

Domestic Abuse: responsibilities and responses

Report of the Head of Communities

Recommendation: that the Scrutiny Committee considers the Council's role in a strategic, multi-agency approach to tackling violence against women and girls and non-gendered domestic abuse in Devon, including a clear focus on preventing violence and breaking the intergenerational cycle of domestic violence and abuse.

1. Summary

This report describes the changing context in national policy on domestic abuse and violence against women and girls outlining the Council's developing responses to these changes, including the Council's progress in delivering the new statutory duty placed on the Council under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse (DA) Act 2021. While domestic abuse has a disproportionate effect on women and girls, all discussion of domestic abuse in this report recognises that abuse is also experienced by men and all victims are entitled to appropriate support. It is also recognised that in the context of interfamilial abuse children must be considered as victims.

The report explores the need for further development of the Council's Violence against Women and Girls' strategic intentions.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The last year has seen significant changes in national policy towards domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. In April 2021, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a wide range of provisions aimed at raising awareness of the impact of domestic abuse on victims, strengthening support for victims and changing aspects of how the criminal justice system responds to crimes of abuse. The government placed a new duty on upper tier local authorities to provide particular types of domestic abuse support, with new recurrent funding allocated to enable delivery of that support.
- 2.2 In July 2021 the government produced the Tackling violence against women and girls Strategy, reviving a focus on this agenda and defining the priorities in investing in prevention, supporting victims, pursuing perpetrators and strengthening the system and it sets an expectation for a system wide commitment to the priorities. This does not currently define additional or new duties for Devon County Council; however, we have seen activities across Devon as a result of investment in the agenda.
- 2.3 Most recently in March 2022, the government published its Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan, which includes an increased focus on preventing abuse and makes commitments to increase funding in certain areas including changing the behaviour of perpetrators of abuse. The strands and constraints of this funding are not yet entirely clear.
- 2.4 Domestic abuse and Violence against women and girls are far reaching issues that need a system wide response. The responsibility for addressing and finding solutions to the challenges these bring cannot sit with one single

body or organisation, but rather requires commitment from and complete collaboration across multiple organisations within systems that serve our communities.

- 2.5 This progress report focuses on the work directly overseen and undertaken by Devon County Council Communities' Team and does not extend to other relevant and co-existing areas of work such as the work of Children Social Care or Adult Safeguarding or progress by our colleagues in NHS – Devon unless these are projects we have directly been engaged with.

3. Progress: Domestic Abuse Act

- 3.1 Since report SC/21/1 to this committee in September 2021, a significant amount of focus has been given to meeting the Council's new statutory duty under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The first responsibilities under the duty were to:

- Form a Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board
- Carry out a needs assessment for the domestic abuse support needed by people in safe accommodation
- Create a Strategy to deliver the support under the Act, consult on it and publish a final version.

- 3.2 These three initial responsibilities have all been achieved:

- The Partnership Board has been meeting monthly since April 2021 and brings together a broad range of statutory partners and specialist organisations. We are in the process of reviewing this to ensure that the Board not only meets the statutory obligations but grows and develops as a partnership responsive to local needs and demands.
- The [Strategy for delivering domestic abuse support in safe accommodation - Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse \(devon.gov.uk\)](#) (Including the needs assessment) was endorsed by the Partnership Board, agreed by Devon County Council's Cabinet and published in December 2021.
- The delivery of the Strategy has now moved to implementation through the creation of project workstreams to deliver specific outcomes and services (see below table). The Partnership Board is providing guidance on the design of the projects and services.

OUTCOME 1	OUTCOME 2	OUTCOME 3	OUTCOME 4
Victims (and their children) fleeing domestic abuse can access good quality safe accommodation appropriate for their needs	Victims experiencing domestic abuse that wish to remain in their homes can do so safely	Victims get the support they need to leave their relationship	A range of trauma responsive therapeutic support is available to victims (and their children) to support recovery and break the cycle
INDICATORS			
Number (N.) of safe accommodation units	N. of victims supported to stay in their home with perpetrator removed	N. of people seeking support Type of specialist support received	N. of victims who received therapeutic support re-referred for further DA support

