



Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

Eddie Hughes MP
Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing

By email only

20 April 2022

Dear Mr Hughes,

The challenges Deaf domestic abuse survivors face in accessing safe accommodation

As part of the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into 'Violence against women and girls', we held a private engagement event with Deaf survivors of domestic abuse, supported by the Deaf health charity SignHealth. A summary of the meeting is published on our website here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/43290/pdf/>

Given your Department's welcome consultation on 'Local connection requirements for social housing for victims of domestic abuse', I wanted to draw your attention to some of the challenges the survivors we spoke to faced when trying to access safe accommodation through local authorities.¹

One participant told us she felt extremely vulnerable as an abusive ex-partner knows the location of her home, and she, along with her child, are not able to move to a new house. She said that to apply for social housing she was told you have to be a resident in the borough for five years, despite the housing officer knowing the participant had suffered domestic violence and abuse. This participant made a formal complaint but said the complaints process required a lot of written English which was very difficult (her first language is British Sign Language or BSL). She also said that having to repeatedly explain to people that she was Deaf, and what her communications needs were, was exhausting and made her want to give up. This participant was also asked to communicate through somebody who signs, but who was not a certified interpreter, which was inappropriate. The interpreter did not know specialist language around domestic abuse, or understand the context of abuse, which made communication even more difficult.

¹ [Local connection requirements for social housing for victims of domestic abuse](#), 15 February 2022

The participant told us that she still has anxiety and feels unsafe in her housing. She said this is difficult because she does not want her child to see she is living in fear. Being unable to move has had severe implications for her mental health. This participant is still living in a one bed flat, with her child sharing her room, because she has been unable to move into a two-bedroom house. Even after providing evidence, including a statement from a refuge, the end result was an offer from the local authority to change the locks of the property. This has left her feeling no less afraid than before.

Another participant told us that when she left an abusive partner and sought social housing near to her parents in another borough, that borough would not give her housing because she had not lived there for the last five years. However, she did not want to live in the same borough, near her abusive ex-partner. No BSL interpreter was provided and so one of her parents had to act as an interpreter to explain the situation and the fact she was fleeing domestic abuse. The council said her domestic abuse “was not serious enough” and did not acknowledge her vulnerability which meant she had to move into her parents’ home with her child.

A representative of the Deaf health charity SignHealth told us that if a victim of domestic abuse wishes to stay in the family home, and make the perpetrator leave, this can be seen by housing officers as an indication that their abuse was not that serious. The representative gave a specific example of a Deaf survivor whose child was in a specialist school for Deaf children. As the child was receiving excellent education and care, and there was no guarantee they would be able to attend another specialist school if they moved, the Deaf mum decided to try and stay in the home to ensure the child could stay in the school. However, SignHealth told us that where the victims have asked to remain, housing officers do not take them seriously as victims.

These are shocking accounts and suggest deep rooted problems in the approach taken by local authorities to Deaf survivors of domestic abuse seeking housing support. We were also very concerned to hear about the lack of provision for BSL interpreters which in many cases appears to have compounded an already difficult and distressing situation.

In light of these concerning cases, the Committee was pleased to see that the Government has launched its consultation on local connection requirements. However, there is no accessible means for the Deaf community, who are clearly affected by policy in this area, to contribute to this consultation. For example, no BSL translation has been provided.

I have therefore set out above some of the evidence we have heard from the Deaf community on this issue; there is more in the published written evidence. I would also like to draw to your attention SignHealth’s wider evidence on domestic abuse and the Deaf community which can be found here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/38301/html/>

The submission includes helpful points on consultation accessibility.

We would ask if you could, by return correspondence, set out the Department’s policy regarding the accessibility of public consultations and policy documents?

Finally, we warmly welcome the Government's support for Rosie Cooper MP's British Sign Language Bill. How will the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 'promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public'?²

We hope your Department will consider the needs of Deaf survivors of domestic abuse seeking housing support, both as part of this consultation and more widely.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dame Diana Johnson MP

² [British Sign Language Bill](#).