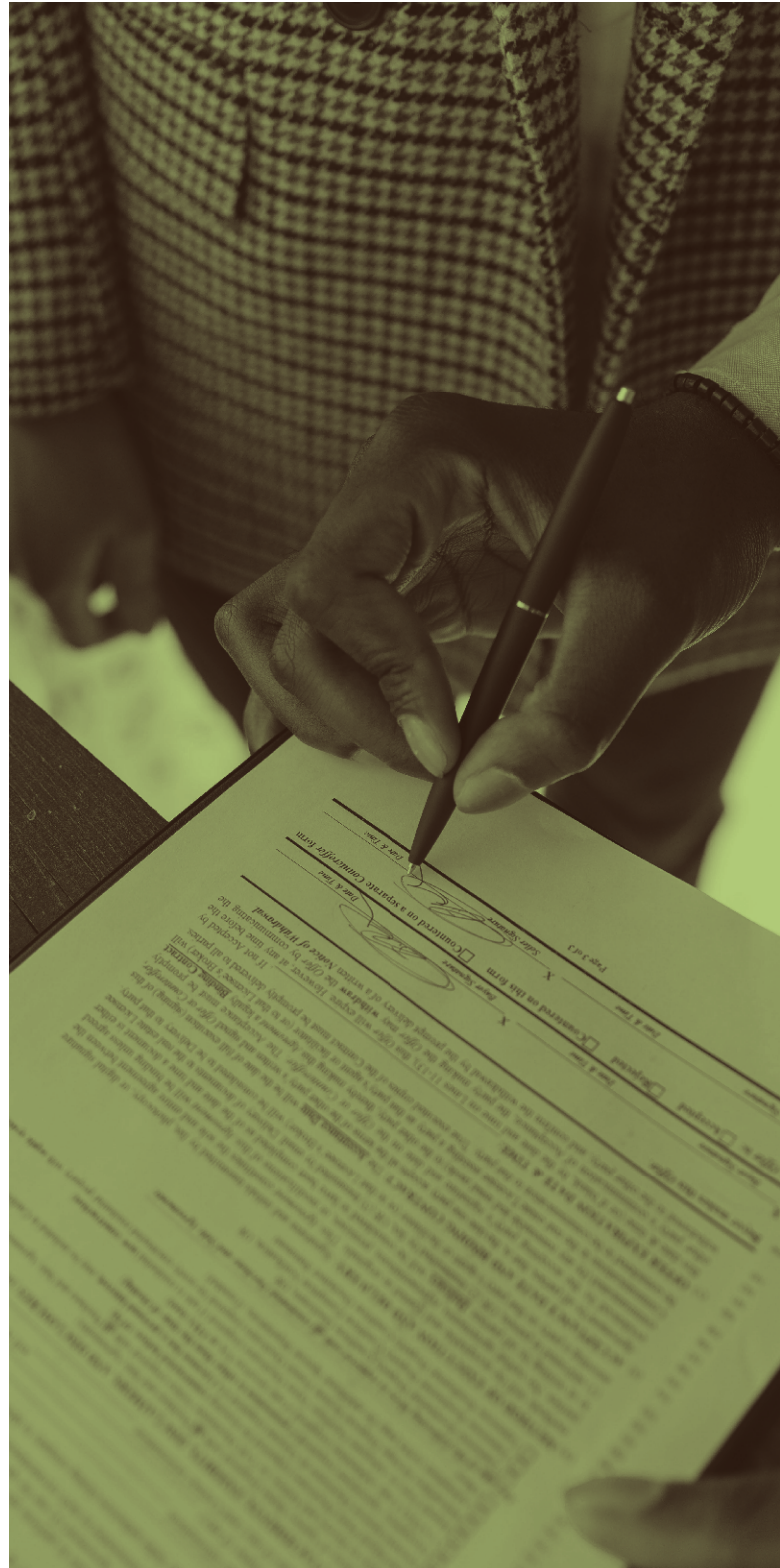
Multi-agency working: At every point in the process, decision making, progress reviews and risk management were shared by the multi-agency framework around the couple. The network responded quickly and flexibly to incidents and concerns as they arose, and worked together to think creatively about how to solve problems and manage risks. This mitigated the concern that the risk would be 'held' by the accommodation provider to manage alone.

Other housing options: As a result of the pilot, independent accommodation supported by Housing First is being explored. The intention is for both to have separate tenancies, with intensive support, with the understanding that they can spend some time at each other's flats if they wish to. If successful, having assured shorthold tenancies rather than license agreements may reduce the risk of both T and C returning to rough sleeping if an incident occurs and/or T has criminal justice intervention.

Challenges

Continued high levels of domestic abuse: Though C felt more able to reflect on the relationship and to disclose to staff when abuse had taken place, the placement did not lead to a reduction in the abuse (although this was not necessarily an expectation of the pilot). It was challenging for the staff (who are not domestic abuse specialists) at the project to witness and manage this, and there was also concern of the impact on other residents who may have had awareness that domestic abuse was taking place and could be re-traumatised. Hostel staff teams are not equipped or supported to work with high levels of domestic abuse.

Managing incidents: At one point during the placement, T was given a DVPO following an incident of abuse, and was not able to return to the project for a month. C immediately left the project and spent this time sleeping rough with T. The pilot demonstrated that hostel environments cannot be flexible about how they respond to incidents, as they need to enforce certain rules and consequences around behaviour; such as warning letters and evictions, which are likely to lead to perpetrators being evicted quickly in some circumstances. The risk is a return to rough sleeping for both survivor and perpetrator, if they cannot be rehoused together.





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