

Report of the Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Abuse Task and Finish Scrutiny Group

Members: Councillors Bridges-Westcott, Baldwin, Baxendale and Campanale.

December 2018 – April 2019

1. Background:

- 1.1 This review was commissioned by the Housing, Community Safety & Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 29 October 2018.
- 1.2 The purpose of the review was to investigate any issues or barriers for those affected by domestic abuse when attempting to access accommodation to flee abuse, both in the short and long term in Richmond.
- 1.3 Concerns had been raised via a local consultation exercise in November 2017, by a prominent local charity that those affected by domestic abuse were remaining with abusive partners due to a lack of suitable available social housing and that this was a problem that was being experienced nationally.
- 1.4 The Working Group noted that this had been recognised as a national issue by the charity Refuge, who in response to consultation to draft guidance issued by the Government in January 2018 (Improving access to social housing for victims of domestic violence) stated: *‘the current system is not working and the impact of insufficient access to social housing for victims of domestic violence cannot be overstated. Increasing access to and priority for women who experience domestic violence in relation to social housing will mean more women and children can escape their perpetrator and can rebuild their lives and regain their independence more quickly.*
 - 1.4.1 *The shortage of social housing and lack of sufficient priority for victims of domestic violence acts as a huge barrier both to women leaving abusers and to women rebuilding their lives after fleeing abuse. In Refuge’s experience too often women feel like they have no choice but to stay with abusive partners or return to them because of the enormous difficulties in finding safe, stable, affordable housing.*
 - 1.4.2 *Refuge’s specialist frontline workers report a myriad of problems and difficulties when helping and supporting women finding appropriate housing, including social housing. Local connection criteria being inappropriately applied, women being unable to meet the high thresholds for additional priority and housing staff not being aware of legal obligations and current guidance regarding victims of domestic violence are all major challenges.’*

2. What the Working Group Did

- 2.1 The Working Group were keen to consider the experience of those affected by domestic abuse attempting to access accommodation locally in Richmond and what could be done to address any issues and barriers locally.
- 2.2 The Working Group met three times between December 2018 and March 2019. In addition, the Chair and other Members have met separately with local charities, SPEAR and Refuge, who work with homeless people and/or those affected by domestic abuse.
- 2.3 The Working Group have met with the following bodies or individuals across the four month period of their work, to gather evidence:
 - SPEAR's Chief Executive, staff and service users
 - Refuge senior staff as well as frontline staff
 - Metropolitan Police, Lead officer for Domestic Abuse
 - Council Housing Officers, Assistant Director and managers
 - Community Safety Officers, Officers delivering work around the Violence Against Women and Girls Initiative

3. Findings

- 3.1 The Working Group were advised that:
 - Service users who had experienced domestic abuse, resided on average, in emergency accommodation or a refuge for a period of six months before moving to a longer-term residency. Women on average made several attempts to leave, before they left an abusive partner. The reasons for this were wide ranging and often complex.
 - Some agencies advised that there tended to be barriers when women and families wished to move on from refuge accommodation. This led to families and women staying in refuges longer than they might like to be. It was estimated that almost half of women chose to stay within the borough when they moved away from a refuge.
 - It was noted that single women who were affected by domestic abuse were not always considered to be in 'priority need', (under the terms of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended)), however if there was immediate danger, emergency accommodation could be offered.
 - Refuge were clear that it was key that priority needs were properly recognised by housing officers and it could be challenging if they were not. Including women who were living in refuges, local authorities tended to recognise these women as being homeless but not as a priority need. Housing officers were clear that they carefully met all statutory obligations with regards to assessing priority need.
 - It was noted that a member of Refuge worked from the Twickenham Civic Centre for half a day a week. The Working Group noted that funding for a full-time housing outreach worker would enable many more service users to be supported.

- Local charities expressed that the homelessness online form was a barrier in itself for the homeless, it was a lengthy form and took 30 minutes to complete. Those with English as a second language would struggle with the form. It was however noted by the Working Group that Citizens' Advice Bureau and other agencies could assist with completing forms and that the form needed to be rigorous and comprehensive in order for housing officers to make the necessary assessments for housing need.
- The Working Group noted the IT refresh due to take place in the Housing and Regeneration Directorate which would further streamline processes and make the experience of service users completing the homelessness application form an easier one.
- The Working Group recognised that all agencies were working towards the same goal and that this should drive the relationship between agencies, rather than a 'them and us' approach which sometimes arose.
- The Working Group noted that the recognised definition of Domestic Abuse had widened significantly in recent years and now included psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotion, controlling behaviour and coercive behaviour. It was also noted that the Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill (Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse 2018) proposed by the Government would also recognise 'economic abuse' as constituting domestic abuse.
- It was noted that when supporting those affected by domestic abuse, it was important to recognise that coercive behaviour and other types of abuse other than physical abuse must be considered fully.

