

TO: EXECUTIVE

DATE: 14 DECEMBER 2021

**Development of the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024
Director of People**

1. PURPOSE OF DECISION

- 1.1 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 requires local authorities to prepare a Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy, with the assistance of the domestic abuse Local Partnership Board. The strategy should include an assessment of needs, identify where there are gaps in the provision of accommodation-based support and make plans to address these.
- 1.2 The Council published its draft strategy on 22 October 2021, in line with the timescales set out in the regulations, and must publish its final strategy by 5 January 2022. CMT and Executive are asked to review and approve the final strategy prior to its publication. The Domestic Abuse Executive Group, which fulfils the role of the Local Partnership Board, is also being consulted on the final strategy.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1 Executive is asked to:

- (i) approve publication of the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024.**
- (ii) approve the funding priorities set out in the strategy which will inform the commissioning of support services for domestic abuse.**

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 3.1 CMT and Executive approval for the strategy is required in order to meet the statutory requirement to publish a final version of the strategy before 5 January 2022.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 None.

5. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

- 5.1 The Domestic Abuse Act received Royal Assent on 29 April 2021. The key objectives of the act are to:
- Raise awareness and understanding about the devastating impact of domestic abuse on victims and their families.
 - Further improve the effectiveness of the justice system in providing protection for victims of domestic abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice.
 - Strengthen the support for victims of abuse by statutory agencies.

- 5.2 Part 4 of the Act introduced a new duty on local authorities to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children within 'relevant' safe accommodation. The specific duties placed on tier one local authorities are:
- To appoint a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board which it must consult as it performs certain specified functions.
 - To assess the need for domestic abuse support in their area for all victims (and their children) who reside in relevant safe accommodation, including those who come from outside of their area.
 - To prepare and publish a strategy for the provision of such support to cover their area having regard to the needs assessment.
 - To give effect to the strategy (through commissioning / de-commissioning decisions).
 - To monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy.
 - To report back annually to central government.
- 5.3 The purpose of this part of the Act is to ensure there is an adequate supply of safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims across all areas. Safe accommodation is defined as accommodation in which domestic abuse victims receive dedicated, specialist domestic abuse support. This includes refuge accommodation, but also self-contained accommodation, short-term emergency accommodation, move-on accommodation and other specialist forms of accommodation provided for domestic abuse victims.
- 5.4 £125 million New Burdens funding has been allocated for 2021-22 to enable local authorities to commission support in relevant safe accommodation to meet the needs of victims including their children. A commitment to three years funding has been made, but the amount of funding from April 2022 is not yet known. £203,767 funding has been allocated to Bracknell Forest Council in 2021-22.
- 5.5 Statutory guidance issued by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) requires tier one local authorities to take the following steps to assess and meet the support needs of domestic abuse victims:
- Completion of a detailed needs assessment and identification of current provision and gaps
 - Development of a Strategy, based on the needs assessment, which outlines how gaps in provision will be addressed; what specialist services are needed for victims from groups with protected characteristics and multiple needs; how children in safe accommodation will be supported; and work on cross-borough referrals and protocols.
 - Development of funding and commissioning proposals that respond to the needs and priorities set out in the strategy
- 5.6 In updated statutory guidance issued on 1 October 2021, DLUHC set a deadline for local authorities to publish their draft Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy for consultation by 26 October 2021 and to publish a final version, including their funding intentions, by 5 January 2022.
- 5.7 The above process and timescales have posed some challenges for local authorities. Guidance on the methodology for the needs assessment was provided late in the day, which has delayed most authorities in starting work on their strategies. Many authorities appeared to have made little progress on their strategies by September, with the requirement to publish this only a few weeks away. In addition, there are

tight constraints on how the funding can be used – not for support services generally but only for those linked to specified safe accommodation – and local authorities will find it difficult to allocate the funding and commission services in 2021/22 as their strategies and funding priorities will not be developed until late in the year.

Progress

- 5.8 A local needs assessment has been undertaken using the government's recommended template and drawing on data from a range of sources and organisations. To supplement this, and to ensure that the assessment is as comprehensive and robust as possible, additional work has been undertaken:
- commissioning of a programme of engagement and structured interviews with victims of domestic abuse
 - interviews with professionals and front-line staff
 - stakeholder engagement with key organisations and the Domestic Abuse Executive Group
 - analysis of case files and records
 - mapping of support services available in the local area.
- 5.9 Engagement with victims of domestic abuse has been a particularly important element of the assessment. This has provided insights into victims' experiences of domestic abuse, the different services they tried to access and with what success, and the outcomes that they achieved. 9 case study survivors were interviewed, ensuring that a range of different cohorts were included: women, men, LGBT+, BAME and ethnic minority individuals, single people and families and people with disabilities. Some of the insights that emerged are summarised below.⁵

Findings and conclusions

- 5.10 Key findings and conclusions from the broad needs assessment and engagement with survivors and victims are summarised below.
- Current provision of refuge accommodation in the local area is 11 places, which is considered adequate and is close to the benchmark number of refuge places of one per 10,000 of the population advised by Women's Aid nationally.
 - Refuge accommodation is not suitable or accessible for some groups, e.g. male and transgender victims, people with disabilities or complex support needs or larger families and those with older sons. As a result, there are gaps in safe accommodation provision for these groups:
 - A Sanctuary scheme¹ should be established to provide more opportunities to support victims who choose to remain in their own homes.
 - Many victims are placed in temporary accommodation provided by the housing service but need a better support offer than they receive currently.
 - Provision of short stay emergency accommodation including furnished accommodation, would increase options for victims and enable better support and accommodation plans to be put in place.
 - There are a wide range of statutory and voluntary support services available in the local area, but victims in temporary accommodation may not be linked to these in a co-ordinated way.

