

Commissioning services to address Domestic Abuse in Devon

Report of the Head of Communities

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That Cabinet be asked to:

- (a) Approve Option 1 - the commissioning of an Integrated Domestic Abuse Service for Devon from April 2025, including improved access, prevention and early intervention, risk planning and advocacy, support for those in safe accommodation and in recovery, and to work with those that harm.
- (b) Give delegated authority to the Director of Public Health, Communities and Prosperity in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities and Equality, the Chief Executive and the S151 Officer to award the contract.

2) Background / Introduction

Interpersonal and gender-based violence and abuse (IG-BVA) is a global public health issue rooted in gender inequality. We use the term of interpersonal and gender-based violence and abuse (IG-BVA) to describe three categories of harm: Violence Against Women and Girls, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence and abuse. This report is focused on our primary activity on Domestic Abuse; however, it is worth noting that these three elements are intrinsically linked and from a victim/survivor viewpoint cannot be naturally separated out.

In 2021 the new Domestic Abuse (DA) Act came into force and with it a new duty for Devon County Council to establish and convene a Local Partnership Board and, through an assessment of need, develop and deliver a strategy for Domestic Abuse support for all victims in safe accommodation and to ensure this support is available. This has been recognised as a new burden for local authorities, Devon County Council has received allocated funding from the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities of approximately £1.48 million yearly and has responded to meet its statutory duties. The 'Strategy for delivering Domestic Abuse [support in safe accommodation - Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse](#)' defines the Council's objectives in reference to this and its Strategic Needs assessment, to improve understanding of communities and individuals affected by Domestic Abuse in Devon, was refreshed in November 2023.

The Domestic Abuse Act recognises for the first time in legislation, children and young people (CYP) affected by familial Domestic Abuse as victims in their own right and lowered the age of 'adults' being recognised as victims to 16 years. This is of particular significance in reference to Devon County Council's organisational response to Children and Young People in Devon.

In Devon, 867 cases were discussed at MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences for High Risk) in 2022/23 and these included 1081 children. Just over two thirds of cases referred to the Devon domestic abuse community support service have children or young people under 18 in the household and over half (52%) of contacts into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), the front door to Children Services, where domestic abuse was listed as a factor were recontacts indicating children experiencing prolonged exposure. 44% of all MASH contacts where Domestic abuse was a feature resulted in social care action, suggesting significant levels of risk.

Older people are a specific group that requires additional focus. Almost half of the adult population of Devon is over 60, yet this group is underrepresented in services. Those 61 years or over are more likely to experience abuse by an adult family member or from a current intimate partner and to be living with the abuser than those 60 and under and they are significantly less likely to attempt to leave an abusive relationship. The rurality of Devon creates opportunities for isolation that can increase risk of harm and enable and abet coercive control for older people.

Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Devon County Council has a duty to provide support in safe accommodation and Districts have a duty to cooperate with Devon County Council to meet the statutory requirements. Local Authorities with a housing duty must also consider people made homeless through domestic abuse as having a priority need for accommodation.

Safe Accommodation in Devon was substantially depleted several years ago following reductions in funding. There are currently 44 units, individuals or families spaces in the county (66 bedspaces) including refuge, dispersed housing and accommodation for those experiencing multiple disadvantages, which does not adequately meet the demand. In 2021–22 in Devon, a total of 272 households were accepted as homeless by their local authority with domestic abuse as the primary factor, mostly women with children with at least 80% of these households accommodated in mainstream temporary accommodation and, of these, at least 80% housed initially within B&Bs or similar. A mapping exercise conducted identified that an average of an additional 130 units (minimum 80) would be required to meet the need in the county.

Further detailed information about the local needs can be found in the 2023 strategic needs assessment published here: [Interpersonal & Gender-based Violence & Abuse - Safer Devon](#).

Tackling violence and abuse within families and intimate partner relationships is one of three strategic priorities for the Safer Devon Partnership. 'Improving the partnership response to Domestic Abuse to prevent harm to children' has recently been added as a priority for the Devon Safeguarding Children Partnership. Tackling Domestic Abuse is, moreover, part of the Devon County Council Strategic Plan 2021-25.

