

Bracknell Forest Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024

November 2021

1. Introduction

Each year, it is estimated that over 2 million people in the UK suffer some form of domestic abuse. Whilst a majority of victims are women, domestic abuse can affect anyone, regardless of age, disability, gender identity, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

It is widely acknowledged that housing is a major barrier for people attempting to leave abusive situations. As reported by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA), a survivor's ability to access safe housing and other economic resources is a key factor in the decision about whether to leave an abusive situation. This makes domestic abuse very much a housing issue. Access to safe accommodation options, along with the right kind of support and assistance, is critical to enable survivors of domestic abuse to move on safely from situations of abuse.

Without access to safe and secure housing, survivors are confronted with the prospect of homelessness and housing insecurity or having to return to a perpetrator.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, part 4, aims to address this situation, by ensuring that a range of safe housing and support options are available at the local level. This is to be welcomed. In Bracknell Forest, all of those represented locally in the Domestic Abuse Executive Group and Forum are committed to the challenge of ensuring that people do not stay in situations of domestic abuse as a result of a lack of appropriate housing and support options.

This strategy has been developed through an evidence-based approach that has sought to gather and analyse the available data from a range of sources in order to assess local needs; to understand the journeys and experience of victims of domestic abuse; and to engage the views of partner organisations and front-line professionals. The development of the strategy and delivery plan is an iterative process, involving continuous analysis and engagement, with the ongoing support and involvement of the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the strategy, including our partners in the Domestic Abuse Executive Group and Forum, Three Sixty Degree Marketing Consultancy, and most especially the survivors who took part in interviews and provided valuable feedback based on their own lived experience. We recognise the importance of their voices in helping us understand and evaluate the current provision of support and accommodation. It is our intention to continue to engage survivors to provide ongoing feedback on our services and to contribute to our annual performance reviews in relation to safe accommodation and support.

2. The purpose of the Safe Accommodation Strategy

The scope of the strategy

The Bracknell Forest Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021 – 2024 outlines how safe accommodation and support for domestic abuse victim-survivors will be provided in the local area in future, in line with the statutory duties included within part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which relates to safe accommodation.

The Strategy covers a three-year period and will be reviewed annually to ensure that it takes account of the voices and experiences of victim-survivors of domestic abuse who access services in Bracknell Forest. A delivery plan, which includes our commissioning intentions, will be developed to show how the objectives within this strategy will be met.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

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.

The Domestic Abuse Act established for the first time a wide-ranging legal definition of domestic abuse.

Its measures include important new protections and support for victims ensuring that abusers will no longer be allowed to directly cross-examine their victims in the family and civil courts and giving victims better access to special measures in the courtroom to help prevent intimidation – such as protective screens and giving evidence via video link.

The police will also be given new powers including Domestic Abuse Protection Notices (DAPNs) providing victims with immediate protection from abusers, while courts will be able to issue new Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) to help prevent offending by forcing perpetrators to take steps to change their behaviour, including seeking mental health support or drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

What is Domestic Abuse?

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 creates a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, controlling, coercive, and economic abuse.

For the definition to apply, both individuals must be aged 16 or over and 'personally connected' to each other, for example, by marriage or civil partnership, or have an intimate personal relationship with one another, or had a parental relationship in relation to the same child or are relatives.

'Abusive behaviour' is defined in the act as any of the following:

- physical or sexual abuse
- violent or threatening behaviour
- controlling or coercive behaviour
- economic abuse
- psychological, emotional or other abuse

The Act also recognises that children can be victims of domestic abuse where they see, or hear, or experience, the effect of the abuse and are related to either person.

Supporting Victims of Domestic Abuse in Safe Accommodation

Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a new duty on local authorities to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children within 'relevant' safe accommodation. The aim of the duty is to ensure that all victims of domestic abuse have access to the right support within safe accommodation when they need it.

The new duty requires Tier One authorities in England to bring together key local partners, including local domestic abuse charities, in a domestic abuse Local Partnership Board. They must also undertake a robust assessment to determine the need for domestic abuse support in their area for all victims (and their children) in relevant safe accommodation.

The partnership board will advise the authority on the development of the needs assessment and the local safe accommodation strategy.

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.

What is safe accommodation?

The Act places a new duty on relevant local authorities to ensure that all victims of domestic abuse have access to the right support within safe accommodation when they need it. The statutory guidance outlines various types of safe accommodation, all of which focus on delivering a specialist accommodation and support package for survivors and victims.

- **Refuge accommodation** – shared accommodation and intensive support, provided on a short to medium stay basis.
- **Specialist safe accommodation** – dedicated accommodation with specialist support for victims with relevant protected characteristics and/or complex needs, e.g. BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), and disabled victims.
- **Dispersed accommodation** - Self-contained accommodation with a high level of specialist support dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse unable to stay in a refuge with communal spaces (e.g. due to complex support needs or families with teenage sons)
- **Sanctuary Schemes** – enhanced physical security measures provided within the home, making it possible for victims to remain in their own homes, where it is safe and it is their choice to do so.
- **Move-on accommodation** – accommodation for victims who no longer need the intensive level of support provided in a refuge, but who need a lower level of domestic abuse specific support for a period to enable them to make the move into permanent accommodation.
- **Other forms of domestic abuse emergency accommodation** – a safe place with support. To give victims an opportunity to spend a temporary period of time to consider and make decisions in an environment which is self-contained and safe. This would include access to wrap around support and specialist support for victims with complex needs (including mental health needs and substance misuse). An example of 'other' forms of safe accommodation would be the [Whole Housing Approach](#).

