**Domestic Abuse and the Private Rented Sector Podcast transcript**

***Michelle Williams - Domestic Abuse Coordinator* (MW) & *Lucy Whittaker, Alpha Vesta (LW)***

MW- Welcome to our podcast today looking at domestic abuse and the private rented sector. My name is Michelle Williams, I'm a domestic abuse coordinator, and I work for the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Domestic Abuse Board. SETDAB as we call it is made up of a range of different agencies and organisations that come together to work and coordinate our response to domestic abuse, and I have here with me today Lucy who I'm going to ask to introduce herself.

LW- Hello, my name is Lucy Whittaker and I'm the founding director and lead trainer at Alpha Vesta. We provide training and consultancy services in domestic abuse across communities and workplaces to build a strong culture of understanding around it, as well as a response to it.

MW **-** Thanks Lucy. So, can I just start off by asking you to talk a bit about what domestic abuse is?

LW- Of course, the first thing I would say about domestic abuse is that it has a very broad spectrum. I often begin a training session with a question where I ask what do you actually mean when we talk about domestic abuse? What do we actually mean when we talk about the kind of behaviours that it comprises of? Because it actually incorporates a number of different behaviours in a variety of different contexts. It may also be underpinned and fuelled by a variety of different factors affecting people, not just in intimate relationships but across a family dynamic as well.

Domestic abuse itself can happen to anybody regardless of age, social background, gender, religion, sexuality or ethnicity and the abuse itself may be physical, emotional, psychological, economic, or sexual. Even a combination of all of these. So, you can see what a broad spectrum we're talking about. Sometimes domestic abuse is categorised by a pattern of coercive control where one individual within that relationship or home will be wanting to exert power, coercion, or control over somebody else. This can escalate in frequency and severity overtime and won't generally relate to a single incident.

Other domestic abuse incidents have a slightly different dynamic to them where we may see a complex mix of mental health issues, substance misuse issues, physical or learning disability, perhaps which, if not supported, create a very toxic vulnerable home where conflict rather than control arises. So, you can see we do have this enormously broad spectrum.

MW- Thank you Lucy and how big a problem is it?

LW- I like begin to build a picture up around this by sharing a few statistics with you and firstly some recent data which was released by the Office of National Statistics tells us that one in five adults will experience domestic abuse at some point during their adult lifetime, and it's now estimated in another report that was published by the NSPCC in 2020, that one in five children will experience it.

They were just over 41,000 incidents of domestic abuse that were reported to Essex Police between 2020 and 21 and it accounts for 22% of all police reported crime across Essex. So, you can see what an enormous response is required.

Michelle, could you add to that a little bit more and tell us more about the importance of addressing domestic abuse in the private rental sector as well as other tenures of housing.

MW- Yes of course so what we know is that domestic abuse is just as prevalent in the private rented sector as any other tenure of housing and that landlords and letting agents can play a key role in responding to it. So more families with children are now housed in private rented accommodation then in social housing, and landlords and letting agents can improve and potentially save lives by increasing awareness of the signs of domestic abuse as well as knowing what can be done.

You could be the first to know domestic abuse is happening and this may be because the tenant has told you directly or it could come from a third party, such as a neighbour. It can be difficult for a victim to tell someone else what's happening to them because perpetrators will often intentionally isolate them as part of the abuse. The victim may also blame themselves for what's happening. They may be scared to talk to someone about it because they may fear that it's going to make their situation worse and could lead to reprisals from the perpetrator and really importantly, some will not associate what's happening to them as domestic abuse. So, it’s really important that that we have eyes and ears across our communities to help our response.

LW- What are the signs to look out for in terms of understanding that domestic abuse may well be happening.

MW- There are lots of indicators of domestic abuse that may be present in a tenancy and that can include things like unexplained damage to property. It could be request for repairs, especially when those are recurring repairs. It could be request for lock changes, or you might notice that there's a presence of broken locks. There could be noise complaints or antisocial behaviour reports, and also rent arrears could be present.

