

## **RESPONSIVE SERVICES AND CUSTOMER CARE SCRUTINY PANEL**

### **POLICY REVIEW 2012/13: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – Lake House**

Monday 18 February 2013

Attended by: Cllrs Curran, Gibson, Richardson, Tate and Thompson

#### **1. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REFUGE ACCOMMODATION**

- 1.1 There are currently three refuges based across the City, in the Coalfield, Washington and East areas. This supported accommodation provides a safe place of refuge and intensive support for women and children fleeing domestic violence. This accommodation is funded by the Council, through the Housing Related Support Budget, at a cost of £483,620.00.
- 1.2 The Panel visited Lake House, a purpose built centre in the Coalfields area of the city. On the day of the visit the refuge was full to capacity and extra 'non living spaces' had been adapted to enable temporary living spaces for urgent cases. Each 'apartment' had been individually decorated and given its own feel and accommodation was spacious and well designed.
- 1.3 The Panel was informed that an extensive level of work had been undertaken within the community prior to it the building opening to ensure the community was comfortable with the refuge. This was felt to be an important element of improving the awareness and understanding of those residents in the local area and crucial to gaining acceptance. The Panel was pleased to hear the refuge has been widely accepted within the community.(The Refuge was funded using Housing Corporation funding and was developed by Endeavour Housing Association in partnership with WWIN and the Council.)
- 1.4 Unlike other domestic violence refuges, WWIN are routed in the community and have an ethos of maintaining the support and contact with service users when they have moved on to accommodation of their own. The organisation don't 'close cases' and the Panel was struck by just how many families are still in contact with WWIN, often years later.
- 1.5 The Panel was also very impressed with the living spaces at the refuge for women and their children, provision for disabled people, and the relaxed environment and the sense of community within the centre.
- 1.6 The Panel was given the opportunity to speak with staff and residents at the WWIN refuge, it should be noted these were all women and therefore the views of male victims are not reflected.

## **2. ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORT**

- 2.1 The Panel wanted to understand how easy it was for victims of domestic violence to access services. In the main the women it spoke to were unaware of the services in the city and how to access them, and in the majority of cases agencies such as the Police and Children's Services had made the referral or signposted to WWIN.
- 2.2 The discussion highlighted differences in the level of assistance from the Police. In one instance the victim was subject to a Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), and the support provided had been excellent, with good signposting and advice and regular follow up contact. In another, more serious case, the victim had been given no support at all and hadn't known where she could go upon leaving hospital, a frightening experience for her. Her parents had eventually found WWIN and gained help. The Panel believed that the Police had a vital role to play in signposting victims to the appropriate services and that this should be done as a matter of course.
- 2.3 Other women were informed of services by other frontline workers such as social workers and housing officers; none of the women were assisted by healthcare assistants in gaining advice or help to escape a violent partner. Several BME women residing at the refuge explained they were unaware of how to access the most basic of services as this was done by their husbands or other members of the family, making it even more difficult to seek help.
- 2.4 The Panel was very pleased to note that most service users had been living at the refuge within several hours of a referral being made. It felt this was crucial in ensuring safety and beginning the development of a trust based relationship with service users.
- 2.5 Not all service users will go to live in refuges, many do not wish to give up their homes and outreach work is undertaken by WWIN whereby service users are provided with support to deal with the issues they have as a result of domestic violence. Women are invited to participate in group sessions and undertake the Freedom Programme. This programme deals with male violence to women and children. One woman reported that this gave her a *'much wider understanding and perception of domestic violence'*.
- 2.6 WWIN provides support to service users by accompanying them to appointments and the women felt this support was instrumental in them seeking the appropriate healthcare.
- 2.7 WWIN also operates a 24 hour, confidential helpline for victims of domestic violence, which is staffed by volunteers. It highlighted the importance of ensuring calls were handled professionally and sensitively, as the experience the victim has in contacting the helpline

could make the difference between seeking help or continuing in an abusive relationship for many years.

- 2.8 Experiences of the court process had been largely positive. The discussion centred around the Independent Domestic Violence Advocate Service and also support from WWIN, without which many of the women felt they would not have been able to give evidence in court as it gave them the '*courage to go through with it*'.
- 2.9 In higher profile domestic violence cases, several of the women highlighted experiences with the media as being negative and intrusive. The Panel were informed that the media is able to print the names of adult victims in its reports, and that it was difficult to resolve this issue unless the Government changes the legislation which would allow the Crown Prosecution Service to withhold this information.
- 2.10 Finally Children's Services was discussed where cases of domestic violence involved children. It appeared to the Panel that the biggest fear for the women it spoke to was that the child would be removed from them, and in several instances, they were made to feel as though they had committed the crime. This indicated to the Panel that the attitudes and abilities of individual social workers had a huge impact on experiences of being involved with this service.

#### **4. AWARENESS OF AND ATTITUDES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

- 4.1 WWIN reported that the Council has consistently prioritised domestic violence, demonstrated in the fact that there have been no domestic abuse homicides in the city for many years (homicide of a partner or spouse). That being said it has concerns that the significant reductions to the Council's budget will continue to put pressure on progress in regard to domestic violence and may actually cause a step backwards in the journey the city has gone on.
- 4.2 The Panel asked whether or not any preventative work had been undertaken in schools with any of the women present, for example around healthy relationships and learning to recognise the signs of an abusive relationship. None of the women had been taught this and all strongly felt it was a gap, the focus being too much on teenage pregnancy. There was a view that some early work should be as early as primary school. The Panel understood more of this work was now being undertaken in some schools, but this was not a standard part of the curriculum.
- 4.3 The Panel learned that by and large experiences of professionals' attitudes to domestic violence had been good. It was reported attitudes have changed significantly over the years. WWIN felt this was, in part, due to the enormous amount of training that had been carried out within City Hospitals and Northumbria Police over the years. Once again, with reductions to public funding, training may be scaled back

among those frontline services, and as staff leave there is a real risk the organisational 'memory' of dealing with domestic violence will be reduced.

## **5. MOVING ON**

5.1 The refuge offers a safe and supportive environment in which women experiencing similar sorts of issues can talk about their experiences and make friends after often being isolated in previous relationships.

5.2 The refuge staff support women to gain access to education and employment. At the time of the visit the staff reported that:

- 12 were attending various Colleges
- 2 were completing Access Courses to gain entry to university;
- Several of the refuge's BME residents were completing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages); and
- 2 were volunteering in local charity shops.

The Panel believed accessing education and volunteering in this way would raise the self esteem of services users and give them the confidence to move back into the community.

5.3 WWIN also arranges visits to the refuge from the Department of Work and Pensions and Job Linkage, and the women are also involved in art therapy, drama and working on the latest campaigns for domestic violence.

5.4 The Panel was unsurprised to learn that service users can find moving on difficult, one woman said she '*missed the camaraderie*' within the refuge. Many women feel they want to '*give something back*' and return as enthusiastic and motivated volunteers, others return regularly to visit. Another was ready to move from supported accommodation and reported having attended the Council's Supported Accommodation Gateway Service to request a property, which had now been secured.