

Evaluation of Sonas Safe Home Project



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Executive Summary

Context and Background

In 2011, Sonas Domestic Violence Charity¹, in conjunction with the Homeless Agency and Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council conducted a feasibility study to examine the need for a domestic violence refuge in the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown (DLR) County Council area. This study found that there was broad agreement on the need for emergency refuge accommodation in DLR as part of a wider set of domestic violence service interventions in the area. Given the evidence that a paucity of adequate and affordable housing can prevent women transitioning from domestic abuse situations, the authors concluded that there was a need for the establishment of a number of domestic violence refuges in the area. However, this was considered too costly given the constrained economic climate at that time.

Arising from this, Sonas submitted a draft budgeted indication of interest to provide low to medium risk accommodation for victims of domestic violence in August 2011. The Safe Home project was designed to provide both intensive support to women and children and secure crisis accommodation within a community setting in the form of self-contained apartments supported by a mobile Women and Children's Support Team. The service has four, two bedroom, properties available to it in the DLR County Council catchment area. The Service is available Monday to Friday from 8AM to 6PM with a general on-call service provided outside of these hours. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) and DLR County Council made available €170,000 for the provision of a Safe House scheme on a pilot basis in the local authority area². Sonas submitted a revised project proposal to the statutory stakeholders in quarter one of 2014.

Aims and objectives of the Safe Home project

The main aim of Safe Home is to "*provide a place of safety for women and children experiencing domestic violence*".

The immediate objectives of the service are to provide safe and secure crisis residential accommodation for women and children who have had to leave home due to domestic violence; to provide risk and safety assessment, planning support, information, advocacy and accompaniment services to women who are accommodated in the safe houses; and to ensure that women and children who are accommodated in the safe houses move on to appropriate accommodation safely and are linked with relevant services that meet all their identified needs. The client base includes women and their children, who are victims of domestic violence and have been assessed as having a low to medium risk of harm, the capacity to live independently and manage their own safety and have residency in the Dún

¹ Sonas Domestic Violence Charity was previously known as Sonas Housing Association

² It must be noted that as of 1st January 2015, Tusla have sole responsibility for the funding of all domestic violence services. Therefore Safe Home will not be funded by the DRHE beyond the initial pilot period.

Laoghaire Rathdown Local Authority area. This criteria was in part a response to the need for a domestic violence service in the area and also necessitated by the nature of the available accommodations and supports that did not meet the requirements of a full refuge.

The service is staffed by two Women's Support Workers and one part-time Children's Support Worker, under the supervision of a Service Manager. Because of the complex nature of domestic violence that often involves different family members overlapping with a myriad of other difficulties that may involve multiple agencies, a multi-agency focus was implicit from the earliest days of the project.

Overview of the Evaluation

In their initial project plan, Sonas committed to commissioning an independent evaluation of Safe Home at the end of the initial pilot period of 12 months. The evaluation involved the analysis of intake, operational, and service exit metrics, as well as a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with service users; project management and staff; referral agents; and key stakeholders.

The specific questions addressed in the evaluation are:

- (1) To what degree has the project provided safe and secure crisis residential accommodation for women and children in the Dun Laoghaire Rathdown area who have had to leave home due to domestic violence?
- (2) Has the project carried out risk and safety assessments for all clients?
- (3) Were suitable supports and planning mechanisms put in place and adhered to in response to the risk and safety assessments?
- (4) Did the women and children who are accommodated in the safe houses successfully move on to appropriate accommodation when they left the project?
- (5) Were the women and children linked into other relevant services that meet all their identified needs?

Throughout this document, Sonas are referred to as the Service Provider or Sonas Staff. External stakeholders refers to individuals from a variety of organisations, including, Tusla, the Gardai, referral agents and Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.