Given Devon's profile, Domestic Abuse is also prominent within the context of the new Serious Violence Duty which requires Devon County Council and other specified authorities to work together to prepare and implement a strategy to prevent and reduce serious violence in their area.

Devon Community Domestic Abuse support services were commissioned in 2018, preceding the new Domestic Abuse Act coming into effect. The impact of this, the changing presenting needs of those affected by domestic abuse, alongside our improved understanding of those needs, now requires a different and transformational approach to the provision of support.

Moreover, the new statutory duty for Devon County Council to ensure support in safe accommodation creates an additional requirement for the Council to commission the provision of services in this arena, in a sustainable and effective way.

3) Proposal

Devon County Council is wishing to remodel and recommission the provision of Domestic Abuse support services for the county, with an anticipated commencement date for the new services on the 1st of April 2025.

The proposed new Service will form an integrated model that covers access, prevention and early intervention, risk planning & advocacy, support in safe accommodation and recovery, and to work with those that harm (see Appendix A). The impact of trauma from domestic abuse is debilitating and long-standing and affects people beyond the event. Supporting people with an understanding of this and the required empathy and compassion can have significant positive impact. The ambition is to provide a trauma informed person-centred service that leads to a positive sustainable change for those supported and their families.

To achieve sustained impact, it is essential that a different delivery model is commissioned and implemented (alongside key partners) that follows the life journey of victims/survivors and their families. The model has been enhanced to support children and young people more effectively and consider the varied needs of people that are supported and how these needs and experiences sit in the context of abuse (intersectionality). It will facilitate community and support network's engagement. Furthermore, this model is designed to address harmful behaviours, to reduce risk, and prevent reoccurring victimisation and break the intergenerational cycle of abuse.

4) Options / Alternatives

Through the commissioning process to date, an options appraisal exercise was conducted. This concluded that the option of commissioning an integrated community and safe accommodation support service in 2025 will provide the most rounded support for victims/survivors, develop sustainable and integrated responses from partners and offer best value. Therefore, Cabinet is recommended to support the commissioning of Option 1 - A Full Integrated Service from April 2025.

Three options were considered as potentially viable:

- (a) Option 1 - To Commission a full integrated service, as proposed, from 2025 (as above). A full integrated service aligning delivery and resources will allow us to dynamically address key gaps and challenges identified through the needs assessment, consultation and modelling process, allowing for best and easiest access to support for those affected and prompt engagement at lowest risk. It allows for greatest impact and improvement in performance across the system. It also allows economies of scale and to make best use of resources over a longer period of time.
- (b) Option 2 - To extend the current community contract until 2026 and continue grant funding the remainder of the projects as per 2024/25. Whilst allowing for some stability the level of current delivery is not adequately meeting the needs of those affected and it would also not elicit the required changes to improve our response to victims, survivors and their families. It also poses risks in terms of relationships with stakeholders and potential for legal challenge.
- (c) Option 3 - Extend community contract for one or two more years (max 2) and commission support in safe accommodation and therapeutic support only. Although this option would allow increased activity around support in safe accommodation, this would be dramatically minimised by the lack of integration and reduced allocated resources and, similarly to option 2, would not allow for change in current community support delivery. Additionally, this would result in negative impact in coming years as delivery would continue to be disjointed over a prolonged period of time. The risk of legal challenge is also present here.

Both option 2 and 3 have, therefore, been assessed and considered as not viable in supporting those affected by domestic abuse effectively and meeting the Council's statutory duties.

5) Consultation and Engagement

The Devon Interpersonal and Gender-based Violence and Abuse Partnership Board has been pivotal in allowing ongoing consultation with stakeholders and partners since its inception in 2021, as they are all represented within this forum. The Board, additionally, oversees the lived experience engagement activity via a sub-group and listening exercises and coproduction is routinely embedded through all activities.

Between February and October 2023, stakeholders, including experts by experience, were consulted through the Strategic Needs Assessment process referenced above.

Moreover, a learning exercise is being undertaken with five of the prototyping projects currently being delivered, which will also allow for consultative activity.

Specifically in reference to the procurement of new services, between November 2023 and January 2024, Devon County Council's key delivery areas, the voluntary and community sector via the VCSE Assembly and key stakeholders and partners via the Interpersonal and Gender-based Violence and Abuse Partnership Board, were consulted, by survey. Market listening exercises are taking place in March 2024.

