

Written evidence from akt (COV0186)

Introduction

1. akt is a national LGBTQ+ youth homelessness charity: providing safe homes, mentoring, advocacy and support to young people between the ages of 16-25 who are homeless or living in a hostile environment after coming out to their parents, caregivers and peers. We operate at a national level with support centres in London, Manchester, Newcastle and Bristol.
2. The demographic breakdown of our service users:
 - Gender: 53% female, 36% male, 9% non-binary and 2% other
 - Gender identity: 27% trans (52% in Newcastle), 7% questioning, 9% other,
 - Ethnicity: 53% BAME (77% in London), 28% white/british,9 % white/other, 37% black, 24% mixed
 - Sexual orientation: 28% lesbian, 27% gay, 25% bisexual, 8% pan, 7% queer, 3% heterosexual, 1.5% questioning and 13% other
 - Age: 98% 16-25, 2% over 25
 - Disability: 67% (76% London), 33% no disability
3. Our submission to this call for evidence is centred upon the government’s legal obligation to protect individuals from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment¹
4. We are concerned about whether current government funding for domestic abuse services will be enough to fully support our service users who are victims of domestic abuse or at risk of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our concern is related to existing barriers our service users face when accessing support and safe housing.
5. Our submission will focus on ‘ *What steps need to be taken to ensure that measures taken by the government to address the COVID-19 pandemic are human rights compliant?*

Domestic abuse experienced by LGBTQ+ youth who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness

6. Our research has shown that 70% of LGBTQ+ young people cite familial rejection as the reason for why they became homeless, as well as living in hostile environments where they are subjected to homophobic and transphobic abuse from family members and sometimes physical abuse². Whilst we support the public health importance of these measures, they have meant that many of our service users have found it difficult to escape abusive households.
7. Government guidance provided exceptions to the household isolation instructions, enabling individuals who were experiencing domestic abuse or feel at risk of domestic

¹ The Human Rights Act 1998, c.42: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/1/chapter/2>
² akt(2015), Youth Homelessness: A National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response and Outcome: <https://www.akt.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c0f29272-512a-45e8-9f9b-0b76e477baf1>

abuse to leave their homes and seek support³. Funding was also made available to support domestic abuse victims, such as releasing £.8.5million from the Domestic Abuse COVID-19 Emergency Fund to 115 relevant support organisations⁴. We further welcome the funding that has been allocated to GALOP.

8. However, these measures will not be enough to support our service users adequately. We have seen a 37% rise in referrals nationally to our support centres and a 107% increase in referrals to our London support centre during the COVID-19 pandemic⁵. Many of these referrals have come from young people who are victims of domestic abuse or are at risk of domestic abuse. As highlighted earlier, most of our young people come from BAME backgrounds who may already be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as the ‘*Unequal impact? Coronavirus and BAME people*’ inquiry is exploring.

Barriers to accessing domestic abuse support for LGBTQ+ young people

9. LGBTQ+ youth who are victims of domestic violence face significant barriers to accessing the support that they need. The lack of partnerships between domestic abuse support services and LGBT organisations serve as an example of structural barriers⁶. Interpersonal barriers also prevent LGBT+ domestic abuse victims from getting adequate support. This includes their concerns about experiencing transphobia and homophobia when accessing services, not identifying their experiences as domestic abuse and the lack of trust in services due to previous bad experiences⁷.
10. While extra funding for domestic abuse victims is welcomed, this needs to be increased and coupled with addressing the existing barriers that LGBTQ+ people face when accessing domestic abuse support services.