Overview of the Pilot Phase

There were a total of 89 enquiries made to the service during the pilot period. Of these, 27 were self-referrals while the remaining 62 were agency referrals. An average of 3.4 women resided in Safe Home each month. The accommodation units were occupied by clients for a total of 130 weeks (out of an available 192 weeks) which is an occupancy rate of 68%. In total, 27 risk assessments were carried out and 20 of these (among 17 individuals) met the criteria of low to medium risk and were subsequently accepted into Safe Home. As well as

the 17 women, 21 children stayed in the accommodation over the pilot period. Pathways into Safe Home included self-referral, social work and homeless agency referrals and referral from legal personnel. These referral pathways included a mix of planned moves from an abusive home environment to more crisis driven moves from homelessness. Accessibility to the service was reflected on positively by a number of participating stakeholders and service users, with most of the participating women recalling being offered Safe Home within a week of being assessed for suitability, some within a much shorter timeframe of one to two days. The lack of any ambiguity concerning the eligibility criteria for acceptance into Safe Home, supported by a standardised risk assessment tool resulted in a largely unproblematic universal understanding of the criteria among project management and staff and subsequent acceptance of decisions that were made about eligibility.

Overview of Key Findings

Drawing together the perspectives of the multiple participants in this evaluation, against the backdrop of the analysis of service metrics, the findings of this evaluation reflect an overwhelmingly positive tone with tangible positive impacts for parents and children directly correlating with the Safe Home service. The evaluation concluded that Safe Home brought a clear 'added value' to the provision of services for women and children experiencing domestic violence. A number of aspects to the Safe Home service were highlighted as noteworthy in contributing to this 'added value' innovation. These included meeting previously unmet and unknown needs arising from domestic violence; making tangible positive impacts within short time frames; multi-agency approach to service delivery and the provision of a high quality, intensive and accessible service. These are developed further below before some key areas for further consideration are discussed.

Meeting Unmet Need Arising from Domestic Violence

Responding to the first and second research questions noted above, specific positive areas of note associated with Safe Home were reported to include the provision of an accommodation service for families fleeing domestic violence, in an area with no similar existing service, with both risk and safety assessments carried out on all service users. In response to the third question of responding to identified risk and need, participating women and children articulated their engagement in intensive supports that were tailored to their individually assessed needs and the risk and safety assessments were found to highlight the reality of their situations for many women who genuinely did not consider themselves to be 'victims of domestic violence'. While two thirds of the families had prior contact with social work, Safe Home were found to be engaging with women who reported they would not otherwise have accessed refuge and would have remained 'invisible' to domestic violence services. Given the international and domestic evidence base and experience that asserts that the existence and extent of domestic abuse has been largely hidden within society (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; Watson & Parsons, 2005), the ability of Safe Home to tap into a population that were not previously engaged with any domestic violence service is a significant success of the project and would on its own, merit the project continuing. In the words of one service user:

I genuinely would never have seen myself as a victim. Claudia (adult).

Tangible Impacts within Short Timeframes

I'm different because of Safe Home. ..there was 'Lauren then [before Safe Home] and Lauren now'. I thank Safe Home for making me stronger. LAUREN (adult)

Throughout all of the interviews, participant service users identified Safe Home as a significant turning point in their lives and could articulate clear and tangible positive impacts correlating with Safe Home interventions. These impacts were found to occur on social, emotional, behavioural and educational levels for children, with examples given including improved behaviour, a reduction in the need for medication, improved mental health, and academic progress as measured by standardised national tests administered to all primary school going children. For participating mothers, improved mental health as reflected in a reduction or absence of anti-depressant medication, improved parenting skills and better relationships with their children were all cited as positive impacts experienced. The provision of intensive needs assessed individualised emotional and practical support whilst in Safe Home, with a focus on preparing for moving on was correlated with these positive impacts, as was the 'one stop shop' nature of the Safe Home model which meant that all of the family's needs were met under the one roof. Comparing her experience of Safe Home to her current supports, one mother described the level and range of interventions and agencies that were working with her family as '*just exhausting really*' (AISLING). For a participating child the child support workers approach to direct work was also positively highlighted, relative to her other experiences of interventions, as she explains:

When I go to these people they just talk about the same thing over and I just feel like it isn't working anymore. I felt like it was just making me worse, having to talk about the same thing,..I would love if I could work with [child support worker] because it's just so much easier, she does it in a play environment, they have play therapy, or play sessions, whereas I sit in a chair for 40 minutes to an hour just talking. Emily (child)

Throughout the evaluation, impact was understood to occur at three different levels. At the level of service provision it is clearly felt by professionals as making a significant difference as it is providing a service that otherwise would not exist in this very mixed socio-economic area. This impact is observed to also extend to the service users who are encouraged to think about options and subsequently supported in that process – options that clearly for this cohort of service users were not conceivable before entering Safe Home. The third impact highlighted is one of prevention. Having the option of Safe Home, particularly for a cohort that would not use refuge, is understood to prevent low and mid-tier cases from escalating to a high risk one.

