

HOUSING AND ANTI-POVERTY SCRUTINY PANEL	DATE 06/09/2021
TITLE Update on Housing Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors	ITEM NO 6
CHIEF OFFICER Director for Housing & Safer Communities	CABINET MEMBER Cabinet Member for Housing

1. **Decision required**

This report makes the following recommendations to the decision-maker:

- 1.1 To note the update provided by this report in respect to the Royal Borough of Greenwich's (RBG) provision of Housing Support to Survivors of Domestic Abuse

2. **Links to the Royal Greenwich high level objectives**

- 2.1 This report relates to the Council's agreed high level objectives as follows:

- A Healthier Greenwich
- A Safer Greenwich

3. **Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 3.1 This report has been produced to update the Housing and Anti-Poverty Scrutiny Panel on RBG's current and future offer of Housing Support to Domestic Abuse survivors within the borough.

- 3.2 The report will provide information regarding the numbers of Domestic Abuse cases recorded within the borough, and how various teams within Housing Services are responding to the current need for support for survivors. It will also highlight recent changes to legislation which will impact on the way Housing services are delivered, as well as recent

initiatives which have been introduced or are currently being progressed to deliver a more effective and integrated offer of support.

3.3 The Panel are asked to note the contents of the report in support of their scrutiny of Housing and Anti-Poverty within RBG.

3.4 The report will refer to Domestic Abuse as “DA” throughout.

4. **Introduction and Background**

4.1 In 2017/18, Royal Borough of Greenwich (RBG) was ranked 3rd highest for domestic offences in London, therefore it was vital that we targeted the prevailing issues and provided adequate support to survivors. National research on Homelessness at the time had shown that 40% of all homeless women stated Domestic Abuse was a contributing factor to becoming homeless. However, when the council carried out its own DA Needs Assessment in 2018, and examined the data at a local level for people presenting at the council, there was a significant disparity between our recorded numbers, and those recorded on a national level.

4.2 This disparity indicated that people did not feel confident in reporting DA, or that DA was not being identified or recognised, at this first point of contact. Based on this estimated data, we can assume that many survivors had not received the service that they really needed, risks were not being properly considered, specialist support may not have been offered and appropriate housing options explored such as refuge and temporary accommodation placements.

4.3 In response, the council set out to improve the response to survivors of Domestic Abuse who present at the front office for housing support, as well as ensuring that they are recognised and provided support at the time that they need it, including those with complex needs, who may require input from specialist services.

4.4 In 2019, the government tabled the initial draft of the Domestic Abuse Bill in Parliament, and local authorities became aware that there would be significant changes to the way housing services would be delivered to DA survivors. This pending change made it imperative for us to ensure that we were fully prepared to provide relevant services to survivors of DA and were fully compliant with the new legislation.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 came into effect on 29th April 2021 and brought with it a significant change in the way that DA applicants if homeless are now automatically deemed to be in priority need, without the requirement for the vulnerability test. This will lead to an increase demand for resources such as temporary accommodation, and additional support services.

- 4.5 Survivors can access housing support via our Housing Inclusion (Homelessness) Service either in person at The Woolwich Centre, or by telephone or email. An out-of-hours emergency service is also available 24/7, for residents who require urgent assistance outside of normal office hours.

Council tenants can approach their Tenancy Officer for support, and a referral can then be passed through to our Temporary Accommodation Team if it is not safe for them to remain in their current property.

Referrals for Housing support can also be made by external agencies, such as Police, Ambulance Service, Hospitals, GPs, Support Groups, Schools and Early Years provisions, DWP, Foodbanks, Community & Faith Groups, and Advocacy Agencies.

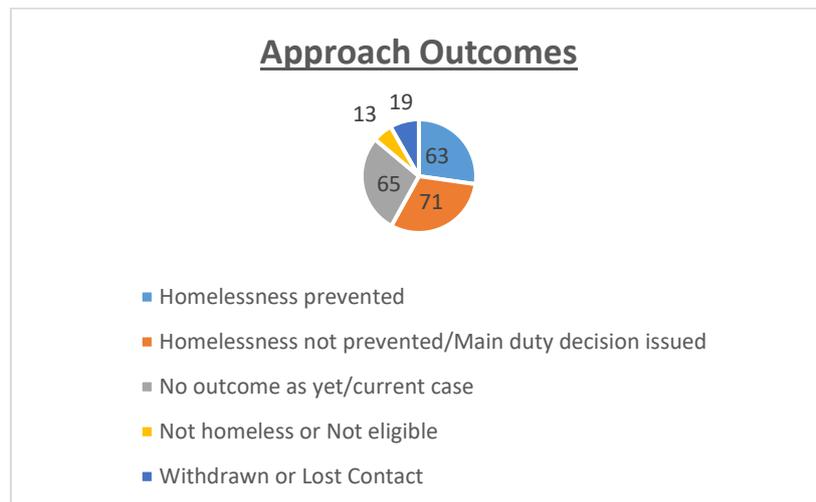
5. Recent Data

- 5.1 The table below shows the number of approaches for assistance via our Housing Inclusion (Homelessness) Service, for the year 2020/21, and for Quarter 1 of 2021/22.