Safe accommodation is only considered to be safe and appropriate if it is delivered with dedicated support for domestic abuse victims. The government's guidance states that privately-owned and managed temporary accommodation with shared toilet, bathroom, or kitchen facilities (such as Bed and Breakfast accommodation) is not considered to be safe accommodation and such accommodation is specifically excluded in the Regulations.

However, the guidance also says that temporary accommodation provided to domestic abuse victims under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, which adheres to the description of relevant safe accommodation, could be included in the Regulations. Therefore, dispersed, self-contained accommodation and other forms of short-term emergency accommodation can be considered to be safe accommodation, where they provide a high level of specialist support dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse.

Support for victims in safe accommodation

The statutory guidance sets out the different types of domestic abuse support that might be provided under the new duty. The aim is to ensure that victims and their children in safe accommodation receive expert help provided by specialist staff in domestic abuse support services. This includes support that is directly provided within safe accommodation services such as refuges, and outreach support services provided to victims in other types of relevant accommodation, including their homes in the case of a sanctuary scheme.

Types of support include:

- **Overall management of services within relevant accommodation** – including, the management of staff, payroll, financial and day to day management of services and maintaining relationships with the local authority (such functions will often be undertaken by a service manager)
- **Support with the day-to-day running of the service**, for example scheduling times for counselling sessions, group activities (such functions may often be undertaken by administrative or office staff)
- **Advocacy support** – development of personal safety plans, liaison with other services (for example, GPs and social workers, welfare benefit providers)
- **Domestic abuse prevention advice** – support to assist victims to recognise the signs of abusive relationships, to help them remain safe (including online), and to prevent re-victimisation
- **Specialist support for victims**
 - **Designed specifically for victims with relevant protected characteristics** (also known as by and for), such as faith services, translators and interpreters within BAME-led refuges, immigration advice, interpreters for victims identifying as deaf and / or hard of hearing, and dedicated support for LGBT+ victims
 - **Designed specifically for victims with unique and / or complex needs** such as, mental health advice and support, drug and alcohol advice and support, including sign posting accordingly
- **Children’s support** – including play therapy and child advocacy
- **Housing-related support** – providing housing-related advice and support, for example, securing a permanent home, rights to existing accommodation and advice on how to live safely and independently
- **Advice service** – financial and legal support, including accessing benefits, support into work and establishing independent financial arrangements
- **Counselling and therapy** (including group support) for both adults and children, including emotional support.

The role of the Domestic Abuse Executive Group

Tier One authorities must appoint a Local Partnership Board consisting of key partners with an interest in tackling domestic abuse and supporting victims, including their children.

In Bracknell Forest, there is an established partnership board which fulfils the functions of the required Local Partnership Board (LPB) as set out in Part 4, Section 58 of the Domestic Abuse Act – the Bracknell Forest Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

This group provides strategic oversight of the multi-agency responses to domestic abuse across Bracknell Forest, bringing together managers from key agencies and representatives of victims/survivors and children, to identify and address gaps in support, including those

within safe accommodation. The Domestic Abuse Executive reports into and is a delivery group of the Bracknell Community Safety Partnership.

In addition to the Executive Group, a practitioner group, the Domestic Abuse Forum meets regularly to share information and develop practice cross-system. Both the Executive Group and Forum have been actively engaged in the development of the safe accommodation strategy.

Links to other policies and strategies

- Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy
- Bracknell Forest Domestic Abuse Strategy 2017-2020
- Community Safety Plan 2020-23
- Bracknell Forest Safeguarding Board Strategic Plan 2020-22
- Sufficiency, Placement and Commissioning Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers 2019-2021
- Equalities Monitoring Annual Report 2019-20
- Bracknell Forest Domestic Abuse Annual Report 2020-21

3. The Safe Accommodation Needs Assessment

The development of the needs assessment

Initial needs assessment work was undertaken to gain a greater understanding of the incidence of cases and the people affected by domestic abuse in the local area.

Data was collected from the following sources:

- Thames Valley Police
- MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference)
- Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA) services - refuge, IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advocate) and outreach services
- Early Help referrals
- Homelessness data (from H-CLIC)
- Adult safeguarding
- Family Safeguarding Model (FSM)

This assessment looked at:

- the numbers of recorded incidents, cases and referrals in the local area
- the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of survivors and victims
- the numbers and details of victims referred to and placed in accommodation

To supplement this quantitative analysis, additional qualitative research has been undertaken in partnership with local organisations:

- structured interviews with 9 victims
- interviews with professionals and front-line staff
- engagement of key partners within and outside of the Domestic Abuse Executive Group
- analysis of case files and records.

How many domestic abuse cases are reported locally?

Recorded domestic abuse cases in 2019/20 and 2020/21 are set out below.

Thames Valley Police recorded 2,434 incidents of domestic abuse in 2020/21. This is a small increase from the previous year when 2,300 cases were recorded.

Bracknell Forest's MARAC high risk cases increased from 146 in 2019/20 to 206 cases in 2020/21.

The Berkshire Women's Aid outreach and IDVA services dealt with 293 cases in 2020/21 compared to 257 cases in 2019/21; however, case numbers were impacted by changes to referrals and staffing in reaction to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Homelessness cases where domestic abuse was the main cause of homelessness rose from 42 in 2019/20 to 87 in 2020/21, a significant increase. Over a third of cases were single people.

