

**DRAFT SUNDERLAND DOMESTIC ABUSE SAFE ACCOMMODATION AND
SUPPORT SERVICES STRATEGY**

Report of Executive Director of Public Health and Integrated Commissioning

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To set the context for the statutory duty on local authorities to assess the need for accommodation-based support for adult and child survivors of domestic abuse and to put in place a strategy to meet the needs identified.
- 1.2 To provide an opportunity to seek views on the appended draft Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy ('the Strategy') and the four priorities in particular.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 This report seeks to inform the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee of a new duty placed on Sunderland City Council to develop, publish and put in place a strategy to provide accommodation-based support to meet the needs of adult and child survivors of domestic abuse, as set out in Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.
- 2.2 Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) have been key priorities for the city for many years. Domestic abuse in Sunderland has historically been led by the Safer Sunderland Partnership. It has also been a priority for other key strategic partnerships in the city including the Health and Wellbeing Board and Safeguarding Boards.

2.3 Domestic abuse in Sunderland

- Residents of Sunderland experience high levels of domestic abuse incidents and crimes compared to other nearby areas, and other areas of the country. During 2020/21, there were a total of 4,841 victims of domestic abuse, representing a rate of 23.7 victims per 1,000 residents. This was the highest rate across the Northumbria Police force area and represented an increase compared to 2019/20.
- Most commonly victims were female and between the ages of 18 and 55. Comparatively high rates of cases were referred to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) due to the level of risks to safety identified.
- In line with nationally observed trends, the period of the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have seen increased demand for support services for survivors,

particularly in the period immediately following the initial wave (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

2.4 Provision of Accommodation-Based Support for Survivors of Domestic Abuse in Sunderland

- Sunderland has a range of safe accommodation-based support available for survivors of domestic abuse. This consists of a blend of 'traditional' refuge, a recovery unit for women with additional needs, dispersed accommodation, support for survivors to remain safely in their own homes and a range of therapeutic interventions. Survivors who access these services are primarily resident in Sunderland.
- Wearside Women in Need (WWIN) is currently the primary provider of safe accommodation and support in Sunderland which is commissioned by the Council.
- Alongside this, there is other provision using dispersed accommodation and behaviour change support for perpetrators of domestic abuse. As such, the range of services in Sunderland are broadly in line with models prevailing in the UK and elsewhere.
- Users of local services recognise them as delivering good quality support and emphasise the need for holistic support, provided in a flexible range of safe environments that are tailored to their individual circumstances.
- In common with similar services in other parts of the country, accommodation-based support services in Sunderland experience significant levels of demand. This has been particularly marked since the initial phases of the ongoing pandemic. As such, there is pressure on capacity across the services offered.

3.0 **The Domestic Abuse Act**

3.1 Introduction

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act') received Royal assent in April 2021. It provides improved protection for the many victims of domestic abuse (DA) as well as strengthened measures to tackle perpetrators. An overview of the 2021 Act is provided in the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021: overarching factsheet](#).

3.2 New Duty on Tier One Local Authorities

Part 4 of the 2021 Act aims to ensure all survivors of domestic abuse have access to the right support within safe accommodation. The 2021 Act places a duty on Sunderland City Council, as a Tier One local authority in England, to appoint a multi-agency Local Partnership Board which it must consult as it carries out specified functions (below, i - v):

- Assess the need for accommodation-based domestic abuse support** for all survivors, and their children, including those who come from outside of their area.

- ii. **Prepare and publish a strategy for the provision of support** to cover the locality having regard to the needs assessment.
- iii. **Give effect to the strategy** by making commissioning / decommissioning decisions to meet the support needs of adult and child survivors.
- iv. **Monitor and evaluate local delivery** of the strategy.
- v. **Report back** annually to **Central Government**.

3.3 Progress to date

- Domestic abuse local partnership board - Cabinet approved the appointment of a Sunderland Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls Executive Board in line with the 2021 Act (section 3.2 above) on 14 September 2021. In accordance with the 2021 Act, the Council has consulted with the Board on the appended draft strategy at the Board's meeting on 24 September 2021.
- Needs assessment for accommodation-based domestic abuse support – this has been developed in-house working with partner organisations including the Northumbria Police force, functions within the Council (Housing, Adult Social Care, Children's Social Care), health and local specialist domestic abuse service providers. A brief desktop review of local and national literature was also undertaken to contextualise the work to support identification of key areas which should inform the Strategy.

As part of the needs assessment, and to inform the strategy, the Council undertook an engagement exercise during July and August 2021 with survivors with lived experience of accessing local safe accommodation and support services. Key messages, based on the feedback from survivors, are summarised in the appended strategy.