As the modelling of the proposed service has been essentially produced through the ongoing consultation as described above, there is confidence that the proposed solution responds to the feedback received through these processes.

Consultation activity on the full model is limited and restricted by procurement and legal requirements that limit the amount of sharable information open for consultation. Wider market engagement is planned subject to the Cabinet's decision.

6) Strategic Plan

This proposal aligns with the vision and priorities in the Council's Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025 as domestic abuse is referenced in the following points:

- Tackle poverty and inequality (address poverty, health and other inequalities)
- Help communities be safe, connected and resilient.
- Additionally, a refocus on children and young people by addressing gaps in prevention and early intervention and on breaking the intergenerational cycle of abuse also makes this proposal 'ambitious for children and young people'.

7) Financial Considerations

In order to make the tender market attractive and delivery viable and sustainable, the contract will need to be over a period of 5 years with an additional 4-year extension possible. As per all contractual arrangements, risks for a long-term contract will be mitigated within the contract itself.

An integrated commissioned service will allow us to significantly improve outcomes from the Council's investment by combining various funding streams. Through these arrangements, partners will provide additional funding to increase the impact on victims and survivors, whilst retaining, improving and increasing delivery at best value.

8) Legal Considerations

The Council has statutory duties in the area as a result of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. As this is a commissioned service, there are inevitable legal considerations. However, these will be routinely managed through the procurement process.

Risk of legal challenge is reduced through commissioning these services by developing clear and sustainable resourcing of services for those affected by domestic abuse.

Potential legal risks have been identified and outlined in the options appraisal summary in section 4, including risk of legal challenge from providers and other stakeholders within some of the options considered.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

An impact assessment has been completed in reference to the commissioning of the Integrated Domestic abuse service. No significant environmental risks and some moderate environmental benefits have been identified, including possible minimisation of carbon emissions due to size of the commissioned service and ability to have more locality-based and online activities that reduce travel need.

10) Equality Considerations

Where relevant, in coming to a decision the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty requires decision makers to give due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct.
- advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people's needs; and
- foster good relations between people by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding

in relation to the protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership (for employment), pregnancy and maternity, race/ethnicity, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation).

An Impact Assessment has been prepared which has been circulated separately to Cabinet Members and also is available on the Council's website at

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/published>

Cabinet is asked to consider this impact assessment as part of its decision making.

The service will align to the Equality Act and Devon County Council's Equality and Diversity Policies.

The integrated service will be required to proactively address barriers to access such as language and cultural barriers and is required to be sensitive to intersectionality and tailored to be accessible to marginalised groups such as ethnically diverse groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, older people and gypsy and travellers and will need to work with local specialist organisations in order to ensure this as well as addressing barriers to accessing services which may include inability to pay for transport, childcare responsibilities, language, specific vulnerabilities and issues with reading/writing/digital literacy and are flexible in their approaches to seek solutions to any other individual need that may be a barrier to access.

11) Risk Management Considerations

This proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken/ included to safeguard the Council's position.

The risks that have been identified are standard risks with any procurement and contractual process, such as risk of legal challenge, of provider/s contractual breach and risk of reduced impact due to poor performance. It is deemed that all risks identified are unavoidable and can be mitigated through considerate processes and good contract management.

If the proposal is supported, the Council will continue to meet its statutory duties as described in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

12) Summary

In summary, we recommend that Cabinet support the proposed Integrated Domestic Abuse service's commissioning plans from 2025 as this:

- Provides the best value for money.
- Allows compliance with statutory duties as per Domestic Abuse Act 2021.
- Delivers support that has the greatest impact for the greatest number of victims and survivors of domestic abuse and their families in Devon.
- Creates opportunities for growth and improvement in delivery of support to victims and survivors to continue within the contract term.