Nationally, it has been reported that incidents of domestic abuse have increased during the Covid 19 pandemic. Whilst a number of local data sources show an increase in domestic abuse cases last year compared to the previous year, some caution needs to be exercised. It is likely that some of the increase is due to better reporting systems, counting of repeat cases and other factors. It is unclear at this stage whether the underlying trend is upwards or not. It is important that regular monitoring and review of case numbers is undertaken in future.

The characteristics of victims and survivors of domestic abuse

Analysis of local data sources showed the following characteristics of domestic abuse victims and survivors:

- Age: The most common age group recorded is between 25 and 44 years old
- Gender: There was only partial data on this. 95% of the BWA's IDVA and outreach services were used by women and about 90% of housing cases were female; the police recorded a higher proportion of male victims (25%)
- Sexual identity: A large majority of referrals were heterosexual/straight. Only a small number of organisations collected data on sexual identity (MARAC, BWA) and these recorded 2% of victims as gay/lesbian and/or bisexual; however, all of these organisations recorded large numbers of unknowns
- Race: 90% were white, with under 5% from Asian groups and under 5% from black and black British groups, reflecting the make-up of the population locally
- Disability: 5-10% of victims had a disability or long-term sickness, similar to estimates of disability in the population as a whole
- Employment: Over 50% were in part or full time employment with most of the remaining number shown as unemployed or looking after family/home.

Overall, the data does not show a significantly higher incidence of domestic abuse among groups with a protected characteristic. The exception to this is gender, where the available data shows that women are the victims in the majority of reported cases.

Recorded incidents of domestic abuse by area

Thames Valley Police data shows:

- Bracknell Forest has a relatively higher number of recorded incidents of domestic abuse (per 1,000 population), compared to the Wokingham and West Berkshire areas. (19.5 per 1,000 people in Bracknell Forest, 12.4 in Wokingham and 16.6 in West Berkshire)
- Bracknell Forest experienced an increase in recorded incidents of 4.8% between 2019/20 and 2020/21. This contrasts with Wokingham and West Berkshire, where recorded incidents fell by 8% and 3.9% respectively.
- The incidence of DA cases is highest in the central north and central south areas and is lower in areas such as Ascot to the north and Sandhurst to the south. There is some correlation of domestic abuse cases with areas with a higher level of deprivation.

Types of safe accommodation available in the local area

The only safe accommodation available in the local area is refuge accommodation and this comprises 11 beds in 2 shared refuges provided by BWA. The level of provision is relatively high and close to the benchmark number of refuge places of one per 10,000 of the population, as advised by Women's Aid nationally (equivalent to 12 places in Bracknell Forest).

There are no other forms of dedicated 'safe accommodation', including dispersed or specialist safe or move-on accommodation in the area.

There is not currently a dedicated sanctuary scheme, although there are plans to provide one.

The most common form of accommodation provided to victims of domestic abuse (from both the local area and outside of the area) is temporary accommodation, sourced by the Housing Service.

Types of support available in the local area

An assessment has been made of the range of locally available domestic abuse support services. This is summarised below.

Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA)	One to one support and CHOICES group work programme (see below). IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy) service for high-risk victims and outreach service (1.5 posts plus 1 additional post funded for 12 months as part of the LA's covid response) and helpline.
BRAVE (Building Resilience And Valuing Emotion)	Therapeutic support for victims of domestic abuse with additional emotional or psychological difficulties and complex needs. One to one sessions followed by a 12 week group-based programme. Funded until March 2022
Family Safeguarding Model (Children's Social Care - BFC)	2 Victim case workers for adult victims with children involved with Children's Social Care. One adolescent worker to work with adolescents who have witnessed domestic abuse in the family or who are displaying abusive behaviour in their own relationships and/or towards family members.
Choices (BWA)	6 week group programme for any woman affected by domestic abuse, regardless of their circumstances or risk level, provided as part of BWA's outreach service and delivered by BWA domestic abuse workers
Domestic Abuse Recovering Together (DART) (Early Help - BFC)	10 week group work programme for mothers and children who have lived with domestic abuse, with a focus on children's experiences, and promoting communication and support within the family.
FLAG DV (Free Legal Advice Group for Domestic Violence)	Free legal advice for people affected by domestic abuse, across Thames Valley. 30 minute free appointment. Self-referral or through an agency.
Freedom (Early Help - BFC)	10 week educational programme for those needing support and awareness around domestic abuse. Run by Family Hubs primarily for women with children
Kaleidoscopic UK	Survivor led support for victims of domestic abuse - providing a support network, 'Liberation from Abuse' programme (6 weeks), 'Fun with Mum', education, training and prevention programmes across Thames Valley.
ManKind Initiative	Confidential national helpline for male victims of domestic abuse across the UK as well as their friends, family, neighbours, work colleagues and

	employers. 9 week online Pattern Changing courses for male survivors due to commence Thames Valley wide.
SAFE! Project	One to one support across Thames Valley for children and young people affected by crime including witnessing domestic abuse.
Support U	Support for LGBT+ people, including those who have suffered domestic abuse. Based in Reading and operates across Thames Valley.
Victims First	Support for all victims and witnesses of crime across Thames Valley to help them recover from the impact of crime including domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, violence and exploitation. Victims First Specialist Service provides support for people who have specialist and complex needs.

In addition, there are a number of universal access services available which are not specific to domestic abuse that help people with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, dementia etc etc.