The Council also engaged with a range of stakeholders, including staff members from local providers, from statutory and non-statutory agencies including commissioners, and members of the recently appointed Sunderland Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls Executive Board ('the Board') as part of this engagement work to inform the strategy development.

In total, 17 survivors were consulted, 20 staff members from local providers and 32 staff from partner agencies including commissioners. Thematic analysis of all interviews was conducted to identify key messages. The needs assessment and engagement highlight the following areas to address through the strategy:

- a. Evidence that the level of demand for safe accommodation exceeds the bed/units available in Sunderland with a lack of capacity in sustainable forms of accommodation.
- b. Need for evidence-based clinical support for survivors-victims, particularly relating to mental health and substance misuse.

- c. Appropriate and culturally competent services for survivors-victims with protected characteristics, notably black and minoritised women and LGBT+ survivors.
- d. Provision of specialist support able to accommodate survivors with complex needs, otherwise prevented from accessing services because of the complexity of presenting needs.
- e. Learning from pilot projects in London and North Yorkshire, to understand how accommodation pathways for perpetrators could support survivors to engage with specialist support services and contribute to their recovery.

The recommendations from the needs assessment and the engagement inform the Strategy's approach to seek to address the gaps identified and to deliver a more robust offer to support victims-survivors in safe accommodation in Sunderland.

3.4 A draft Domestic Abuse Sunderland Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy- Sunderland City Council has a legal duty to publish its strategy before 5 January 2022 and to publish a draft of the strategy ten weeks prior (by 26 October 2021).

- The draft Strategy has been considered by and received support from:
 - Sunderland's Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls Executive Board on 24 September 2021.
 - Council Cabinet on 12 October 2021.
- The draft Strategy has been shared with the Sunderland's Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Sunderland's Safeguarding Adults Board and the Safer Sunderland Partnership to seek views on the strategic priorities.
- Having engaged with survivors, staff and other stakeholders (section 3.3) on 'what good looks like' in respect of support in safe accommodation, we are now seeking their views on the four strategic priorities to refine and finalise the Strategy.

The final Strategy will be submitted to Cabinet for approval in December 2021, ahead of submission to the DLUHC before 05 January 2022.

3.5 Safe Accommodation Funding

The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (previously the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) issued a section 31 grant to Sunderland City Council which provides additional funding to support the Council to meet its statutory duty to provide support to survivors of domestic abuse and their children residing in safe accommodation. The funding allocation of £666,874 is confirmed for 2020/2021 only by the DLUHC. Future funding allocations would form part of the local government finance settlement and at this stage there is no indication as to the funding levels for 2022/23.

4.0 Sunderland's Draft Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy

4.1 The appended draft Strategy sets out four strategic priorities for 2021 to 2024:

1. Ensure that what we do is underpinned by a robust needs assessment: to improve our knowledge of demand and capacity and to better understand and evidence the levels of unmet need (including needs of male victims-survivors) and the barriers that prevent victims-survivors with diverse and additional needs from accessing support.
2. Deliver quality service interventions which contribute to improving outcomes for survivors and children: to commission outcome-based services to meet needs identified giving priority to support services which address mental health and substance misuse and services which work directly with children.
3. Increase safe accommodation provision: to ensure victims and survivors achieve stable and secure accommodation with a minimum of moves which contributes to their recovery and ability to engage with specialist support services, including how pathways into accommodation for perpetrators could be developed.
4. Strengthen our approach in hearing the voice of survivors, and children and young people, including those with protected characteristics, to ensure their views are heard and influence what we do: to involve survivors-victims in commissioning processes to ensure support services are accessible, equitable and inclusive and outcomes for victims-survivors are understood.

4.2 The draft Strategy also sets out a high-level action plan for the delivery of the priorities, including measures to use to monitor and evaluate success. The financial implications for the provision of support in line with the draft Strategy, and having regard to the need assessment, will be considered at the appropriate time prior to commissioning the relevant activity or service.

4.3 The Strategy does not cover the wider issues and responses to domestic abuse (for example, prevention, holistic response across statutory agencies in the life journey of survivors and their children) as this would be addressed in a violence against women and girls' strategy of which this Strategy would be an integral part contributing to the Council and partners' response to violence against women and girls.

4.4 Health and equality have been considered in the development of the Strategy. In line with public sector equality duties an equality analysis has been completed has been undertaken.

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 That Members of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee provide comment on the strategic priorities of the draft Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy.

6.0 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy

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