N. of people accessing DA support in safe accommodation N. of families accessing safe accommodation	N. of removals N of victims supported to stay home safely with perpetrator		Post support Mental Health self-assessment
WORKSTREAMS			
1.1 Increase safe accommodation	2. Staying put – support for whole family so victims and children can stay safely in their home long term	3. Underpinned by existing DA provision	4. A range of person-centred therapeutic support for victims and their children
1.2 Support for women with complex needs in safe accommodation			
1.3 Support for victims and their children in safe accommodation			
5. Support accessible and appropriate for people with protected characteristics			
8 Data and insights (dynamic needs assessment)			

3.3 The above workstreams will result in the design and procurement of some new services. The workstreams are at different stages of progression and are developing in different ways.

Workstream updates:

Increase Safe Accommodation (Ref 1.1 in table): This project aims to respond to the acute lack of safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims in Devon. The work is being led by District Council colleagues within the remit of the Devon and Cornwall Housing Options Partnership (DCHOP). A soft market testing exercise just completed will now lead to the commissioning of a short consultancy to provide more detail on safe accommodation needs across the County and identify options to increase the supply. We foresee this being completed by October 2022. It is worth noting that the scope of the Domestic Abuse Act funding allocated to upper tier authorities is not capital funding, so availability of safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse will be pivotal for the success of this project.

Support for women with complex needs (1.2 in table): We are investing in a ‘proof of concept’ Women First project in partnership with specialist services in Barnstaple and engaging in conversation with organisations in Exeter, who are providing person-centred support to women with multiple complex needs, for whom standard refuges or safe accommodation are not a viable option. This model is based on “housing first” principles and entails person centred care wrapped around the women’s presenting needs and moves away from the approach of providing only a response to the presenting issue or delivering only what the service is commissioned for. This forces people with multiple needs to attempt to access a multitude of services to get their needs met resulting in them not getting what they need most of the time. We will use findings from this pilot to inform future joint commissioning of services for those with complex needs and multiple disadvantages.

Support for victims and their children (1.3 in table): This project depends in part on 1.1 and this will need to progress in order to define what is required to provide a comprehensive package of support appropriate to the accommodation. We are in consultation with local domestic abuse support providers around modelling the offer. Whilst we await further developments with the accommodation strand, we are exploring the possibility of a more rapid response to the need through a 'proof of concept' project which would utilise existing "Place of Safety" accommodation in the county to test the efficacy of a support model and provide evidence base for scaling up the project countywide, next year.

"Staying Put" (2 in table): this approach focuses on enabling victims of abuse to stay safely in their own home, with the person causing harm removed. One specific approach is "Sanctuary Schemes", which focus on physical security measures in the home. Even this limited option is not universally present in Devon due to the requirement for this scheme to be supported by Police Crime Prevention Officers, which are not consistently available across the county. The detail of how this type of offer is modelled can ensure its success or failure. As such, and true to our principles of wanting to hear the voice of lived experience throughout our work, and of co-design and co-production, we are in the process of engaging people that experienced domestic abuse and either have stayed at home or resorted to moving into alternative accommodation and we will use their experiences in the design of the offer. We are, moreover, co-ordinating a collaborative response to this by setting up a multi-agency working group to drive this workstream and collectively overcome some of the preconceived barriers across the system.

Support to leave abusive relationships (3 in table): This workstream is currently fulfilled through existing Domestic Abuse support provision but will need reviewing once the safe accommodation offer is defined in order to avoid duplication and/ or gaps in delivery.

Therapeutic Support (4 in table): This has proven to be a challenging area of work primarily due to the varied need and interpretation of need across stakeholders as well as the breadth of the population in scope as it applies to children, young people and adults. Our commitment is to undertake a gap analysis to identify where resource would be best placed and have most impact. Additionally, we will also be exploring short term solutions to respond to the more pressing and evidence-based needs through short term interim commissioning of delivery. Devon County Council is also contributing to funding the continuation of a range of therapeutic support interventions for families impacted by domestic abuse within the Early Help arena. The remainder of the funding is being provided through a Local Partnership Fund which the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and Devon and Cornwall Police have made available to the Safer Devon Partnership through their Serious Violence Programme. Part of the funding is being used to commission an independent evaluation that will be used to help to inform future commissioning decisions.