In reviewing the provision of local support services, an assessment has been made of the availability of specialist support for particular cohorts - men, honour and faith-based violence, victims with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), older people, people with a disability, LGBT+, those with mental health and substance misuse issues. The key points to emerge are:

- Female victims – there are a wide range of local support services and programmes for women.
- Male victims – there are national helplines but no specific local support services.
- Children – there are a number of local support services including through Children’s Social Care, Early Help, and the SAFE! Project.
- People from faith and non-white British ethnic groups – no specific local services were identified.
- LGBT+ - Support U is a LGBT focused organisation based in Reading that can provide support to victims. Support U have recently joined the Domestic Abuse Forum.
- People with disabilities – The Ark Trust provides support for people with learning disabilities and dementia. The Ark Trust has recently joined the Domestic Abuse Forum.
- People with mental health issues – some support provision locally, e.g. BRAVE provision but limited for people with more complex or multiple support needs.

Referrals to safe accommodation

Demand for refuge accommodation is high and is increasing. There were 18 successful referrals to the BWA refuge spaces in 2020/21. All of these came from out of the area. The largest numbers were from Reading (7) and Wokingham (3).

There were 64 unsuccessful referrals. This does not necessarily reflect demand from women fleeing DA who wish to live in Bracknell specifically but could also be a reflection on the shortage of refuge places across local authority areas more widely in the region/wider area.

BWA report that the most common reasons for unsuccessful referrals were:

- No space in BWA refuge/no suitable room size
- Complex mental health needs - unable to offer space

- Complex substance misuse needs - unable to offer space
- Complex disability needs - unable to offer space
- Not safe in area - unable to offer space
- No recourse to public funds - unable to offer space

Referrals to temporary accommodation

There were 127 homelessness applications assessed by Bracknell Forest's housing service where domestic abuse was recorded in 2020/21.

32 of these were placed in some form of temporary accommodation. Of these, 10 had no children, 17 had one or two children and 5 had three or more children. 26 were female and 6 were male. Placements were generally in temporary accommodation managed by the Council or Private Sector Leased (PSL) accommodation.

A further 95 cases were not accommodated. The most common reasons were:

- Contact lost/withdrew application
- Secured own accommodation
- Helped to or chose to remain in existing accommodation
- No duty owed

A review of the council's homelessness case files found that:

- Victims were frequently offered refuge accommodation elsewhere, but often declined this, preferring to make their own local arrangements
- About one third of homelessness cases relating to domestic abuse were people from outside of the local area
- There is no suitable safe accommodation locally for male victims and transgender victims
- There is no immediate access emergency accommodation locally for DA victims with specific or complex needs that cannot easily or quickly be met.
- Opportunities for victims to remain at home could be increased through the provision of a Sanctuary Scheme
- Victims remain in temporary accommodation for over a year due to a lack of longer-term housing options
- The Council does not use B&B/shared provision for any families, including victims of domestic abuse.

Gaps in safe accommodation provision

It is widely acknowledged that shared refuge accommodation cannot meet everyone's needs. This is especially so for victims with protected characteristics or more complex needs.

Existing safe accommodation in the local area may be unsuitable for:

- Male victims
- Transgender victims

- People with some forms of disability
- People from some ethnic groups and those with no recourse to public funds
- Larger households and those with older male children
- People with more complex or multiple support needs
- Those in need of safe accommodation and who wish to remain in the local area but will not be accepted by a refuge (as doing so might compromise the safety of others/reveal the location of the refuge).

Other groups that are less likely to use refuge accommodation include older people, those in employment or who own a home, for whom the higher rents of refuge accommodation present a challenge, and those who would prefer to remain in their own home, with appropriate safety measures.

