

# SURVIVING WINTER CAMPAIGN: Safer Places provides sanctuary for women who are abused, a situation that worsens at this time of year

Get vital help to pay off your bills



LAUNCH: David Finch

PEOPLE struggling to pay their energy bills this winter are set to get a helping hand from the Essex Energy Switch initiative.

By joining forces with thousands of fellow residents and registering an interest in changing energy supplier at [essex.gov.uk/energyswitch](http://essex.gov.uk/energyswitch), participants will be entered into a collective auction, which gets energy companies to bid against each other to offer the lowest rate for gas and electricity contracts.

The campaign, which has the support of Age UK Essex among other charities, comes at a time when many elderly residents find it difficult to raise the money to

heat their homes, with some forced to spend winter confined to one or two rooms of their house to save money.

Michelle Martin, the community engagement manager for Age UK Essex, said:

"Age UK Essex supports any initiatives that help struggling people, especially older people, save money on their gas and electricity bills so we were very keen to lend our support to the Essex Energy Switch campaign."

Council leader David Finch launched the county-wide campaign at High Chelmer Shopping Centre.

Visit [www.essex.gov.uk/energyswitch](http://www.essex.gov.uk/energyswitch) for more information and to register for the initiative.

## £1k means refuge can give happy memories to children

By Harriet Sinclair  
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WITH Christmas lights shining from homes and shop windows, it's often easy to forget that for many people winter can be the hardest time of year.

For Anne Russell the winter is a harsh reminder of the seasonal increase in domestic violence, as several years ago she received a phone call out of the blue telling her that her niece Emma had been hospitalised after an attack by her boyfriend.

Emma had been so brutally beaten that she would be left with permanent scarring on her face.

Anne had always doted on her niece. The 25-year-old had spent school holidays and weekends at her house when she was a child, and was a confident girl.

"She was my first niece, so I was obsessed with her; she was so cute, she literally came to my house every weekend and during the school holidays. She was so confident and boisterous. I was just shocked that this happened to her," Anne told the Chronicle.

### Controlled

"She was with this partner she moved out of the area with. Whenever you are being controlled or suppressed, you isolate yourself and try to keep your family away. Her mum phoned me one night to say she was in hospital and her face had been severely beaten. She has got scars that she will have for life, she would need plastic surgery to get rid of them.

"It was horrendous. Any family member going through that is awful – but the fact that it was at the hands of someone else just added to how terrible it was.

"She didn't call me herself – I think she was embarrassed. Her perception was that she was in the situation and felt like she provoked it."

Emma is one of many women who experience domestic violence over

### Appeal's totals

In the last four years, our readers have donated a whopping £78,000 to the Surviving Winter appeal, meaning we've been able to provide emergency help to pensioners to pay their heating bills, hot lunches at vital community groups, heating packs in the coldest months, and help to homeless people during winter, as well as helping those affected by domestic violence.

At last count, this year's appeal has already raised £4,800.

winter. It is a season when the number of domestic assaults tends to rise, explained Jo Murphy, head of communications for the Essex Community Foundation, which is working with domestic abuse charity Safer Places this year as part of the Essex Chronicle-backed Surviving Winter Campaign.

"Christmas especially is a very emotive time, it can be a lonely, isolating and sad time for many people.

"Safer Places tries to create that warmth and sense of belonging at this time of year, so that people staying there can feel safe and be among people who care about their well-being," said Jo.

"We will be donating £1,000 from the Surviving Winter Campaign to Safer Places.

"The campaign focuses on people who are elderly or vulnerable, and we want to highlight that the women and children who have survived domestic violence and are in a refuge are in a vulnerable position.

"I hope some of the money will go towards making Christmas feel a little bit special for some of the children in the refuge, and giving them some happy memories of this time of year."

Thankfully, Emma's life was turned around when the hospital called Safer Places, which provided her with

REFUGE FOR THE ABUSED: (Back) Jo Murphy of Essex Community Foundation, and (l-r) Safer Places workers Kate Harris, Nicki Carnaby, Sam Withers and Fran Wright show their support for scheme



accommodation and helped her see that she wasn't to blame for the horrific attack.

"It worked wonders – she knew what was happening was wrong, and they helped her turn her life around.