Supporting people with protected characteristics (5 in table): This workstream cuts across all our work and is currently being progressed at peninsula level under the EOS peninsula partnership exploring intersectionality and protected characteristics. Needs assessments have been completed and unsurprisingly have identified different needs for different protected characteristics and led to a variety of recommendations. A decision has been taken in favour of a staged approach to meeting the needs of people with protected characteristics and the first to be

addressed will be learning disabilities as, at present, the greatest evidence of need has been found here. Moreover, a 1-year pilot for a System Capacity Builder, who will facilitate peninsula wide system development, is being progressed.

In addition to the above workstreams, the Council is using the new funding to support existing services which fall within the remit of the Act, including: The women's refuge operated by North Devon Against Domestic Abuse and Specialist Behaviour Change Advisors working with families experiencing abusive relationships.

We have also identified a need to better resource our own team and we are currently undertaking a review so that we can effectively respond to the increased demand arising from the duty under the Domestic Abuse Act.

4. Beyond the Domestic Abuse Act:

4.1 Although the DA Act has influenced most recent activity, it does not amount to all activity. We embrace the opportunity to also update on progress on other relevant areas of work:

4.1.1 We have recently commissioned a domestic abuse training package for professionals. This is in a late phase of design by the provider and will be delivered to professionals across Devon including professionals working with children and young people.

4.1.2 CRAFT Approach – since 2019 we have been supporting this project designed to provide a framework, through system wide professionals' development, for domestic abuse prevention practice, focused on developing more ethical, equitable and socially just outcomes, for those experiencing, causing, and responding to abusive behaviour. This time limited pilot has reached almost 200 professionals in the delivery period and is now in the process of step down and evaluation. The evaluation is not ready for distribution but highlights some significant unexpected findings such as the importance that needs to be placed on the wellbeing of those who support people affected by domestic abuse.

4.1.3 Running since December 2020 and funded by Safer Devon Partnership through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, we have been piloting a Young People Behaviour Change IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advocate) role offering a bespoke 1:1 intervention service for young people who are displaying a pattern of abusive behaviours towards a partner or family members/carers and who have themselves experienced/witnessed domestic abuse in the family home. This will run until at least the end of this financial year and is being evaluated by the University of Plymouth.

4.1.4 Initially funded by Safer Devon Partnership through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and receiving continued funding through the DA Act fund for 2022-23, Behaviour Change IDVAs operate across Devon engaging those identified as perpetrators of domestic abuse through a behaviour change programme. This is currently being evaluated by Exeter University. Although there is a clear commitment to this agenda, and a real evidence base to support this work, funding for this has been historically unreliable and inconsistent, which has posed many challenges including recruitment and retention and forward planning. We very recently welcomed

information from the Home Office which suggests that the need has been recognised and that there may be on the horizon opportunity for more sustained funding for Behaviour Change interventions such as this. We are preparing for this and establishing best course of action.

- 4.1.5 Finally, in collaboration with colleagues across the peninsula, and hosted by NHS Devon (CCG), we are currently engaged in a Sexual Violence Trauma Pathfinder pilot project which aims to create and improve pathways and partnership working approaches for the benefit of adults with complex trauma-related mental health needs associated with sexual assault and abuse.

5. Strategic ambition

- 5.1 We are in the early stages of strategic planning for the organisation in reference to Violence Against Women and Girls and Domestic Violence and Abuse, which needs more time to be effectively developed. An effective approach will require commitment and coordinated action from multiple Council services, statutory agencies, specialist organisations, voluntary and community sector partners and society as a whole.

- 5.2 There are a number of developments that could help to inform our thinking in terms of how we take this forward:

- 5.2.1 Exeter City Council has embraced and is driving forward the VAWG agenda and has developed a Safety of Women at Night (SWaN) Charter.

- 5.2.2 Plymouth have developed, in recent months, a Violence Against Women and Girls Commission which focuses efforts on educating men and boys and preventative measures, instigating a cultural shift across the city.

- 5.2.3 Devon and Cornwall Police have developed a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and updated action plan and made violence against women and girls their top priority.