A Multi-Agency Approach to Service Delivery

Grounded in an existing empirical evidence base, Safe Home's commitment to a multi-agency approach to service provision in the area of domestic violence also emerged as a potentially positive aspect of service delivery, reflecting Stanley and Humphreys (2014) assertion that domestic violence responses demand a multi-agency response because of the complexity of issues involved. The struggle that the literature identifies multiple agencies experiencing as they try to co-ordinate their risk assessment protocols and differing understandings of risk and need, also resonated in this evaluation and is indeed a broader issue for domestic violence services and not confined to Safe Home. As Safe Home is a new and innovative service with no comparator in the jurisdiction within which it operates, a common stakeholder understanding of issues such as eligibility criteria, risk and need, can understandably be slow to develop and evolve as the service develops. Clarity regarding this common understanding of risk and need is critical in order to avoid an undermining of what Yalloway et al (2012) identify as the key to the success of the differential model: good working relationships between statutory, voluntary and NGO bodies. Identifying multi-agency involvement as the key ingredient to the Safe Home model working, this participant stated: *'the biggest advantage for me is that it was a genuine multi-agency model that I wouldn't have experienced before'* (STAKEHOLDER 8). Returning to the notion of 'added value', focusing very clearly on the need to drive this initiative through a multi-agency forum not only enhances the innovative footprint of the project but also serves as a very clear statement of the need for a collective response to domestic violence.

The Provision of an Accessible and High Quality Service

Consistently highlighted as positive throughout the evaluation for all participants was the provision of a high quality service, in the service users own area. The service users highlighted the accessibility of the service, regarding both what they experienced as an easy route into Safe Home and from an affordability perspective. This didn't simply concern the rental payments for the accommodation but more so concerned the relative lack of disruption for families where work and school commitments meant additional travel. While there was agreement throughout this evaluation that service provision should be planned on responding to need rather than cost efficiency, this evaluation concludes emphatically that while Safe Home is responding to need and doing so cost effectively, it is not and has never been intended as a replacement for refuge. Cost efficiency was however a major consideration from the outset in terms of service design. One example of this is the sharing of the Children's Support Worker with another Sonas service.

Returning to the issue of accessibility and as referred to above, the evaluation highlighted the need for a more common understanding of eligibility, to ensure that the service continues to build on its reputation for accessibility. Given the feasibility study findings on need which echoes international prevalence rates, the disparity between need and demand, as reflected in the occupancy rate of 68% over the course of the pilot was a cause of concern for Safe Home. From the Stakeholders' perspective however, there was overwhelming consensus that the service was meeting a need, specifically a previously

unmet need arising from domestic violence and no concern was expressed by them about the low referral rates, with confidence expressed that once the service was established, demand would subsequently follow. Concern was expressed however about the possible expansion of the service to include other county council areas.

The evaluation concludes that promoting the continued use of the service with a view to building occupancy levels is dependent on a clear and robust marketing strategy which includes attention to the above education piece to promote a shared understanding around issues such as 'risk level' and the 'respite vs. crisis' debate. Central to this is a redesign of marketing material (including the poster) and a return to agency visits, including those where referrals are currently not forthcoming. Significant amongst these are GP services and primary care teams, highlighted in the recent European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) European wide survey to be a significant source of disclosures for women experiencing domestic violence.