3.2 SPEAR outlined their service provision for those affected by domestic abuse for the Working Group:

- SPEAR's primary focus was homelessness and alleviating homelessness.
- Around 50% of SPEAR's female clients had mental health needs and over 35% had experienced domestic violence. SPEAR work with around 35 women a year, mostly rough sleepers. This represented around 20% of the verified rough sleeper cohort in Richmond.
- Homeless women often lose touch with family and children and self-harm. Eating disorders and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder were also prevalent.
- SPEAR previously operated eight units of supported accommodation for homeless women in Richmond, however with time limited funding from the Greater London Authority ceasing, this was reduced to four units in 2018. There was also a five-bed unit in Wandsworth open to both Richmond and Wandsworth residents. The average length of stay was six months. After this, the client would move to independent or supported accommodation. SPEAR support a pathway from temporary accommodation into private sector accommodation. Once clients were

in the private sector there may be support offered to keep them in their tenancy.

- There were around 10 street homeless women waiting for supported housing at the present time. (February 2019) Women who had been street homelessness were not prioritised for social housing per se, but it was reported that Richmond Council had been very supportive in providing a quota for social housing nominations and were open to reviewing the quota on an annual basis based on the previous year's take up. The local authority annually reviewed the cohort for social housing. The quota could go up or down. The trend for rough sleeping was that it was going up each year.
- Local supported accommodation provided by Refuge wasn't always appropriate for some female rough sleepers as their support needs were very high. There were currently no other women's supported housing options in the borough for this group. SPEAR had staff that were qualified in helping women with issues such as mental health and drug addiction. There were some extremely complex cases where women had multiple needs and were highly traumatised. For example, there may be drug use, prostitution issues to raise money for drugs, pimping of them by their partner.
- SPEAR accommodation didn't make provision for children/ other family members.
- SPEAR offered a range of support services and would work to carry out an initial assessment of needs and goals and a safety plan, when a service user came into their service. It was key to build trust, if support was to be effective. SPEAR employed a Skills Development Worker and offered a counselling service. There were very good support networks and strong links between support services locally. Support was often offered over a 2-3-year period given the often complex needs of service users.
- It was noted that some of SPEAR's accommodation wouldn't be fit for some of their service users. Those service users with complex needs would need a staffed location to meet their needs.
- SPEAR played a key role in assisting service users to access accommodation that was suitable for them. It was important that women were not isolated from their existing social and support networks and felt safe and able to cope in the accommodation offered to them.
- It was noted that SPEAR worked in partnership with Refuge and the local authority. SPEAR also worked closely with the Police and the Integrated Offender Management service to ensure that their service users were safeguarded.
- It was clarified to the Working Group that SPEAR didn't need capital funding as most properties were rented from Housing Associations or other landlords. These were on assured tenancies.

- SPEAR suggested there should be year on year funding for homelessness support as there currently wasn't any consistent funding stream.

3.3 Service Users

- 3.3.1 The Working Group was privileged to hear the experience of service users as part of their evidence gathering work.
- 3.3.2 Service users reported that they had been very grateful for SPEAR's support. One of the service users shared her experience with the Working Group and said that she had been sleeping rough for two weeks before approaching SPEAR. After contacting SPEAR, she had only slept rough for a further 2 or 3 days, she felt that she had been well looked after by SPEAR. Having lived on the streets for two weeks, she had developed medical problems and SPEAR were supporting her to seek medical attention. She had lived in a B&B arranged by SPEAR for two weeks before being moved to her current hostel. She was unsure of her future but was keen to take up the support offered by SPEAR to source longer term accommodation

