Housing Rights

**https://www.housingrights.org.uk/housing-advice/housing-advice/people-experiencing-domestic-abuse**

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# People experiencing domestic abuse

This information is for people living in Northern Ireland.

You should always feel safe in your home. You should be safe from any abusive behaviour. This includes physical violence, controlling behaviour, financial and sexual abuse. You are not alone, and you are not to blame.

There is help out there to assist you with deciding on your options. You might want help with staying safe in your home or leaving it.

If you have experienced or are experiencing domestic abuse, you can call the police on 101. You can also **report an incident online**. **If it's an emergency situation, always call 999**.

## Support if you’re affected by domestic abuse

There are several organisations that can help you, including:

- **24-hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline**
- **Women’s Aid NI**
- **The Men's Advisory Project**
- **LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline**

Domestic abuse can affect many aspects of your life. It can impact your mental and physical health. If your health is suffering, you should always speak with your GP. There is also a range of services that can help you with specific issues.

# Staying in your home

If you decide to stay in your home, you must take measures to stay safe. You should speak to:

- **a solicitor** about getting a court order to keep the abuser away from you and your home
- the Housing Executive if you are one of their tenants. They may be able to help make your home safer.

**Keeping an abuser away from you and your home**

Depending on the type and extent of the domestic abuse, the law can help in different ways. It can be dealt with in both the criminal and civil courts.

The two main types of court orders that a solicitor can help you get to keep you safe from an abuser are:

1. An occupation order - this is where the court decides that an abuser must stay away from your home. It means that the abuser can no longer live with you. It gives you the right to remain in the home. You can get an occupation order even if you're not the main tenant or owner, or if the abuser is the legal owner or tenant. You must call the police if the abuser breaks the occupation order. Breaking an occupation order could lead to the court issuing the abuser a fine or a jail sentence.
2. A non-molestation order - this is a legal injunction.  It can help prevent an abuser from harassing, threatening or being violent towards you. Depending on what the court includes in the order, it can stop an abuser from:

- contacting you
- coming to your home or
- going to specific areas

Getting a non-molestation order can give you some peace of mind. It can give you space before making any long-term decisions. You must call the police if the abuser breaks the non-molestation order. Breaking a non-molestation order is a criminal offence. The person who breaches it can be arrested and face jail time.

**Getting help to stay safe in your home**

If you decide to stay in your home, you should take action to make it safer.

If you are a Housing Executive tenant, they might be able to help you. They run a sanctuary scheme that can install proper security (such as alarms and CCTV). To access the scheme, the police will need to check your home first. For anyone else, contact your landlord or the police for advice and assistance.

## Video: Staying in your home

**Staying in your home - video transcript**

You should always feel safe in your home, free from any abusive behaviour.

Abusive behaviour can include physical violence, controlling behaviour, financial and sexual abuse.

Remember, you are not to blame for any abuse that is happening to you, and you're not alone. Help and support is available.

If you feel that there's a threat to your life or well-being, you should phone the police on 999.

If you're living with an abuser, it might seem impossible to be able to stay in your home and have the abuser leave, but there are ways in which the law can help you.

You can apply for what's called an occupation order, where the court decides that an abuser can no longer live with you. An occupation order can be made in your favour even if you're not the main tenant or owner of the home.

You can also apply for what's called a non-molestation order. This order prevents an abuser from harassing, threatening, or attacking you. It can also prevent them from contacting you, coming to your home, or going to specific areas.

If you think these could be an option, you should speak with a solicitor. They can give you legal advice and help you to apply for these orders.

You should also consider what safety measures you can put in your home. If you're a housing executive tenant, you should ask them about the sanctuary scheme.

This scheme can help to keep you safe by installing security measures such as alarms and CCTV cameras. If you're not a housing executive tenant, you should contact your local Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project, or the PSNI for advice on safety measures.

Contact Housing Rights if you need any advice about your housing options.

You can call, email, or chat with our advisers online.

# Leaving your home

## Preparing to leave

If you've decided to leave an abuser, prepare ahead of time if you can. The safety of you and any dependants is a priority.

It's a good idea to pack an emergency bag for yourself and any children you're leaving with. Try to find somewhere safe to hide it. It might be best to leave it somewhere away from your home, such as at a friend's house or with a trusted family member.

If you can, put aside some money to take with you, or deposit it into a separate bank account in your name.

You will need to decide which practical items to pack for you and your children. You may not be able to return to the property once you have left. You might need to pack away things like:

- school uniforms
- favourite toys
- medications
- bank cards
- important documents such as medical cards, birth certificates, passports
- anything on record relating to the abuse (police reports and court orders) and
- money

Some people may not be eligible for Social Security benefits. For example, because of their immigration status. A lack of financial security can make it harder to think about leaving. Speak to one of the organisations above to check if you can get help.