LW- Going back to rent arrears can you explain a little bit more about how rent arrears could sometimes be linked to domestic abuse.

MW- Yes so, a perpetrator might be controlling how a victim acquires or spends their money. They might exploit their income and spend money set aside for bills, they might try to sabotage their employment and resources and these kinds of behaviours are associated with what we would call economic abuse, and this occurs a lot in cases of domestic abuse. So, making that link between rent arrears and domestic abuse as early as possible can help prevent the generation of further arrears and also really importantly prevent the risk of eviction.

LW- Absolutely

MW- So can I just ask how a landlord or letting agency can begin on a journey to support their tenants around domestic abuse Lucy?

LW- So firstly what we would say is landlords are not expected to be specialists or hands on in the same way as a social housing landlord would. However, they could have a significant impact and improve outcomes for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Firstly, your culture of understanding around domestic abuse and its impact needs to extend across your whole organisation, your whole workforce.

Everybody that works within your workforce needs to understand what it is as well as how it impacts across our communities more broadly. This then puts you in a really strong position to not only respond to concerns around tenants but support your own staff who may be experiencing it themselves. Remember, for one in five adults they either have or are experiencing it, where their workplace could be the safest place for them to talk about what they are experiencing as well as provide the opportunity to engage with support around it. So, this culture of understanding then extends out to your tenants and we can give you a couple of simple strategies to respond if you suspect a tenant may be experiencing domestic abuse or they have reported directly to you.

So, a helpful response needs to take into account some important elements. Firstly, a willingness to listen. Hear what the person wants to happen and to believe them is described by victims as incredibly helpful.

Landlords should only speak to the suspected victim when they are alone and never in front of others. That's because that other person may well be the perpetrator, or they may tell the perpetrator. Ensure the safest way of keeping in contact with them or even a code word, perhaps that they can use with you if it's not safe to talk.

Did you know something as simple as sharing local and national support numbers could even save a life, provide information, perhaps in your welcome pack on national and local domestic abuse services.

If approached by a tenant or neighbour, have the relevant numbers to hand to pass on and encourage them to access appropriate domestic abuse services as early as possible to allow them to make informed, safe choices about what to do next.

Tenants can also seek support from the local authority housing options team. Some areas have what we call sanctuary schemes, which are a victim/survivor centred service that consists of the installation of security measures in and around the property to enable them to remain at that property. Agreeing to have that work done can help keep someone safe.

But finally, if ever you feel that there is an imminent risk, even if the perpetrator has left the property, always contact the police on 999. Ensure that if there are children, young people, and vulnerable adults that may be affected by domestic abuse that you do seek appropriate help and advice and make any referrals as appropriate under your own safeguarding procedures.

So, Michelle, where could a landlord or letting agency access more information as well as training?

MW- So there's lots of resources and information that we've put on our SETDAB website, and this includes key information that you can pass on to your tenants. So, for example, information about COMPASS, which is a partnership of domestic abuse services providing a response across Essex, the national domestic violence helpline is available seven days a week, 24 hours a day. And there's also information on their around services for perpetrators, such as the Change Project. We've also got lots of free training available, so we have a basic awareness E Learning training program that anyone can access free of charge. There are J9 community sessions that you can sign up to, and lots of training delivered by Alpha Vesta.

LW- Brilliant Michelle. So just to finish off, could you just recap on some of that key information and advice?

MW- Yes, absolutely. So, what we would say is never ignore signs and provide key support information to your tenants at the start of every tenancy. Consider additional security measures and be aware of sanctuary schemes in your local area.

Look at tenancy issues that may arise through the wider lens of domestic abuse. So don't just think. for example, antisocial behaviour. And as we said, if you think there's an imminent risk even if the perpetrator has left, always call 999 and again where there are children, young people and vulnerable adults that are affected by domestic abuse do seek help and advice and refer as appropriate under your safeguarding procedures.

Thank you very much for listening today. And just to reiterate, please do look at our website for some more information.

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