Barriers to accessing safe housing

11. The Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government has also recently announced further funding from the Next Steps Accommodation Programme, to help support the 15,000 people who were placed in emergency accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic⁸. While this is welcomed, many of our young people were not housed in emergency accommodation, instead they are experiencing hidden homelessness, sofa surfing etc. and not rough sleeping in large numbers after escaping hostile and abusive environments.
12. Our service users experience significant barriers to finding safe housing. This is a result of issues around the assessment of LGBTQ+ youth as a priority need category under the Homelessness Code of Guidance⁹. Priority need criteria states that if you are living in fear

3 Home Office (2020), Domestic abuse: get help during the coronavirus (COVID-19 outbreak): <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

4 Home Office (2020), Domestic abuse safe accommodation: COVID-19 emergency support fund: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-safe-accommodation-covid-19-emergency-support-fund>

5 Figures taken from April 2019-April 2020

6 C.f.: S. Harvey, M. Mitchell, J. Keeble, C. McNaughton Nicholls, and N. Rahim, Barriers Faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Accessing Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment, and Sexual Violence Services. Cardiff: NatCen Social Research, 2014.

7 Ibid.

8 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020), Next Step Accommodation Programme: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/901754/NSAP_Guidance.pdf

or subjected to abuse or violence and experiencing mental health issues, you can be classed as vulnerable within a broader context of considerations. This includes the risk of harm to self or from others and whether you have sought support from services.

13. Consequently, this presents a challenge when working with our service users who will not have sought support from other services and it may be the first time they will have asked for help. For this reason, many of these young people will be classed as making themselves voluntarily homeless for leaving the family home and may be returned to their families.
14. In addition, official government statistics show that individuals who identify as black in England and Wales are almost ten times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than those who identify as white¹⁰. This has also posed an issue for our service users from BAME backgrounds, in particular our black service users, who have been rough sleeping after fleeing abusive households, preventing them from being helped as they are regularly moved from locations by the police.
15. Finally, government guidance to local authorities states that the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition will continue to be applied throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This will affect our service users with NRPF who will have no choice but to stay in abusive households or sleep rough.

The measures that the government needs to take

Further funding for LGBTQ+ domestic abuse services and addressing the barriers to accessing support

16. It is vital that the government allocates further funding to LGBTQ+ domestic abuse services, which provide specialised support to our service users. Nonetheless, increasing funding is not enough, and the government needs to work closely with support services so that LGBTQ+ youth who are victims of domestic abuse feel safe and supported when seeking help.
17. This involves providing mandatory, uniform training to local authorities and registered housing providers on the domestic abuse experienced by LGBTQ+ youth. It also means ensuring that the advertising of domestic abuse services are inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, so LGBTQ+ youth feel more comfortable to access support.

Providing safe housing for LGBTQ+ youth

⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2019), Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities : https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a969da940f0b67aa5087b93/Homelessness_code_of_guidance.pdf

¹⁰ Home Office (2019), Police powers and procedures, England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2019: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841408/police-powers-procedures-mar19-hosb2519.pdf

Monitoring sexual orientation and gender identity

18. When providing temporary accommodation to LGBTQ+ youth, information relating to sexual orientation and gender identity must be considered. LGBTQ+ friendly accommodation will provide our service users with a safe environment while having access to specialised support. Furthermore, the mandatory monitoring of sexual orientation and gender identity in housing and homelessness services will help the government to provide more tailored support to LGBTQ+ youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness after escaping an abusive household.

Providing housing for LGBTQ+ youth with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

19. The government must reconsider the NRPF condition so that LGBTQ+ youth with NRPF are not forced to stay in abusive households or become homeless, without any other alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing further funding to local government, local authorities will have the means to support LGBTQ+ youth with NRPF.

Ensure that LGBTQ+ youth and BAME LGBTQ+ youth fleeing or at risk of domestic abuse have access to safe housing

20. The government must work closely with local authorities and registered housing providers, to ensure that LGBTQ+ youth are classified under the priority need category. This requires increased awareness and understanding of the domestic abuse experienced by LGBTQ+ youth. The government also needs to roll out long-term training to the police, and housing and homelessness departments within local authorities and other registered housing providers so that LGBTQ+ youth and BAME LGBTQ+ youth get the housing and support they need, after escaping an abusive household.

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