## Getting housing help when you leave

If you decide to move out of your home, speak with the Housing Executive as soon as possible. The Housing Executive has a legal duty to assess and help people who are homeless. This also applies to someone who might become homeless soon.

The Housing Executive can assess your situation to see what duties they owe you. In the first instance, this might include offering you temporary accommodation.

The Housing Executive will never talk to your abuser about your situation. But they may want to speak to people or groups you've contacted about what has happened to you, such as

- a solicitor,
- a doctor
- a social worker
- a friend or family member

The Housing Executive will have a **legal duty** to give you temporary housing if they believe that you:

- are homeless or cannot go back to your home, and
- have experienced or are at risk of experiencing domestic abuse in your home. This is also known as having a 'priority need'.

The Housing Executive should offer you temporary accommodation if you meet these criteria. Temporary accommodation could be in a hostel, B&B or a 'single let' in a privately rented house. The temporary accommodation may be outside the area where you have been living.

Get advice if the Housing Executive doesn't give you temporary accommodation. You might be able to challenge the decision.

You can get help when the Housing Executive offices are closed by contacting:

- the Housing Executive out-of-hours service or
- one of the hostels that takes self-referrals

You can also contact Women's Aid to see if you can stay in one of their hostels.

You can get help from the Housing Executive or Women's Aid with the cost of public transport to get you to the temporary accommodation.

### Paying for two homes

You might still have to pay rent on your home, even if you have left it. You can **get help paying for two homes** if you:

- left because of threats of  violence and
- you plan to go back and
- you're entitled to benefits.

If you left because of domestic abuse and your rent is not covered by benefits, **speak to our advisers** for help.

## Video: Preparing to leave

### Preparing to leave - video transcript

You should always feel safe in your home, free from any abusive behaviour. Abusive behaviour can include physical violence, controlling behaviour, financial, and sexual abuse.

Remember, you are not to blame for any abuse that is happening to you and you are not alone - help and support is available.

If you are living with an abuser, you might end up thinking that getting away is the best and safest option. If at any time you feel that there is a threat to your life or well-being, phone the police on 999.

If you are considering leaving, try to prepare as much as possible in advance so that you are ready to leave when the time comes.

You should try to pack an emergency bag for yourself and anyone leaving with you. It might be best to leave it somewhere outside of your home. You could ask a trusted family member or friend to look after it.

Think about what you will need to take. This could be things like important documents, medication, bank cards and school uniforms.

If you can, try to put some money aside or deposit some money into a bank account in your name.

Contact Housing Rights if you need advice about your housing options. You can call, email, or chat with our advisers online.

# Video: Leaving your home

### Leaving your home because of domestic abuse - video script

You should always feel safe in your home, free from any abusive behaviour. Abusive behaviour can include physical violence, controlling behaviour, financial and sexual abuse.

Remember, you are not to blame for any abuse that is happening to you.

If you are living with an abuser, you might end up thinking that getting away is the best and safest option. If you feel that there is a threat to your life or well-being, you should phone the police on 999.

If you decide to leave, but have nowhere to go, you should contact the Housing Executive immediately for help. The Housing Executive might owe you a legal duty to give you emergency accommodation.

You'll need to give them as much information as possible about why you left your home. The Housing Executive will not contact your abuser. But they might need to speak to other people or groups who know about your situation. This could be a solicitor, social worker, friend or family member. Also, make sure to let the Housing Executive know the safest way to contact you.

You should be entitled to temporary accommodation if they believe that you are homeless and can't go back to your home because you have experienced abuse or there is a risk of abuse. Temporary accommodation could be in a hostel, B&B or what's called 'single let' in a privately rented house. The temporary accommodation might be outside the area where you have been living.

If the Housing Executive doesn't give you temporary accommodation, contact Housing Rights to see if you can challenge the decision.

We can also advise you on your homelessness assessment and your housing options.

You can call, email, or chat with our advisers online.

# Getting help with your animals

Having a pet or 'companion animal' can offer many health benefits. They can help your emotional, physical, and mental well-being. You may also be responsible for farming or working animals. Concern for their safety may make you stay in a dangerous living situation.

Domestic abuse may not only be directed at you or members of your family. Unfortunately, the welfare of any animals may also be at risk. Animals may be used as an emotional weapon to keep you living in an abusive situation. They may use the animal to control you, to make you feel that you have no option but to stay with them.

Unfortunately, most domestic abuse refuges do not have the capacity to accept animals. It can also be difficult to find a private landlord who will allow you to keep an animal.

Some charities may offer a fostering service for a limited time until you get settled into a new home:

- In Northern Ireland, you can contact the Causeway Coast Dog Rescue or USPCA
- If you plan to move to the Republic of Ireland, contact Safe Ireland or DSPCA
- In Great Britain, you can get help from the Dogs Trust Freedom, Cats Protection Lifeline, Endeavour and Refuge4Pets

Even if these groups are not in your area, you should be able to contact them for advice on what to do. The Links Group can provide further information.