END FURNITURE POVERTY

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Executive Summary

Creating Homes to Rebuild Lives

The Importance of Furnished Homes for Survivors of Domestic Abuse

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> "Many women fleeing abuse are faced with sleeping on dirty floorboards, without any kitchen essentials like a cooker or a fridge, and this can mean survivors return to their abusers, where at least their child had a bed and they could prepare a meal. For these people, this can be a matter of life and death. I have seen too many cases where women have returned only to be murdered – all for the sake of furniture and appliances"
>
> Jess Phillips, Member of Parliament for Birmingham Yardley

WHAT IS FURNITURE POVERTY?

Furniture, white goods and flooring are the most expensive items people on low incomes are likely to purchase. While there is extensive support for food and fuel costs, there is minimal help available for vulnerable groups to furnish a property.

Living without essential furniture items can have a devastating impact on your physical and mental health, as well as your social and financial wellbeing. People can get into unmanageable debt trying to acquire items, leaving them unable to cover essential expenses like food and housing costs. It can lead to isolation - you are far less likely to invite family, or a support worker, into your home if you do not have a sofa.

FURNITURE POVERTY CAN UNDERMINE SAFETY AND RECOVERY FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

This report, written by End Furniture Poverty with support from Furnishing Futures, makes a simple but urgent case: survivors of domestic abuse need more than a roof over their head. To recover, rebuild and remain safe, they need homes that are liveable, properly equipped and dignified from the point they move in. As Caroline Deeprose, CEO of the Angels Foundation, who are a Cambridgeshire-based domestic abuse charity, stated "leaving the relationship is just the beginning".

The evidence in this report shows that furniture poverty can undermine every part of recovery from domestic abuse. Empty, cold and unsuitable homes can damage physical and mental health, increase isolation, deepen debt, affect children's development and wellbeing, and, in the most serious cases, encourages survivors to return to a perpetrator because they cannot meet their own or their children's basic needs. All too often, Furnishing Futures support women in this situation, with one survivor saying, "at times, I considered returning to the abusive relationship so my daughter would have a bed to sleep in".

The report is published in the context of the Government's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, which rightly recognises the importance of safety, support and long-term independence for victims and survivors. However, the material conditions of the home remain a major gap. A survivor cannot fully rebuild their life in an empty property without the essentials needed to sleep, cook, wash clothes, keep children safe, maintain privacy and feel secure.

"After escaping a DV relationship, I was relieved to be offered a safe home, but when I saw it, I felt so anxious. It was completely bare, with no flooring and I was so worried about how I was going to make this house feel like home. It felt cold and empty, especially for my son. The burden of having to do everything on my own was causing me panic and anxiety".

The impact of furniture poverty on survivors is severe. Furniture poverty can worsen anxiety, depression, isolation, physical health, financial hardship and the risk of returning to a perpetrator. Children are also directly affected. Lack of beds, flooring, storage and safe play space can affect sleep, development, school readiness, confidence and emotional wellbeing.

Furthermore, better data is needed. Local authorities and housing providers do not consistently record whether survivors are being allocated suitable, furnished properties, or simply an empty box, making the problem harder to identify and solve.

THE STATE OF SOCIAL HOUSING

"I had no idea that homes came completely empty like that. I had absolutely no way of sorting it myself. What I thought would be a fresh start suddenly felt impossible to make liveable"

Survivors of domestic abuse are given priority need for social housing, and as a result many are allocated this type of property. Women and children who have fled violence are often moved into unfurnished temporary or social housing with no beds, flooring, curtains, cooker, fridge, washing machine or basic storage. Survivors may arrive with few possessions, no savings and debt caused by economic abuse, with little capacity to source, pay for, transport and install essential items. The result is that safety in principle can become hardship in practice.

Currently, only 3% of social housing is let as furnished. This means that most new tenants will be placed into an empty box, without any furniture, appliances, floor or window coverings.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

