

## People experiencing domestic abuse

You should always feel safe in your home. **If you feel unsafe or threatened, call the police. In an emergency, always call 999.**

You should be safe from any abusive behaviour. This includes physical violence, controlling behaviour, financial and sexual abuse. You can get support for any situation, including [staying safe in](#) or [leaving your home](#).

## Support if you're affected by domestic abuse

There are several organisations that can help you, including:

- [24-hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline](#)
- [LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline](#)
- [The Men's Advisory Project](#)
- [Women's Aid NI](#)

If you're not entitled to benefits because of your immigration status, it can be harder to think about leaving an abusive situation. Speak to one of the organisations above to check if you can get help.

## 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

## **Keep an abuser away from you and your home**

Depending on the type and extent of the domestic abuse, it can be dealt with in both the criminal and civil courts. The Belfast Area Domestic Violence Partnership has produced [information on what the law can do to help you](#).

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

- An occupation order means that an abuser must stay away from your home, and they cannot live in your home. 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 court order.
- A non-molestation order prevents an abuser from harassing, threatening or attacking you. It also prevents them from coming to your home or anywhere near you. It helps give you time to stay in your home and make long-term decisions.

## **Get help keeping your home safe**

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.

# **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 leaving with you. 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 some money into a separate bank account under your name.

You will need to consider what practical items to pack away 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

## Getting help when you leave

[If you decide to move out of your home](#), speak with the [Housing Executive](#). The Housing Executive can assess your situation to see what duties they owe you. This might include offering you somewhere to stay temporarily and permanent rehousing. 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, such as a solicitor, 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 violence 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.

If the Housing Executive doesn't give you temporary accommodation, you should [get advice from one of our advisers](#). You might be able to challenge the decision.

If you need somewhere to stay at the weekend or when the Housing Executive offices are closed, you should contact:

- the [Housing Executive out-of-hours service](#) or
- one of the [hostels](#) that takes self-referrals

You can get free bus or rail tickets from the Housing Executive or Women's Aid to travel to a refuge or emergency accommodation.

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.

## Protecting your animals

Having a pet or 'companion animal' can offer many health benefits. They can help your emotional, physical, and mental well-being. But having a pet can be an added concern when you are living with domestic abuse. Concern for your pet's safety may make you stay in a dangerous living situation or make you delay

leaving. Both of which can be a risk to your well-being or your life. You may also be responsible for farming or working animals. Their welfare can be a major consideration when deciding about your future.

Domestic abuse may not only be directed at you or members of your family. Unfortunately, the welfare of your pet may also be at risk. Animals may be used as an emotional weapon to keep you living in an abusive situation.

An abuser may attempt to use an animal against you by:

- neglecting it
- threatening to harm it or
- deliberately cause it pain

An abuser might do this to cause you further fear and distress. 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.

If you want to leave but need help with your pet, you should contact a local domestic abuse support service or a local animal welfare charity. Some charities may offer a [fostering service](#) for a limited time until you get settled into a new home:

- In Northern Ireland, you can also contact the [Causeway Coast Dog Rescue](#) or [USPCA](#)
- If you plan to relocate to the Republic of Ireland, contact [Safe Ireland](#) or [DSPCA](#)
- In Great Britain, the leading charities that can help are [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. You can also find more details from [the Links Group](#).