Domestic Abuse Approaches 2020-21 and 2021-22					
Count of HAD Ref	Gender of Main Applicant				
Years	Approach Date	F	M	Grand Total	
2020	Apr	5	1	6	
	May	10	2	12	
	Jun	19	4	23	
	Jul	6	1	7	
	Aug	16	4	20	
	Sep	14	1	15	
	Oct	9		9	
	Nov	14	2	16	
	Dec	11	1	12	
	2020 Total		104	16	120
	2021	Jan	17	2	19
		Feb	16		16
Mar		11	2	13	
Apr		15	3	18	
May		13	1	14	
Jun		16	3	19	
Jul		11	1	12	
2021 Total		99	12	111	
Grand Total		203	28	231	

5 .2 The figures above show a 25% increase in approaches where DA is cited as a primary or secondary reason for homelessness, during the first quarter of this current year, when compared to the first quarter of the previous year. This shows that the demand on services is steadily increasing, and may continue to rise, now the Act has been passed, as DA survivors may feel more reassured that they will be supported with a priority status when approaching the local authority for assistance with housing. It may also be interpreted that improvements have been made in the way that survivors are assessed, and supported, and as a result, they are able to disclose the DA at a much earlier stage than was previously seen.

5 .3 The chart below shows the outcomes for all DA approaches between April 2020 and August 2021



5 .4 A positive homelessness prevention is achieved where a survivor has been supported to move into alternative, suitable and settled accommodation, within 56 days of their initial approach for assistance, and directly from their existing accommodation. This period of time is referred to as the Prevention duty stage. During this period the survivor will be placed onto the Council’s housing register under the Reasonable Preference policy, and will be able to bid for social housing properties with both a priority and a general banding. They will also be advised on searching for properties in the Private Rented Sector, and how the Council’s HACTRAC scheme may be able to assist with funding to secure accommodation through this route.

If they are unable to remain in their usual accommodation, and need to be placed into temporary accommodation, or a refuge placement, they will be placed into the Relief Duty stage, and if suitable, settled accommodation can be secured for them within 56 days of this period commencing, then this will also count as a positive prevention of homelessness.

Where it has not been possible to secure alternative accommodation in either the Prevention or the Relief stage, and the prescribed period of time has passed, then the Housing Officer will issue a decision on their homelessness. This is referred to as the Main Duty. If they are accepted as homeless, then they will continue to be able to bid on the Choice Based Lettings system, as well as continue to look for Private Rented properties.

- 5.5 Unfortunately it is sometimes the case that a survivor will withdraw their application, and perhaps remain in a relationship, or living with the perpetrator, as we know that it can take several attempts for a survivor to successfully leave their situation. In cases such as this, or where contact with the survivor may have been lost, the Housing Officer will take steps to ensure that any other professionals who may be involved are made aware, make any safeguarding referrals which are necessary, or request a police welfare check, where there is an immediate and urgent concern for a survivor's safety. All these measures are carried out whilst being mindful not to place the survivor in any greater risk of harm.
- 5.6 Within Tenancy services, as at August 2021, there are currently 78 RBG council tenants who have disclosed that they are a survivor of DA, and who are being supported, either to remain in their home (with additional safety measures, and where it is deemed that the risks are adequately managed), or who have been moved into temporary accommodation elsewhere.

6. **The Current Offer**

- 6.1 All staff are supported to build the relevant skills, knowledge and confidence to identify domestic abuse and safeguarding concerns and follow internal and local procedures (i.e. safeguarding training, domestic abuse training). Staff are made aware of the DA policies and procedures,

and these are available to view on the intranet. Managers support staff through supervision sessions, debriefing support, training, self-care strategies and HR policies.