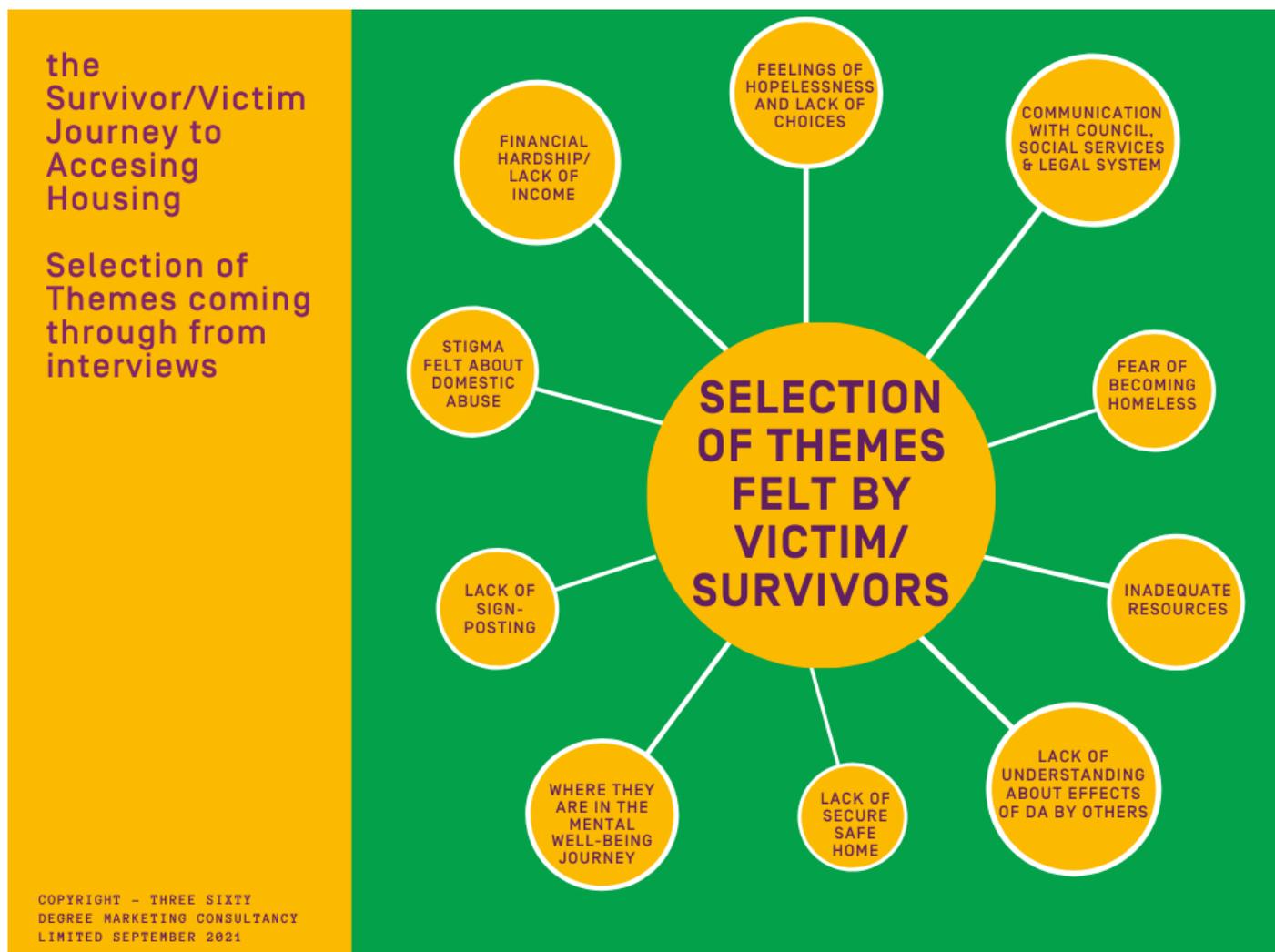
The voices and experience of victims

The council commissioned Three Sixty Degree Marketing Consultancy Limited to undertake qualitative research to supplement the needs assessment, and to convey the voice of the survivor. This took place through a combination of interviews held with domestic abuse survivors, as well as interviews with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and front-line council staff.

A total of 9 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.

The interviews focussed on understanding the victim's experiences of domestic abuse, the different services they tried to access, and with what success, and exploring the outcomes that they achieved and how these matched their expectations.

The case studies, along with the interviews with voluntary and statutory organisations, provided important insights into the themes that recurred during interviews with victims. These are captured in the chart below.



Victims from particular cohorts with protected characteristics conveyed the unique and specific challenges they faced.

- Male victims felt they were not believed or understood and that there were no locally accessible support services.
- Some victims with visual impairment, physical difficulties, and learning difficulties do not feel comfortable using digital technology
- LGBT+ victims face unique forms of manipulation from abusers relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity, such as the threat of being 'outed' to family
- Victims from some faith groups and ethnic groups can face additional challenges in identifying and seeking help for domestic abuse due to cultural reasons, language barriers, isolation and immigration status

Victims also talked about their experience of approaching the council and other organisations for help and support. Above all, they wanted to feel safe and understood, able to quickly access information, services and accommodation, as well as on-going support.

Some of their key messages are summarised below.

What victims want and need

To feel safe and to have fast, effective, action

Victims need the council to find and secure safe accommodation as quickly as possible, usually local and furnished, with help to address an inability to pay a first months rental or deposit or lack of references, and a dedicated point of contact to support them.

A single point of contact

Victims need to feel that approaching the council is as safe as approaching the police or a refuge, for help and support in finding a safe home and to have a single point of contact who can 'hand-hold' them through the process and signpost appropriately; victims shouldn't have to tell their story again and again

Acknowledgement and building trust

All victims want to *feel heard and acknowledged*, especially if they do not 'fit' the perceived type, e.g. male victims, LGBT+ victims, elderly victims, those with learning difficulties or physical disabilities or mental health issues.

Front-line staff to be trained in domestic abuse

Victims approaching the council or other organisations would like staff to be aware of and understand all of the different forms of domestic abuse, as well as domestic violence.

Suitable/appropriate accommodation

When considering placing in accommodation, need to consider location, cost of private rent and bills, or cost of refuge, furnishings, safety features and risks of remaining in the home. Victims would like more options to stay locally, including furnished accommodation.

A holistic approach to support

Victims want a 'holistic approach' to support that considers a wide variety of needs, including an early offer of counselling/therapy, specialist support tailored to specific groups, financial help if no furniture, clothes, money, and more access to programmes – Choices, BRAVE, DART

Better signposting

Victims want improved online information that covers all cohort types and effective signposting to local VCS organisations, commissioned services and inhouse services.

Stakeholder engagement

As part of developing the needs assessment and strategy, multiple methods of engagement were employed to seek the views of partner organisations, front-line staff, and voluntary sector providers, including:

- Presentations to and discussions with members of the Domestic Abuse Executive Group and Domestic Abuse Forum
- One to one meetings with housing staff and a local registered provider
- Structured interviews undertaken with voluntary sector organisations.

Many of the themes that emerged from this engagement mirrored the views and comments of domestic abuse victims. Some of the most common themes and recommendations are set out below.