- 5.2.4 The Safer Devon Partnership has recently taken the decision to prioritise violence prevention through the development of new solution focused cohesive arrangements for tackling violence and its causes. This will have a particular focus on domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. Statutory agencies, including the Council, will need to define their role in relation to this – both in terms of development and delivery.

In addition to supporting the ongoing workstreams and strategies around Domestic Violence and Abuse, we would suggest the Committee considers how the Council can best develop and articulate a statement of intent around tackling violence against women and girls that includes a focus on:

- education, prevention and early intervention for boys, girls and whole Devon communities
- breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma, misogyny and abuse.

Additionally, we would welcome the Committee's consideration in reference to focusing on creating a roadmap that drives responsive and dynamic action to achieve the broad strategic objectives identified.

A plan will need to be formulated to effectively respond to these emerging findings and resource would need to be identified to support this.

6. Alignment with Strategic Plan

Domestic Abuse is a stated priority within the [Council's Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025](#) under two strategic priorities. Under the 'Tackling Poverty and Inequality' priority the Council commits to prioritise the delivery of our domestic violence and abuse strategy; and under the 'Helping communities to be safe, connected and resilient' priority there is a commitment to keeping people safe by improving community safety and targeting domestic violence and abuse.

7. Financial Considerations

The government recognised the costs of delivering the new duty under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as a New Burden on local authorities and has allocated additional funding to Devon County Council in 2021-22 of £1.4m. A similar sum has been allocated in 2022-23. The funding has been allocated as a non-ring-fenced grant but is expected to be incorporated into the Local Government Settlement at some future point.

The amount of funding for years from 2023 is unconfirmed and will be a matter for the next Spending Review. The [Statutory Guidance](#) for the delivery of the new duty recommends that local authority Strategies should cover a period of 3 years and that commissioning for services under these Strategies should be conducted on a "long-term basis". This clearly presents some risk for decisions on commissioning services when the level of funding for the period covered by Strategies is not known.

In addition to the above, Devon County Council is committed to the commissioning of community-based domestic abuse support services (lead provider Splitz Support Services) at an annual cost of £800k. The service is funded from the Public Health Grant. The Council also administers several short-term funding streams for additional related pilot projects such as behaviour change activities. The transient and inconsistent nature of this funding poses challenges to long term planning and strategic decision making.

8. Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations other than as set out in the primary legislation for the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and associated regulations.

9. Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change)

There are no significant environment impact considerations.

10. Equality Considerations

The needs assessment carried out to inform Devon's Strategy for Domestic Abuse Support in Safe Accommodation drew on testimony from a range of organisations representing people with protected characteristics, disabilities and complex needs. This testimony highlighted that there are significant barriers that can prevent people from recognising that they are experiencing abuse, from knowing where to go for support, and from receiving support that addresses their particular background and needs. These barriers include language (need for advocacy or interpreting and

translation), reliance on support from other people or facilities in everyday life (carers, need for physical adaptations in the home), neurodiversity and combinations of different characteristics and needs (intersectionality). An initial approach to these considerations at a peninsula level is mentioned in the section above on delivery of the Strategy for Domestic Abuse Support in Safe Accommodation.

11. Risk Management Considerations

As highlighted in point 7, the uncertainty surrounding the long-term allocation of funds poses a risk. Additionally, the short-term nature of other funding streams to this priority poses additional challenges and risk.

Simon Kitchen, Head of Communities

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities and Equality: Councillor Roger Croad

Director of Public Health, Communities, and Prosperity: Steve Brown

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Contact for Enquiries: Liz Thompson, Violence against Women and Girls Strategic Lead

Tel No: 01392 383000 Room: G60 County Hall, Exeter

Background Paper

Strategy for Domestic Abuse Support in Safe Accommodation in Devon 2021.

Published on the Council's website at:

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/dsva/document/strategy-for-delivering-domestic-abuse-support-in-safe-accommodation/>

Ending Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy 2016-21. Published on the Council's website at:

[DSVA Strategy and Action Plan - Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse \(devon.gov.uk\)](https://www.devon.gov.uk/dsva/document/dsva-strategy-and-action-plan-domestic-and-sexual-violence-and-abuse)

Domestic Abuse responsibilities and responses - Final