3.4 Metropolitan Police

- The police primarily ensure the safety of a victim in any situation. The needs and risk to the victim would be identified using the DASH risk assessment tool. Police generally take a cautious approach. The suspect would be located. Legal avenues will be pursued including remand. A magistrate court may prevent the suspect from going back to the residence. Often the likelihood of allegations being dropped were high. A victimless prosecution may be pursued, however the risks of doing this would be assessed. If a victimless prosecution was pursued, this may mean that the victim could no longer remain at home. A magistrate may as a condition of any bail agreement impose conditions such as a curfew. A remand application may be sent to a judge.
- Police also attempt to identify those at risk. 'Clare's Law' gives potential victims the right to know and the right to ask.
- It was noted that safeguarding would override GDPR considerations. Sensitive information was only given verbally. Those that receive information would sign a disclaimer to not disclose the information. The information was always given in a controlled environment.
- The police viewed the emergency accommodation availability in the borough to be good and expressed that on some occasions service users had unrealistic expectations.

4 Recommendations

- 4.1 There were a number of points raised across the Working Group's meetings around the need for empathy and sensitivity when dealing with service users who had experienced trauma or domestic abuse. This was critical in ensuring that appropriate accommodation was offered to service users. If accommodation was unsuitable, this could often lead to service users returning to unsafe circumstances or to return to living on the streets.
- 4.2 The Working Group noted that the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) was part of the Governments 'Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy: 2016 to 2020' and were leading on this work. DAHA was the UK benchmark for how housing providers should respond to domestic abuse in the UK. The DAHA website states: *"DAHA accreditation is the first step in delivering a consistent set of standards across housing providers in the UK. By undertaking Accreditation, you are sharing DAHA and the Government's mission to improve the housing sector's response to domestic abuse. DAHA Accreditation will ensure those affected by domestic abuse are treated in a fair, compassionate and effective way – no matter where they live in the UK."*
- 4.3 DAHA Accreditation would demonstrate the Council's commitment to prioritising, recognising and responding to domestic abuse as well as demonstrating a good practice approach. The Working Group agreed that accreditation would address some of the concerns raised by local stakeholders as well as show a strong commitment from the Council to support those affected by domestic abuse with sensitivity and compassion. It was noted that the fee for the DAHA Accreditation was £3000.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 1:

Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) accreditation for the Housing & Regeneration Directorate be sought and encourage major housing associations in the borough to seek accreditation, if they are not already accredited.

- 4.4 The Working Group noted that a leaflet advising those affected by domestic abuse, of where to find support and what to do if they were experiencing domestic abuse had been produced for Wandsworth. This leaflet was distributed widely in libraries, GP surgeries, pubs and other local places. The Working Group felt it was key to have the same localised information available for Richmond. The leaflet included information about community safety apps as well as a Victim Support app, enabling service users to access support in a range of formats.
- 4.5 The Working Group recognised that this was key as a means of empowering those that had suffered domestic abuse by ensuring they knew their rights and provided them with the advice they needed to break free from domestic

abuse. The leaflet should also be relevant to a range of parties including landlords and agents.

- 4.6 In addition, the Working Group noted that a critical area of prevention work was education in schools and beyond to encourage healthy relationships and supporting children who have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse. This was critical as it prevented a repetitive cycle of abuse as a result of learnt behaviour. The Working Group noted that 'relationship and sex education' in schools would become mandatory in 2020'.

The Task Group recommends that:

Recommendation 2:

That a leaflet for Richmond on domestic abuse be produced, with reference to best practice elsewhere, mirroring the leaflet available in Wandsworth, to be distributed widely throughout the borough in a variety of public places such as libraries, GP surgeries, pubs and other suitable locations. That the leaflet also be distributed to all officers and councillors to build and raise corporate awareness of domestic abuse.

Recommendation 3:

The Cabinet Member for Children and Schools be recommended to undertake an audit of what information is in schools and colleges on healthy relationships and recognition of unhealthy ones, to offer assurance that there is sufficient information being provided. That the leaflet produced in Wandsworth which educates teenagers to understand the warning signs of domestic abuse be replicated for Richmond and distributed throughout local schools.