Stakeholder engagement: themes and recommendations

- Provide a Domestic Abuse Specialist within the housing service to be the point of contact for DA Victims presenting to the council
- Improved signposting and more inclusive messaging
- Better collaboration and joined up working between voluntary organisations and council services to ensure council staff are aware of and champion local support services
- Training in trauma informed approaches and a clear focus on the victim's journey, understanding that mental well-being is critical
- More local safe accommodation options for male victims
- A quicker, more responsive, process for victims seeking help
- More welcoming, furnished and secure accommodation, ability to provide emergency short-term financial assistance
- More collaboration with and incentives for private sector landlords to offer suitable accommodation
- More options for victims that cannot access refuges, such as larger households, or want to stay more local
- Provision for immediate access emergency accommodation for DA victims, especially those with specific or complex needs

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of local data and assessment of needs and current provision, interviews with domestic abuse victims and engagement with partners and service providers, the most important findings are highlighted below.

1. Refuge accommodation provided by BWA for women and children is the only form of Safe Accommodation for victims of DA in the local area. This is used predominantly for victims of domestic abuse from outside of the borough.
2. The Women's Aid benchmark of one refuge place per 10,000 people, translates into 12 places in Bracknell Forest, which suggests the current provision of refuge places in the local area is sufficient.
3. Current refuge accommodation provided by BWA is not generally accessible for some groups. As a result, there are gaps in safe accommodation provision for:
 - men
 - transgender victims
 - victims with certain disabilities
 - victims with complex needs (mental health, substance misuse)
 - No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)
 - larger families
 - victims with older sons
4. There is no specialist supported housing for people with protected characteristics e.g. ethnic minorities or for victims with complex needs. There is also no move-on provision, sanctuary provision or dispersed accommodation. The relatively low numbers of people from these cohorts presents challenges in considering how specialist accommodation and support can be provided for particular groups such as male or transgender victims within the local area.

5. Victims are commonly placed in temporary accommodation by the housing service or assisted to access refuges outside of the area. Due to a lack of options in the local area, particularly short-term furnished accommodations, victims often make their own arrangements, with friends or other family members. Many victims would prefer to stay in the local area where they have their own support networks if there were more safe accommodation options.
6. Groups with protected characteristics, including LGBT+, men, people with disabilities, are able to access help through national helplines but would prefer more local services that can signpost people to local support and accommodation options.
7. There is no dedicated short-term, emergency/respite, furnished accommodation for victims which could help enable better support and accommodation plans to be put in place and allow victims to consider their options. There is a gap in this type of accommodation provided elsewhere outside of the local area too.
8. There are a wide range of statutory and voluntary support services available, but victims in temporary accommodation may not be linked into these. There is support for a role for a dedicated domestic abuse support lead within the housing service to ensure that all victims receive a rounded offer of support tailored to their needs and also scope for better joint working with the voluntary sector.
9. There may be opportunities for the Housing Service to work more closely and collaboratively with Private Rented Sector (PRS) landlords to develop a pool of accommodation where landlords may be willing to offer longer-term security of tenure, furnished accommodation, and flexibility about advance rents and deposits – as a variant on the existing landlord incentive scheme.
10. The voices and experience of survivors and victims should inform the future development of support services and packages for people in safe accommodation and should form an ongoing part of developing and delivering the strategy.
11. More emphasis should be given to moving perpetrators out of accommodation shared with the victim, so that they can remain living there, with appropriate support and safety measures in place.
12. How and where to go for support is a big issue for survivors, especially in the early stages. More work is needed to make people aware of what support services there are available, not just online, but through other media and training of staff in key front-facing roles.
13. The provision of self-contained dispersed accommodation suitable for people with a range of characteristics and support needs should be explored, which would provide suitable and supported accommodation for men, transgender victims, single victims with care and support needs and other complex needs, larger families.
14. More people could be helped to remain in their home through a sanctuary scheme with multiple referral routes
15. Further work should take place with other boroughs to consider reciprocal arrangements and the potential for joint services where there may be better economies of scale.

4. Safe accommodation priorities

The needs assessment that has been undertaken, including the engagement with victims and partner organisations, has highlighted where there are issues and gaps in provision. The remaining part of this strategy sets out our initial proposals and recommendations to ensure that victims of domestic abuse have access to appropriate support in safe accommodation.

The recommendations include some specific actions that can be taken to address gaps in provision, including the need for new services which will form part of the funding and commissioning plan. In other areas, it is recognised that further work is needed, in conjunction with partners, victims and other boroughs, to explore how specialist services for victims from particular cohorts and those with complex needs can best be provided.

Priority 1. Raise awareness and provide information on available services and support options

It is evident that some victims are not getting the support that they need at an early stage to help them leave abusive situations and to cope with the trauma of doing so. There are many barriers and challenges faced by victims – financial, emotional, practical, safety. On top of this some victims experience additional issues relating to their gender or sexuality, language, disability, ethnicity, or culture. Getting the right support at the right time is crucial.

Recommendations

- 1.1 Review the online information on the council's website to ensure it is fully inclusive of all groups and promotes available services.
- 1.2 Work with the Domestic Abuse Executive Group to consider awareness campaigns around domestic abuse and its different nuances for different groups, and non-digital information about what the council and local voluntary and community organisations offer in the way of support.
- 1.3 In collaboration with the Domestic Abuse Forum, ensure that council staff are aware of and champion local support services to ensure victims receive early support and advice.
- 1.4 Ensure council staff and other organisations receive Trauma Informed Training to understand how domestic abuse impacts on different groups and on mental well-being.
- 1.5 Develop a short, one-page document to enable council staff and other organisations to easily identify relevant support services for victims.
- 1.6 Explore the development of a single point of contact within the Housing Service to ensure effective signposting and contact with other agencies.