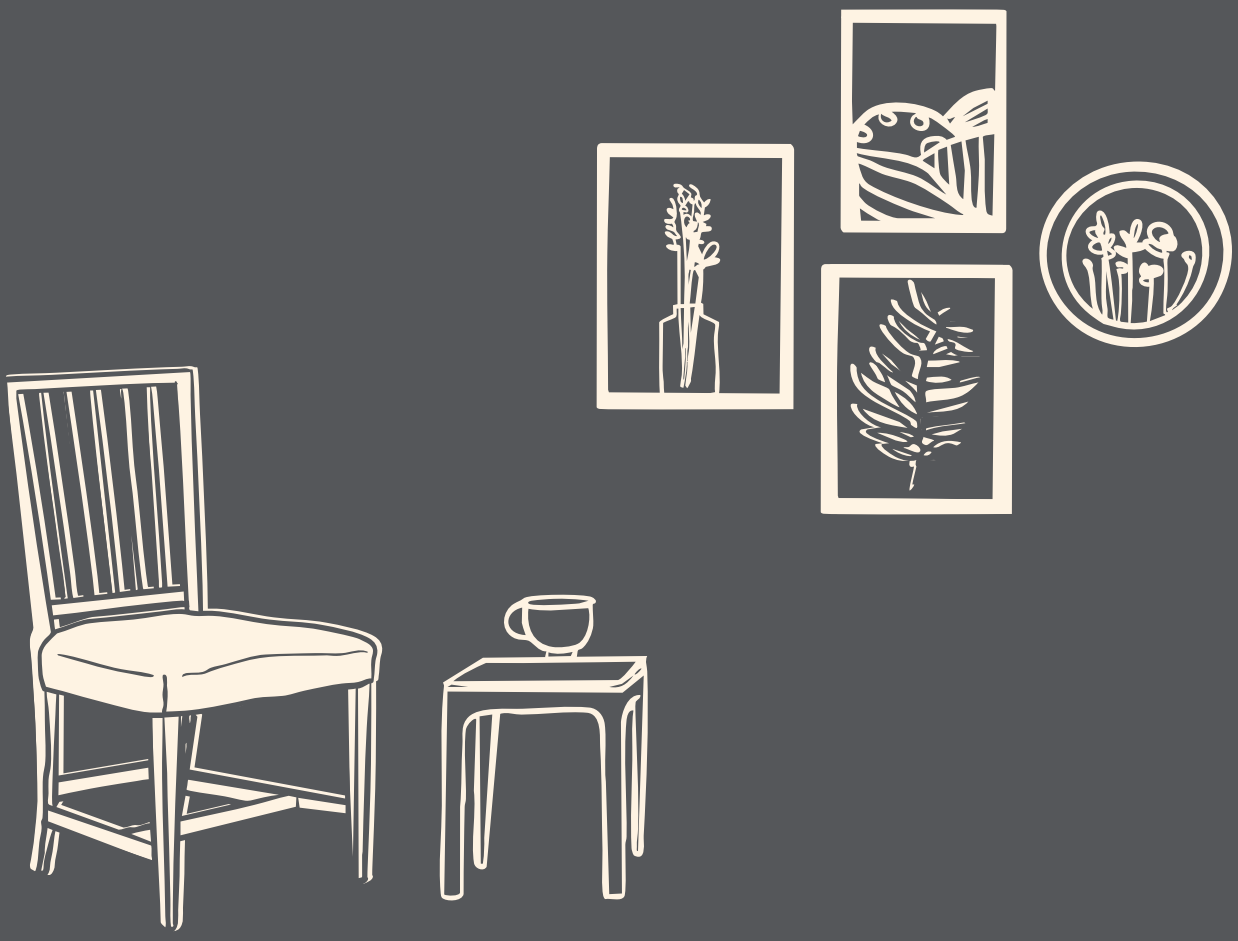
The report calls for action from social landlords, local authorities and Government. Social landlords should ensure survivors can access the essential items they need, with all properties let to survivors fully floored as a minimum and at least 10% of general needs social housing let as furnished. Local authorities should use the Crisis and Resilience Fund to provide furniture and appliances where a furnished tenancy is not suitable, and housing staff should receive trauma-informed domestic abuse training.

Government should make Local Welfare Assistance a statutory duty with adequate ring-fenced funding, ensure survivors are not excluded from social housing because of abuse-related debt, exempt survivors from the benefit cap, and develop a national framework for social housing allocation data. This work should be taken forward across the Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Department for Work and Pensions as part of the cross-government response to Violence Against Women and Girls.

Some survivors must look to the third sector for support, be that grant-making charities or furniture reuse charities. There is very little support aimed at survivors of domestic abuse who are experiencing furniture poverty. Relying on the third sector is not a sustainable solution for ending furniture poverty for survivors of domestic abuse.

> "Furniture poverty can drive women back to their abusers which can be a death sentence. Together we can end violence against women and girls, and together we must End Furniture Poverty" Jess Phillips, Member of Parliament for Birmingham Yardley

END FURNITURE POVERTY



www.EndFurniturePoverty.org