- 6.2 Domestic abuse checklist is used across the organisation when dealing with disclosures, and staff are aware that safeguarding needs to be considered, and relevant referrals made to Children's or Adult's Services where needed.
- 6.3 Staff across the organisation demonstrate an understanding that not all survivors access services equally due to experiencing additional barriers. This is incorporated in training and wider publicity campaigns. Staff understand that an individual may be more comfortable disclosing to someone with similar protected characteristics to themselves and this is accommodated wherever possible.
- 6.4 Staff across the organisation demonstrate a clear understanding of how to ensure safe disclosures, and work to create an enabling environment to encourage such disclosures. They take into consideration factors such as customer literacy, understanding of the English language, and providing interpreters and information in other languages, as required.
- 6.5 Staff are confident to provide advice and support with housing options and interventions specific to domestic abuse. Examples include:
 - Support to locate refuge placements, and financial assistance with travel when required.
 - Offer of Temporary Accommodation and support if the survivor has no alternative, safe accommodation available. Areas of risk, and location of support network will always be considered when sourcing a suitable placement.
 - Sanctuary Scheme – where appropriate and in line with risk assessment. Greenwich Domestic Violence and Abuse Services (GDVA) runs the Sanctuary Scheme, which helps survivors to remain in their own homes by installing additional security. The scheme can change locks, provide window alarms, fireproof letterboxes, and personal alarms etc. Specific security measures are assessed on a case by case basis.
 - Management transfers/reciprocal schemes -for existing council and social housing tenants.
 - Dual housing benefit/discretionary housing benefit – to assist with additional costs due to refuge or temporary accommodation placements.

- Financial assistance with arrears and relocation costs.
 - Advice regarding injunctions, non-molestation orders, and referrals to specialist support agencies, such as HER centre, REFUGE, local VAWG provision etc. (more detail provided below)
- 6 .6 Designated officers from Housing Inclusion as well as Tenancy Services attend regular MARAC meetings (multi-agency risk assessment), to share relevant information, and pick up on households that need housing support.
- 6 .7 RBG currently commissions five refuges within the borough which provide a total of 30 placements for survivors, as well as 26 bed-spaces for children. Included in this figure are 4 placements which are designated for women with complex needs, and which can offer the intensive support needed. The refuges are managed by Housing 4 Women, in partnership with GDVA. Over recent years, to address the rising levels of DA cases being picked up, the council has committed to increased funding in this area, including £540,000 towards refuge placements and floating support. A further £340,000 is allocated for additional support and intervention services, including the HER Centre, GDVA/Housing 4 Women, and the Metropolitan Police DV Intervention Team. Based on combined services, RBG estimates that support is provided to an estimated 900 survivors at an average cost of £980 per woman per year, although they will all have different levels of need, so the individual cost per intervention varies considerably.
- 6 .8 Within Housing Inclusion, there is a designated officer who provides a link between the Refuges and the Housing service, manages the incoming referrals, and provides a single point of contact for Refuge staff to liaise with.
- 6 .9 The RBG Domestic Abuse Strategy is committed to tackling DA by ensuring an enhanced response to survivors of DA who present to the council, wherever they come from and whatever their needs or background. This includes those who present at Greenwich housing from other boroughs or areas of the country; those who come to Greenwich refuges from other boroughs or areas of the country; and those who need to move out of the borough by ensuring they are linked with local support and services.

- 6 .10 Within Housing Inclusion, there are plans to recruit a specific Domestic Abuse Coordinator, as an additional resource, to specialize in such cases, and who can provide a high-quality support service for vulnerable clients, who may have quite complex needs, as well as being a designated point of contact for partner agencies. This will be progressed if funding can be obtained from central government, or if other relevant funding streams become available.
- 6 .9 Housing will ensure that perpetrators of DA are referred to the new Perpetrator Service for rehabilitation where appropriate. RBG Community Safety Team has introduced a Domestic Abuse Perpetrators Group (DAPG) to support MARAC processes and employed 2 perpetrator workers who can be tasked to directly engage and work with perpetrators.

7. **Partnership Working**

- 7 .1 The Safer Greenwich Partnership's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, (VAWG) incorporates DA and aims to encourage survivors of DA to ask for help, and to make sure that they are safeguarded from harm and supported, whatever their situation and wherever they present from.
- 7 .2 The council work closely in partnership with the HER Centre, a local women's charity based in Greenwich, which provides services to women and girls in Greenwich and Lewisham, and aims to engage, enable and empower women to move away from abuse, and to move forward with their lives. An efficient 2-way referral process exists between the HER centre and the Council, which aims to provide a holistic advice and support service to DA survivors seeking assistance.
- 7 .3 As part of our partnership with the HER Centre, an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) has been commissioned to work full-time alongside the Council's Housing Inclusion Service and is able to support and advise staff directly with casework. The IDVA is able to work with all survivors, including those with complex needs, due to; alcohol or drug problems, mental health conditions, or those with no recourse to public funds due to their immigration status. The IDVA is partly co-located within the Housing Service, to provide a seamless, joint working provision for DA Survivors.