Priority 2. Improve access and pathways to appropriate safe accommodation options

A lack of safe accommodation options can mean that victims stay in or return to an abusive situation or lack the ability to move on and recover. The ability to access safe, secure, stable, and suitable accommodation is critical to the mental well-being of victims as they

attempt to rebuild their lives. In some cases, victims want to remain in their own homes, but they need support and safety measures to make this a safe option.

Recommendations

- 2.1 Continue to support existing refuge provision in the area and review options to increase access for some groups.
- 2.2 Establish a Sanctuary Scheme to provide safety measures for victims living in their own home which includes dedicated domestic abuse support.
- 2.3 Explore options for providing short-term emergency furnished accommodation with intensive assessment and support.
- 2.4 Develop options for providing dispersed accommodation of various sizes (for single people and families with children) that can meet the needs of a range of groups, including male, female, and transgender victims by working with partners, registered providers (RPs), and voluntary providers.
- 2.5 Explore the scope for more formal reciprocal arrangements with other boroughs regarding the use of refuge, dispersed and short-stay accommodation.
- 2.6 Work with landlords to increase access options for domestic abuse victims in the private rented sector including supporting them to offer short-stay accommodation and enabling victims to remain in accommodation by providing safety measures.
- 2.7 Work with the police and landlords to explore measures in the Domestic Abuse Act to remove perpetrators from the home, where appropriate, to enable victims to remain in their properties, with support.

Priority 3. Ensure effective, multi-agency working and specialist support to meet a wide variety of needs

There is no dedicated, ongoing support for victims placed in temporary accommodation which can ensure that this fulfils the role of safe accommodation. A specialist domestic abuse worker within the housing service could ensure a better understanding of the needs of individual victims, including people with protected characteristics, and enable the delivery of the type of accommodation and support that is needed. It is also important for the council to actively engage with local voluntary sector organisations as partners to ensure that victims and their children have access to locally provided specialist advice and tailored support that they need.

Recommendations

- 3.1 Build engagement and partnership across all service providers, e.g. through the Domestic Abuse Forum, to improve collaboration and information sharing.
- 3.2 Establish a dedicated domestic abuse support role within the housing service to provide housing-related support, assess and co-ordinate support for victims in safe accommodation, and to champion and develop provision in the local area.
- 3.3 Ensure that all victims in temporary accommodation receive dedicated domestic abuse support and are linked to more specialist services such as financial or legal support, counselling and mental health services, support for children.
- 3.4 Review the need for and provision of financial assistance to meet emergency costs

- 3.5 Ensure relevant service providers and council staff receive 'specialist training/advice' regarding the needs and issues of particular cohorts.
- 3.6 Work with neighbouring local authorities to consider options to jointly commission support services for particular groups with protected characteristics.
- 3.7 Develop proposals to meet the need for specialist support for men, honour and faith-based abuse/violence, NRPF, older people, people with a disability, LGBT+, mental health and substance misuse.

Priority 4. Continue to develop our understanding of needs through improved data collection and ensuring survivors have an effective voice

The process of developing this strategy has contributed to an improved understanding of domestic abuse, through the collection and analysis of data from various sources and the insights from victims and front-line professionals. In order to ensure continuous development and improvement in the delivery of services to victims of domestic abuse, we must build on and continue this learning. We must look at how we can collaborate and innovate, working with our partners, and through the Domestic Abuse Forum. Most importantly, we should continue to engage victims in shaping our services and assessing our performance.

Recommendations

- 4.1 Ensure ongoing regular review of the delivery plan alongside monitoring of case numbers and trends at the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.
- 4.2 Improve analysis of housing cases to provide a better understanding of support needs, accommodation preferences, and referrals into and out of the borough.
- 4.3 Continue to engage victims as part of the review of the strategy and the design and commissioning of services.
- 4.4 Improve understanding of the needs of people from groups with protected characteristics through direct engagement, data analysis and research.
- 4.5 Review and expand membership of the Domestic Abuse Forum to include groups that are not currently members who may identify and/or support victims of domestic abuse and their children.

5. Delivering the strategy

Funding proposals

The government has allocated £203,767 to Bracknell Forest Council to fund support for victims and survivors who are living in safe accommodation in 2021/22. The government has promised further funding for 2022/23 and 2023/24 but no firm commitment has been made at this stage. Despite this, the government’s expectation is that support services will be funded for the three years of the strategy.

The regulations state that this funding can only be used for accommodation-focused support services, as outlined in the strategy. This can include:

- funding the costs of running and supporting people in safe accommodation such as refuge;
- meeting the costs of ensuring people are safe and supported in their own homes, via sanctuary schemes (but not the cost of safety equipment);
- assessing and co-ordinating the provision of support for people in safe accommodation to ensure victims receive dedicated, specialist domestic abuse support, which can include housing advice, counselling, advocacy and therapeutic support;
- providing specialist support for people with protected characteristics or complex needs.

The funding proposals set out below are intended to deliver the actions recommended under each of the four priority areas. They aim to address the need for more safe accommodation, to ensure that victims’ support needs are fully assessed, to improve the knowledge and information about the range of support available, and to ensure specialist forms of support are provided, where needed. These proposals have been discussed with the Domestic Abuse Executive Group and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), formerly MHCLG.