¹ Sanctuary schemes provide enhanced physical security measures within the home to enable victims to remain living in their home, if that is their preference.

- The provision of self-contained dispersed accommodation, which could be temporary accommodation that includes dedicated domestic abuse support could meet the needs of some groups for whom there is a gap in safe accommodation – men, transgender victims, larger families and people with complex needs
- The need for specialised forms of support and accommodation for groups with protected characteristics should be explored further.
- Further work should take place with other boroughs to consider reciprocal arrangements and the potential for joint services
- Ongoing engagement with survivors and victims should take place to inform the future development of support services for people in safe accommodation and the evaluation of the strategy and delivery plan.

Priorities and Recommendations

5.11 The strategy outlines 4 broad priority areas and sets out recommendations and actions under each, focusing on the issues listed above. These are:

1. Raise awareness and provide information on available services and support options.
2. Improve access and pathways to appropriate safe accommodation options.
3. Ensure effective, multi-agency working and specialist support to meet a wide variety of needs.
4. Continue to develop our understanding of needs through improved data collection and ensuring survivors have an effective voice.

Funding priorities

5.12 The strategy outlines the proposed funding priorities in order to deliver the recommendations, which are summarised below.

1. Establishment of a specialist DA Housing Officer role within the Housing Service to develop and co-ordinate support provision for victims in safe accommodation
2. Continuing funding of support in local refuge accommodation
3. Commissioning of a specialist outreach service to provide dedicated domestic abuse support for victims in other accommodation (including those supported through a sanctuary scheme)
4. Establishment of a new Sanctuary Scheme to provide safety measures for victims able to remain in their home
5. Commissioning of ongoing engagement with survivors and victims to evaluate and inform service delivery
6. Establishment of a furnished accommodation service
7. Commissioning of specialist support services to meet gaps in provision for victims from groups with protected characteristics
8. Part-time DA administration role

Delivering and monitoring the strategy

5.13 The recommendations in this strategy will be translated into a delivery plan which will be developed and agreed with the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

5.14 The delivery plan will be monitored and its outcomes evaluated by the Domestic Abuse Executive Group. This will include the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, to ensure the support made available adequately meets the

level and nature of need within the area. A framework for doing this will be agreed with the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

- 5.15 DLUHC is developing a standardised reporting form for authorities to report back annually to government on the steps taken to meet the duty.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 6.1 The Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy has been prepared to comply with Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the statutory guidance issued on 1 October 2021. Tier one local authorities are required to publish their draft strategy by 26 October 2021, which the Council has done, and to publish a final strategy by 5 January 2022, which the Council will do, with the approval of the Executive.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 £203,767 New Burdens funding has been allocated to Bracknell Forest Council in 2021-22 with an unspecified commitment to further funding for 2022/23 and 2023/24. Funding is specifically to commission support in relevant safe accommodation to meet the needs of victims including their children. The proposed funding and commissioning priorities are outlined in 5.12 and have been agreed with the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.
- 6.3 The funding priorities have been shared with and approved by officials from DLUHC. Further ongoing discussion is taking place with the department to establish whether the funding allocated for 2021/22 can be carried over to next year, given the very short time remaining once the strategy is approved. The arrangements for the procurement of services and engagement of staff will need to reflect the uncertainty of future funding to avoid creating liabilities for the local authority if funding is reduced.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 In developing the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy, the Council must have due regard for advancing equality. An Initial Equalities Screening Report Form has been completed and has determined that the Strategy will have a positive impact on those groups included within the protected characteristics set out in the Public Sector Equality Duty. Recommendations in the strategy include measures to ensure that victims who are less likely to receive the specialist support they may need, due to (for instance) their age, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, are linked to specialist support in safe accommodation.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 Refer to 6.3 above. There are no other significant risks identified relating to the proposals contained in the report.

Climate Change Implications

- 6.6 The recommendations in Section 2 above are expected to have no impact on emissions of CO₂, as they relate to the provision of support for domestic abuse victims in existing accommodation.

7. **Consultation**

- 7.1 The new duty requires authorities to bring together key local partners in a domestic abuse Local Partnership Board, which must be consulted before publishing the strategy. In Bracknell Forest, there is already a well-established partnership board, the Domestic Abuse Executive Group, which provides the functions as set out in the Act. Presentations have been made to this group, which has been consulted throughout the process of developing the needs assessment, the strategy and the funding priorities.
- 7.2 The Domestic Abuse Forum has also been consulted. This is a practitioner group that includes all of the principal services working with victims of domestic abuse.
- 7.3 As noted above, the strategy has been informed by commissioned research with victims of domestic abuse and frontline staff.

Background Papers

Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024

Contact for further information

Ian Stone, Housing Strategy, Enabling and Projects Manager, Early Help and Communities.

01344 351699

ian.stone@bracknell-forest.gov.uk