"She spoke to me about it a lot, she has moved on now, she has been relocated now, she has a job and a baby,"

Anne explained. "I wasn't aware of what was happening to her; she kept herself away from us because we're the kind of family who would have asked her what was wrong.

"When you have a supportive family, that happens a lot, people isolate themselves."

And seeing how much the charity



ABUSE: There is help out there if it happens to you

## Help is out there for the victims of domestic violence

A mum-of-two suffered years of emotional, financial and physical abuse before eventually moving to the refuge after colleagues at work noticed bruises and urged her to seek help.

She said: "He drove me to work, picked me up, did all of the shopping while I was at work and put everything in his name. If I suggested I needed money for anything he would say we couldn't afford it but then he'd go out and buy himself things.

"Basically, he controlled every aspect of my life and I didn't have a say in anything. "It's only when I look back now that I realise how bad it was. You don't realise at the time that the emotional and the financial stuff is all part of it.

"When you're in that situation you almost accept all of those things and they become part of everyday life."

Another woman, who was forced to flee with her daughter after her partner of

six years turned violent, said: "I knew my story was bad but actually getting up and doing something about it was so difficult. In the back of my mind it wasn't something I wanted to do and then there was the fear of not knowing where I'd be going, what help was available, having to leave everything and starting all over again.

"But looking back now, I believe coming here saved my life. It's the hardest and the best thing I've ever done."

Another victim fled her home after the abuse from her partner became physical and started to visibly affect her children.

She said: "It is hard but you find strength and courage that you didn't even know you had. The network of support is invaluable and I think it should be more common knowledge that these places are actually here. The staff are amazing. My children have come on leaps and bounds since coming here."

who are abused, a situation that worsens at this time of year



NO STEREOTYPES HERE: Case worker Amber Larner, Alex Joseph, Safer Places' territory manager for mid Essex, Sharon Westfield de Cortez, the mid Essex service manager, and Kate Harris, housekeeper and play worker

## 'There is no such thing as a typical person in here'

SHARON Westfield de Cortez wants to change the misconceptions of refuges as the county's Don't Delay, Act Today campaign continues in the run-up to Christmas.

The domestic violence initiative, run by Essex County Council and Essex Police, aims to tell a different story every day throughout December to a bid to curb the seasonal increase in abuse.

"People expect a dirty little room with stained bed linen, full of people high on drugs and alcohol," said Sharon, Safer Places' Mid Essex manager.

"They think it's going to be a hell on earth, but a lot of that is because when people are in abusive relationships they are made to feel they can't do any better and to fear the worst."

Mrs Westfield de Cortez admits that social prejudices about refuges

are one of the most frustrating things about her role. She said: "There is no such thing as a typical woman who comes here. Everyone thinks the women will all be single mums on benefits, whose partners spend the day sat on the sofa drinking, but it's not like that.

"We get professional women. We've had teachers, nurses, all sorts.

"You also get young women who are 16, 17 or 18 who haven't even had a chance to enter the world of work and make a start in life before the abuse started. We all get dealt different hands in life and the women and children here have just been dealt bad hands. In a year's time they will be back out there, living their lives and building a future."

For information on the services provided by Safer Places call their 24-hour emergency number on 0845 0177 668.

**NO MATTER HOW MUCH IT'S ALL FOR THE CAUSE**



I/WVE would like to support the Surviving Winter Appeal 2014.

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If you are a UK taxpayer, Essex Community Foundation can reclaim Gift Aid, ie 25p on every £1 that you give, at no extra cost to you. Please sign below if you want Essex Community Foundation to reclaim tax on this donation.

Signed ..... Date .....

Please return this slip with your donation to: Essex Community Foundation, 121 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT

### HOW TO SUPPORT APPEAL

Text WINT77 to 70070 to donate £5

Visit

[www.justgiving.com/Winter-Appeal-2014](http://www.justgiving.com/Winter-Appeal-2014)

Send a cheque to Essex Community Foundation, 121 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT – please complete and return the form above and remember to tick the Gift Aid box

For people in the 60-plus age bracket, ECF is suggesting that those who do not need their government Winter Fuel Payment could consider donating it to the Surviving Winter Appeal