Proposal	Role/purpose	What recommendations will this deliver?
Establish a new Domestic Abuse Housing Officer post to develop and co-ordinate support services for victims in safe accommodation	To provide a new domestic abuse housing and support role within the housing service to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provide a single point of contact with other agencies and council services - ensure the support needs of DA victims are assessed and assist in accessing relevant support for them - build close working relationships with DA providers to ensure a range of support needs can be met - provide housing-related support to identify housing solutions and access to safe accommodation and move-on housing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the development of a single point of contact within the Housing Service to ensure effective signposting and contact with other agencies • Ensure that council staff are aware of and champion local support services to ensure victims receive early support and advice. • Work with landlords to increase access options for domestic abuse victims in the private rented sector. • Build engagement and partnership across all service providers to improve collaboration and information sharing.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - manage the Sanctuary scheme, co-ordinate referrals and ensure support - act as DA champion within the Housing Service to deliver training, raise awareness of and provide information on support providers, and improve data collection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a dedicated domestic abuse support worker within the housing service to provide housing-related support, to assess and co-ordinate support for victims in safe accommodation, and to champion and develop provision in the local area. • Ensure that all victims in temporary accommodation receive dedicated domestic abuse support and are linked to more specialist services such as financial or legal support, counselling and mental health services, and support for children. • Improve analysis of housing cases to provide a better understanding of support needs, accommodation preferences, and referrals into and out of the borough.
Provide support for refuge accommodation	To ensure continued funding for the provision of support to 11 refuge places in Bracknell Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support existing refuge provision in the area and review options to increase access for some groups.
Commission a specialist outreach service to provide dedicated domestic abuse support for victims in accommodation	To provide a specialist, dedicated, domestic abuse outreach service to support victims placed in self-contained safe accommodation. Support will also be extended to those in Sanctuary Scheme safe accommodation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop options for dispersed accommodation of various sizes (for single people and families with children) that can meet the needs of a range of groups, including male, female and transgender victims by working with partners, registered provider's (RPs), and voluntary providers. • Ensure that all victims in temporary accommodation receive dedicated domestic abuse support and are linked to more specialist services such as financial or legal support, counselling and mental health services, support for children.
Set up and operate a new Sanctuary Scheme	To set up and run a new Sanctuary Scheme which will ensure that victims who would prefer to remain in their existing home receive adequate advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Sanctuary Scheme to provide homes with safety measures for victims living in their own home which includes

	and assistance. The funding will cover the personal safety advice and support provided as part of the scheme. The costs of safety equipment will be separately funded as this is not eligible for DLUHC funding.	dedicated domestic abuse support
Commission ongoing engagement with survivors and victims to evaluate and inform service delivery	To commission further engagement with survivors and victims, focused on reviewing services, assessing the impact of new provision, understanding the needs of victims from particular cohorts, and informing future service delivery and priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to engage victims as part of the review of the strategy and the design and commissioning of services. • Improve understanding of the needs of people from groups with protected characteristics through direct engagement, data analysis and research
Establish a furnished accommodation support service	To enable furnished accommodation to be provided when required either through setting up a furniture store, working with a local voluntary provider or equipping some units of TA which furniture/white goods that can be used when needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore options for providing short-term emergency furnished accommodation with intensive assessment and support. • Consider more formal reciprocal arrangements with other boroughs regarding the use of refuge, dispersed and short-stay accommodation. • Work with landlords to increase access options for domestic abuse victims in the private rented sector including supporting them to offer short-stay accommodation and enabling victims to remain in accommodation by providing safety measures.
Commission specialist support services to meet gaps in provision for victims in safe accommodation.	To provide grant funding to enable the provision of specialist support services where there are currently gaps, including through wider joint commissioning arrangements with other boroughs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with neighbouring local authorities to consider options to jointly commission support services for particular groups with protected characteristics. • Develop proposals to meet the need for specialist support for men, honour and faith-based abuse/violence, NRPF, older people, people with a disability, LGBT+, mental health and substance misuse.
Establish a part-time DA	To provide part-time (15 hours pw) business support to strengthen the role of the DA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure ongoing regular review of the delivery plan and monitoring and review of case

administration role.	Executive Group, including administrative support, data collection, communications and co-ordination of tasks.	numbers and trends at the Domestic Abuse Executive Group <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Domestic Abuse Executive Group to consider awareness campaigns around domestic abuse and its different nuances for different groups, and non-digital information about what the council and local voluntary and community organisations offer in the way of support
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How Bracknell Forest Council and the Domestic Abuse Executive Group will monitor progress in the delivery of the strategy

In order to ensure that we deliver against this strategy we will:

- Develop a delivery plan, working with partners and the Domestic Abuse Executive Group and update this as needed over the next 3 years.
- Agree a process for how the Domestic Abuse Executive Group will support Bracknell Forest Council to report back to DLUHC on progress in delivering the safe accommodation duty, in line with statutory guidance and the standardised reporting form.
- Ensure that the Domestic Abuse Executive Group reports annually to the Community Safety Partnership to update it on progress.
- Build on positive partnership work: ensure we can listen to and consult with stakeholders from agencies outside the local authority.
- Continue to regularly engage with people who have lived experience of domestic abuse to find out more about how they experience services and listen to their advice on what can be improved.
- Ensure that there is a good understanding of the strategy and our commitments amongst the staff who work in housing needs and welfare support within the local authority, and with our partners, so the ambitions and relevant actions needed to achieve change are embedded in daily work within services.