- 4.7 The Working Group understood the Council's duty to alleviate homelessness but also recognised that it was important to work closely with support workers to understand the needs of service users and to ensure suitable and appropriate accommodation was offered. It was noted that those affected by domestic abuse often would not share their experiences of abuse initially and that once trust was developed with support workers, this would encourage them to share their experiences, there could also be denial in some cases. Unsuitable accommodation could lead to service users returning to undesirable or unsafe circumstances.
- 4.8 In addition, the Working Group were advised that a great deal of information was required on the homelessness application form and that this was then followed with an interview with housing officers. This often led to the service user recounting their experiences a number of times. This could be a traumatic experience for service users and the response of housing officers was key. The Working Group recognised that repetition of application processes leads to unnecessary trauma of recalling distressing incidents that may have led to homelessness in the first instance.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 4:

All Council officers and councillors dealing with the public be encouraged to undertake Trauma Awareness and Sensitivity training and that officers dealing with the public be appropriately trained and female staff be deployed where appropriate.

Recommendation 5:

All housing officers dealing with those affected by domestic abuse, be encouraged to work collaboratively with support workers and advocates to assure the best outcome for the service user is achieved.

Recommendation 6:

An annual best practice event be arranged, possibly by DAHA for key agencies, council officers and councillors to share best practice and ensure the best outcome for service users.

- 4.9 The Working Group's investigations showed that there was a reluctance of local stakeholders to speak honestly about service areas that were perhaps not working quite so well. It was recommended that a collaborative session to draw out some of these issues be arranged.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 7:

A collaborative session be arranged for all support agencies and stakeholders to audit and review the partnerships and pathways for accessing accommodation for this group and where a greater collaboration of support agencies may be beneficial. This could be delivered by the Domestic Violence Forum and it is recommended that it be delivered by the end of Quarter 2 (September 2019), with a view to repeating this regularly at least every 18 months.

- 4.10 The Working Group recognised the valuable work of the outreach Refuge staff member who works from the Twickenham Civic Centre for half a day a week and were keen to explore if this outreach work could be funded full time as this would allow a greater number of women to be supported and would improve overall service provision.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 8:

That the feasibility of funding a full time Refuge outreach worker be explored, to improve the support available for this vulnerable group.

- 4.11 The Working Group's investigations indicated that the unintended consequence of the 'Violence Against Women and Girls' staff merger had led to the redundancy of a full-time dedicated staff member for Richmond (Violence Against Women & Girls Operational Manager). The Working Group felt it was key to have a dedicated Richmond member of staff to undertake this valuable work and that the loss of this post would be detrimental to the service.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 9:

A full-time dedicated staff member be appointed for Richmond to support work around Violence Against Women and Girls sufficiently.

- 4.12 The Working Group throughout their work had recognised the importance of awareness raising and publicising of domestic abuse issues. The Working Group were keen to publicise their work, findings and recommendations to show the Council's commitment to the issue of domestic abuse.
- 4.13 Members of the Working Group were also keen to encourage Members to attend some of the free sessions offered by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board which covered a range of key safeguarding issues and were very informative.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 10:

The findings and recommendations of the working group be publicised to show the commitment of the Council to this very important issue. That this be undertaken through the Comms team and links with the Mayor's charity, via the Loop, website and social media before the new municipal year.

Recommendation 11:

That the Council commit to support the following awareness raising campaigns and that officers and members be encouraged to support each of these:

- 'No More' Campaign (year-round campaign)
- White Ribbon Campaign
- International Women's Day

5. Concluding Comments

- 5.1 The Working Group on balance were pleased to find through their evidence gathering and meetings with key frontline staff and service users that good services were in place in the borough, to support women who had experienced domestic abuse and to assist them to find accommodation both in the short and long term.

- 5.2 The Working Group recognised that there was a shortage of social housing and that this reflected a national problem. This placed pressure on services which were attempting to accommodate this vulnerable group. Evidence gathered by the Working Group showed that emergency provision was generally adequate in the borough for those that were identified as priority need. Accessing longer term suitable accommodation was more problematic and some of the recommendations proposed above attempt to tackle some of the issues around this.
- 5.3 The recommendations proposed by the Working more generally, attempt to build on the services, networks and support already in place and encourage greater collaboration, sharing of best practice and awareness raising as well as an emphasis on the importance of honest conversations around what is not working so well.
- 5.4 The Working Group recognised that with an area such as domestic abuse it was key to keep communication lines open and to ensure that officers were kept abreast of emerging issues.
- 5.5 The Working Group also recognised that this was an area that was very difficult to limit to one issue and that as much as possible must be done to support those affected by domestic abuse and to eradicate abuse, hence the recommendation that ongoing campaigns be supported.

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APPENDICES

Service Mapping document

Refuge's response to Government Consultation 2018