

**Written evidence submitted by Hestia**

In the UK 950,000 children experience domestic abuse each year. 30,000 of these children flee their homes to the safety of a refuge. Child victims of domestic abuse who have to flee their homes to a refuge, despite being some of the most vulnerable in society, are quickly forgotten by the system which ought to support them. The National Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy does not address the mental health, education and well-being needs of these children. Many do not receive the support and interventions which they need.

**About Hestia**

Hestia is the largest provider of domestic abuse services in London with 39 refuges across 14 London Boroughs. We are a specialist provider of domestic abuse services, supporting victims in the community as well as providing dedicated refuge accommodation. We support almost 700 women and their children every day. In 2014-15 we supported more than 4,000 women and children within our domestic abuse service provision. This includes accommodating 545 children who were homeless as a result of domestic abuse.

**Summary**

1. There are 30,000 children who flee home each year to enter refuges for survivors of domestic abuse. It is our experience that the needs of children are routinely overlooked with an absence of appropriate and specialist support. Systemically education, health and children services make inadequate provision to address the needs of these children who are frequently traumatised by their experience.
  - 1.1. These include delayed entry to schools, minimal access to mental health support services, inadequate commissioning of specialist children's workers within refuge contracts, a poor understanding of the impact of abuse on children among statutory agencies and inconsistent access to support for older boys (12-16 years old).

**Education**

2. At Hestia, 40% of the children in our refuges wait an average of six weeks before they are offered a place at a new school (Hestia, 2015). Some wait much longer. An annual survey of Women's Aid members supported this

research, finding that 42% of them had difficulty in placing children within schools.

- 2.1. The NUT in 2005 found that in this already difficult period for children and their families, finding a new school only exacerbated the problem due to a child's need for an established routine.
  - 2.2. A disruption in a child's education that results in missing six weeks (14%) of an academic year undermines their capacity to grasp the curriculum at a level commensurate to their peers. There is also a significant body of evidence that shows that children who have witnessed domestic abuse suffer from trauma, behavioural issues and are more prone to truancy in school (Hestia, 2015). This exacerbates their educational challenges.
3. At present, looked after children of compulsory school going age have priority and fast track access to school places. In addition schools receive a maximum Pupil Premium of £1,900 for each child who is looked after by the Local Authority for one day or more, has been adopted from care or who has left care under a special guardianship order, a residence order or a child arrangements order.
- 3.1. This both enables schools to give additional support to those who have often come from difficult circumstances and incentivises them to take in children who may have additional needs.
  - 3.2. This serves to ensure that children can better access and make use of the educational opportunities on offer and are better equipped to overcome earlier difficulties.
4. We support the aims of **"Terms of Reference 4"** to offer an equitable educational experience for some of Britain's most vulnerable children. We call on the Commissioner to consider the positive effects of incorporating children living in refuges under the same rules and guidelines as looked after children when it comes to improving their access to education.

### **Mental Health**

5. Most victims leave abusive relationships after an average of 3 years of escalating coercion, control and psychological abuse.
6. There is a substantial body of evidence that shows that children who experience or witness domestic abuse are at significant risk of ongoing mental health problems.

- 6.1. 25% of children entering a refuge are under 3 years of age and so often in a non-abusive setting for the first time of their lives. Exposure to abuse often leaves children at risk of PTSD, suicide, depression, self-harm, aggression, under-developed social skills and eating difficulties. Exposure to trauma via abuse at an early age has been found to inhibit a child's Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED).
7. Our latest research (2015) has shown that 91% of families in our refuges had received no access to counselling or any form of therapeutic programme from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This is further supported by *Safe Lives*, whose nationwide research of refuges across the country found the same proportion of children were unable to access essential mental health support across England.
8. In terms of mental health provision for children living in refuge accommodation, we support the aims of "**Terms of Reference 5**" and would welcome suggestions for how the Government can address the specific needs of children through its next Violence Against Women and Girls strategy.

### **Boys 12-16**

9. At present, many refuges don't accept referrals from families with boys over the age of 12-16, many of whom will present as young men. This however leaves many women with older sons facing several difficult choices; to enter the refuge without her son, remain homeless whilst awaiting other accommodation or, in the worst case scenario, to stay with or return to the perpetrator.
  - 9.1. Separating a mother from her child ignores the urgent developmental needs they often have, with many urgently needing a space that allows them to not only escape their perpetrator but also to rebuild the relationship with their son.
10. Our research shows that 79% of women who enter our refuges do so to ensure the wellbeing and safety of their children.
  - 10.1. Forcing women to face the choices outlined above can potentially serve to undermine both the well-being and safety of their child. So, in line with "**Terms of Reference 3**" we call on the Commissioner to explore and consult on the various options which can prevent families from being separated.

**References**

Hestia (2015), From Victim to Survivor: A revised study of the obstacles faced by domestic abuse victims in London.

Hestia (2015) Hidden Child- Children - Forgotten Victims of Domestic Abuse

Safe Lives (2015), In plain sight: Effective help for children exposed to domestic abuse.

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