Moving On from Safe Home

All clients that move on from Safe Home are offered a Visiting Support Service as a matter of course, regardless of their housing situation, in addition to support linking them in to a variety of resources in their area. The findings around the moving on from Safe Home to appropriate accommodation and with supports raises a number of issues, somewhat linked to the two points in the previous section. Firstly, the level of intensive support in response to rigorous risk and need assessment has been highlighted as a key positive for the women and children who have engaged with Safe Home. Less positively experienced have been the moves on from Safe Home with the women struggling to manage without the 'lifeline' they described the service as having been. While always 'under no illusion' as to the length of Safe Home involvement and the timing of the cutting of the chord post Safe Home, participating service users nonetheless expressed varying degrees of distress and difficulty coping post Safe Home, recommending a 'weaning off' from that intense support with their individual support workers. Accepting that women and children may have had different perceptions and understandings of what was available to them in terms of supports in their new communities post Safe Home, they nonetheless could experience this as going from high intensity to 'nothing'. Emerging clearly from the data as highlighted already is the level of interagency cooperation and collaboration, heralded as a strength of the service before entering and during the service user's time in Safe Home. The evaluation recommends a revisiting of the protocols around follow up, which has to include other agencies as well, in a multi-agency capacity. Further discussion is required around the 'moving on to appropriate accommodation' metric which emerged as a concern for two of the participants in this evaluation. In the context of the need for agencies and organisations to work together, this also an issue of shared responsibility.

Post-Separation Contact

Key findings on the impact of exposure to domestic violence reflect the existing knowledge base and were evident in the narratives of participating mothers and children and clearly informed the work of the women's support worker and child support worker in their engagement with service users. While, as the Safe Home interventions clearly reflected, healing from exposure to domestic violence requires a reparation from that exposure and a focus on the mother-child relationship it also requires an ending to that exposure, something that continued child contact with abusive adults facilitates the continuation of. While it is not a new issue and one that continues to be problematic on an international scale, the Safe Home project brings the strength and rigor of the multi-agency platform they have driven and consequently the potential for a multi-agency response to the issue of problematic post-separation contact. Again, it is no one agency's gift to solve the problem, requiring a joined up approach that a multi-agency initiative or forum could begin to address in a meaningful way.

An Outcome Focused Service

Finally, in moving towards a future focus, O'Connor and Pillinger (2011) noted in the Safe Home feasibility study, that many of the stakeholders interviewed discussed the fact that their longer term outcomes for women living in refuges are not recorded, nor are their impact incidences of re-victimisation. This is true also of Safe Home. In order to fully appreciate the longer term impact that the service has on the lives of victims of domestic abuse, efforts should be made, on a multi-agency level, to track the service users' subsequent interactions with a range of domestic violence related services, in order to inform the evidence base to the design, development and delivery of services. In making this recommendation, the evaluation views this task as not within the gift of any one service provider or organisation, but one that requires a multi-agency approach to ensure viability.

Conclusion

In bringing this report to a close, the evaluation of Safe Home reflects an overwhelmingly positive tone with tangible positive impacts for parents and children directly correlating with the Safe Home service. A new and innovative high quality service has been designed, delivered and developed and is clearly supporting best practice in responding to the needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence. The evaluation confidently supports the services ability to embrace the challenges that the immediate and longer term future holds, while the final sections draws together the recommendations.

Summary of Recommendations

The key recommendations from the evaluation are as follows:

Recommendation 1	There should be a continued emphasis on the drive towards the delivery of domestic violence services through the vehicle of a multi-agency approach.
Recommendation 2	Provision of Safe Home should be continued in its current capacity in the immediate term. In the medium to longer term, the need for a 'cautious expansion' of the service should be considered by the Steering Committee. This would allow for the bedding down of current best practice and addressing the issues emerging from this evaluation that require revisiting. Any decision to extend the service should be informed by the activity levels of Safe Home coupled with identified need.
Recommendation 3	Continued and considered attention to how the service is understood, requiring focused attention on a rigorous marketing drive. Part of that drive involves the need to achieve greater clarity and uniformed agreement on what is understood by key terminology including risk assessment and eligibility in the context of the provision of a service which has no comparator.
Recommendation 4	To fulfil recommendation 3 requires revisiting the key agencies including in particular GP and Primary Care teams in order to improve engagement from agencies who have not, to date, referred to Safe Home.
Recommendation 5	A particularly strong aspect of this model of service delivery is the level of intensive support provided within Safe Home. These supports address issues identified during each service users individualised needs assessment. We recommend that this level of support be maintained.
Recommendation 6	Further considered attention needs to be given to the issue of follow on provision of supports for service users, including a consideration of a tapering off of the support provided.
Recommendation 7	Focusing on building the evidence base regarding outcomes for Safe Home service users, to ensure that service delivery is outcome focused, planned, documented and reviewed over time in order to understand the medium and long term impact of Safe Home, and further understand the service users' needs going forward.



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