- 7.4 Survivors can be referred to the Homefinder Revive Project, with whom we have a joint working partnership, for support to find suitable accommodation. The Revive project focuses on relocating domestic abuse survivors to permanent social housing in a new and safe environment in a different part of the country. The REVIVE project will further enhance the survivor-centric case management services designed to help find homes for survivors of domestic abuse.
- 7.5 In order to support DA survivors, the council also work closely with a range of external agencies including:
- Beresford Project, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust
 - DePaul UK
 - Foodbanks
 - Housing for Women
 - Lewisham & Greenwich NHS Trust
 - London Ambulance Service
 - London Probation CRC and National Probation Service
 - Metropolitan Police
 - Nia project
 - Oxleas Community Health Service
 - Oxleas Mental Health Trust
 - Rape Crisis Centre
 - Registered Social Landlords
 - Solace women's Aid
 - Thames Reach
 - Survivor Support

8. **Key Outcomes**

- 8.1 In March 2021, the borough was awarded the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) Accreditation, in recognition of the high standard of advice and support provided to residents and service users. As part of the preparation for the assessment process, the council's Housing Department reviewed, adjusted and implemented some new methods of working, to ensure that the Council is able to provide a holistic and efficient service, to survivors of DA, via some of our key areas, such as Housing Inclusion and Tenancy Services, and that we sustain effective, appropriate and compassionate responses to DA survivors.

8.2 During the COVID pandemic, the Council was faced with several challenges around service delivery, particularly in the front facing Customer Access Team, and Assessment teams. Housing Services quickly adapted to a new way of mostly remote working, with residents being assessed over the phone, and quickly referred on to the relevant services which they needed. A skeleton staff presence in the Woolwich Centre was also operational throughout the entire lockdown, with Housing Inclusion officers present in the back office to assist with emergency and complex cases. As soon as was practically possible, a counter service was open to the public, for emergency homeless cases, while remote assessments continue as the standard way of working with homeless applicants.

8.3 At the end of the year 2020/21, through a survey given to all clients who had been provided a service from local refuge services, the following data was obtained.

- 85% of the service users said that they had felt an improved confidence in managing their financial affairs.
- 100% of school aged children in refuge services were registered for school.
- 98% of school aged children in refuge services were registered with doctors.
- 89% of the service users said that they had felt satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received.

9. **Main Challenges Ahead**

9.1 Automatic priority need for DA survivors, is likely to increase the demand for Temporary Accommodation, which is an already overstretched resource. There will be an increased challenge to procure suitable properties to be used as Temporary or Emergency Accommodation, as well as additional Private Rented Sector properties, for applicants to move on to, as settled accommodation.

- 9.2 Increased approaches have already been evident in Q1 of this year, prior to the DA Act being introduced, and it is yet unclear what additional impact the Act could have on this figure.
- 9.3 We have started to see some Non-Priority decisions, issued earlier in the year, being overturned at review, in light of the introduction of the DA Act, and these could continue to be overturned, which will impact on the council's performance figures for reviews.

10. Cross-Cutting Issues and Implications

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Legal including Human Rights Act	The purpose of this report is to update the Panel in respect of the Councils provision of housing support to survivors of domestic abuse. As such, there are no legal implications arising directly from the report.	<i>Azuka Onuorah</i> <i>Head of Legal Services</i> <i>23rd August 2021</i>
Finance and other resources	This report has been produced to update the Housing and Anti-Poverty Scrutiny Panel on the Royal Borough of Greenwich's current and future offer of Housing Support to domestic abuse survivors within the borough. The update does not introduce any new financial implications arising directly from the report.	Akosua Boachie Accountancy Business Change Manager 23 rd August 2021.
Equalities	This report reviews and monitors the Royal Borough of Greenwich's (RBG) provision of Housing Support to Survivors of Domestic Abuse. As such, there are no new Equalities	Claire Tugwell – Performance, Policy & Development Manager, Housing

	implications arising directly from the report.	Inclusion Service 23 rd August 2021.
Climate change	This report reviews and monitors the performance of the Housing Inclusion Service in 2020-21. No formal decision will be taken and as such will have a remote or low impact on the Greenwich Carbon Neutral Plan agreed by Cabinet on 18 November 2020.	Claire Tugwell – Performance, Policy & Development Manager, Housing Inclusion Service 23 rd August 2021.

11. **Report Appendices**

None

12. **Background Papers**

None

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