Simon Kitchen,
Head of Communities

Steve Brown,
Director for Public Health, Communities and Prosperity

Electoral Divisions: All

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

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Nil

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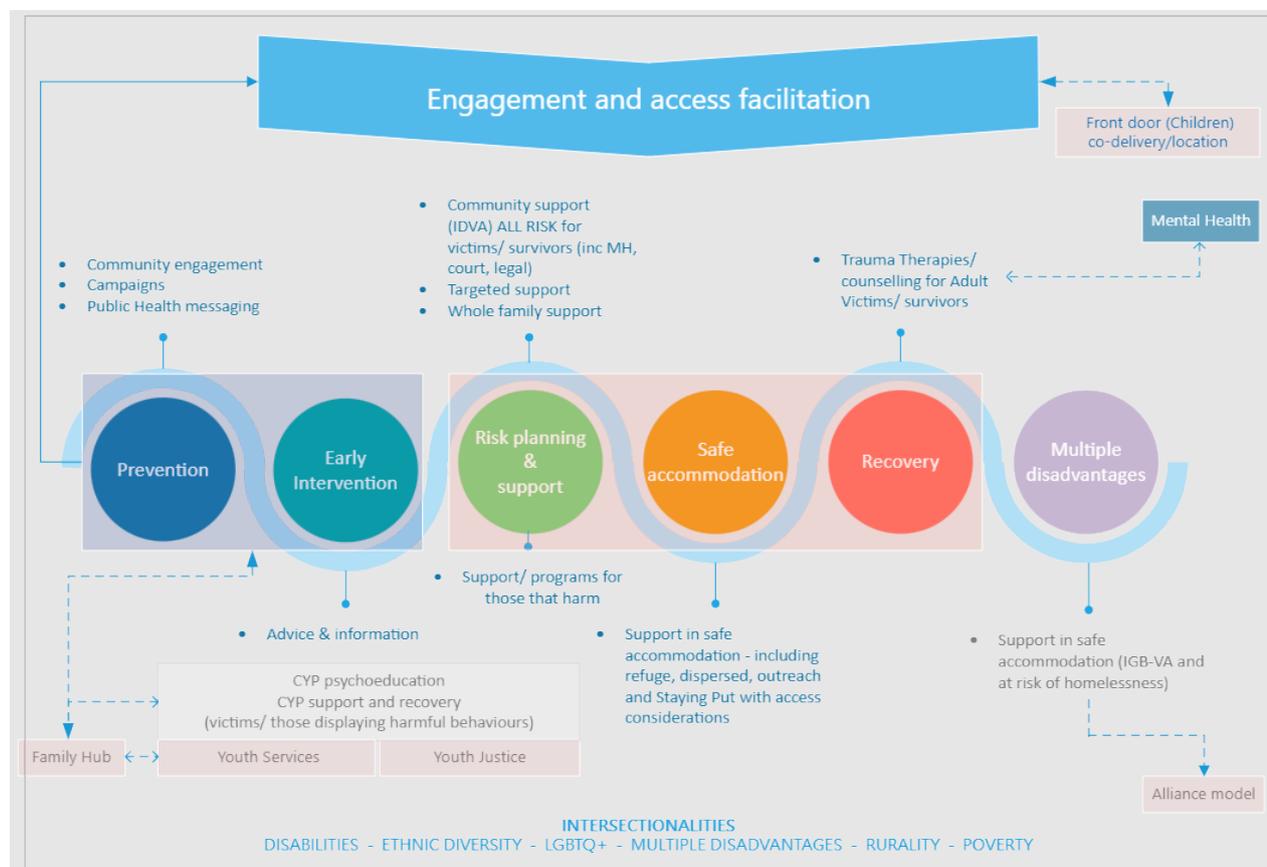
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Commissioning services to address Domestic Abuse in Devon – Final

Appendix A to SC/24/1

Domestic abuse integrated service infographic



The proposed integrated service will allow us to address some significant gaps identified in current available support, mapped against the needs of those affected by Domestic Abuse in Devon:

- **Improved Access** to advise, engage and intervene at the earliest opportunity.
- **Prevention and Early Intervention** - Whole population activity, awareness raising and public/ community strengthening and direct delivery.
- **Risk planning and advocacy** – support and advocacy for victims and their families
- **Work with those that harm** – behaviour change work to break the cycle.
- **Safe accommodation support**– to comply with the Domestic Abuse Act and to effectively meet the needs of victims and their children.
- **Recovery** – working with victims/ survivors and their children to help them recover.