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**To: Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4)**

**Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022**

**Subject: Safe Housing and Accommodation for Vulnerable Women**

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## **1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 To update the Board on the City's response to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and how we work on an operational basis around housing and victims of domestic abuse.

## **2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4) are recommended to:
- 1) Consider the Council's response to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 in relation to accommodation to vulnerable women.
  - 2) Identify any further recommendations to the appropriate Cabinet Member.

## **3 Information/Background**

- 3.1 Preventing harm from Domestic Abuse is a priority within Coventry and is a key measure within the One Coventry Corporate Plan. Coventry's Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018 – 2025 outlines the city's approach to addressing domestic abuse, including honour-based abuse and forced marriage.
- 3.2 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 received Royal Assent on 29 April 2021. The Act provides, for the first time, a statutory definition of domestic abuse and delivers a number of significant changes to improve the protection of victims within the community and the criminal justice system.
- 3.3 The Act has a number of implications for the local authority, including the requirement of a new statutory board, implementation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse, a duty to produce regular needs assessments and strategies, delivery of specific minimum types of support for victims within safe accommodation, the prioritisation of domestic abuse victims within homelessness applications and a requirement to annually report to the Secretary of State.
- 3.4 The COVID pandemic has had a significant impact on domestic abuse victimisation. Control measures put in place to limit infection have also reduced the time and space for victims to seek help, has been used as a tool for further abusive behaviours and placed a number of additional pressures on families and individuals. Other measures – such as legislation to protect people from being

evicted from their homes under the Coronavirus Act 2020 and changes to court proceedings which has lengthened the wait for civil and criminal hearings – have meant that different parts of the local system have experienced differing trends of victimisation and demand.

3.5 Overall, levels of reported domestic abuse continued to increase since the first lockdown in March 2020 with police reporting a further YTD 22% increase in reported domestic abuse. Commissioned services and Children’s Services all reflect higher levels of demand and an increase in the level of case complexity and risk.

3.6 In summary, key aspects of the Act includes:

- I. Creation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse. This adopts a broad definition of domestic abuse which includes a range of forms of abusive behaviour between two people, both aged 16 and above, who have a “personal connection”.
- II. Creation of new orders including Domestic Abuse Protection Notices (DAPN) and Orders (DAPO).
- III. Placing the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme – ‘Claire’s Law’ - onto a statutory footing to improve consistency of the scheme across the country and increase the number of applications.
- IV. Provision of added protective measures for victims in court hearings,
- V. Creation of new offences. Non-fatal strangulation and suffocation and threats to disclose private sexual photographs and films will become criminal offences.
- VI. Changes to existing homelessness legislation (Housing Act 1996) to make victims a priority regardless of any vulnerability.
- VII. Creation of lifetime tenancies for victims.
- VIII. Creation of a register for serial and serious perpetrators that would be managed through Multi agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA),
- IX. A requirement on local authorities to conduct regular needs assessments and publish a strategy for victims in safe accommodation.
- X. A requirement on local authorities to provide a range of support for victims in safe accommodation including counselling, therapeutic support for children, support to resolve immigration issues.
- XI. A requirement for local authorities to appoint and coordinate a Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board to oversee the needs assessment, strategy and local action.
- XII. Provision of anyone subject to immigration control who is a victim of domestic abuse with a route to apply for limited leave to remain for at least six months to allow for immigration proceedings to be considered.

#### **4 Impact on the local authority**

4.1 The Act introduces several new duties and a range of implications for local authorities; below is a summary of the implications in relation to (i) safe accommodation strategic planning, (ii) safe accommodation provision and support for victims, and (iii) prioritisation of domestic abuse victims within homelessness applications.

4.2 Overall, the clarification of the definition of domestic abuse and added protection for victims intended by the Act are expected to increase reporting and demand on services. The inclusion of statutory prioritisation of domestic abuse victims within homelessness applications and provision of temporary leave to remain of migrants reporting domestic abuse is also expected to increase demand on homelessness, migrant and domestic abuse services.

4.3 The Act required local authorities to conduct a needs assessment which has been completed and published in Oct 2021 with addendums to the current strategy –

[click here](#)-responding to the Act and extending the current strategy to 2025. An action plan has further been developed responding to the needs assessment and requirements of the ACT.

4.4 Local authorities are required to establish a Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board as a statutory board of the Council. The purpose of this new statutory board is to provide advice to the local authority in relation to domestic abuse - as a minimum to provide advice on its duties to:

- assess the need for domestic abuse support in its area
- prepare and publish a strategy to provide support
- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy
- consider the local authority's annual report to the new national Domestic Abuse Commissioner

4.5 Coventry's Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board has been meeting since May 2021 and has a broad range of representative partners. The Act sets out statutory membership and must include people representing local authorities, victims and their children, domestic abuse charities or voluntary organisations, health care providers and the police or other criminal justice agencies. The Board is chaired by Councillor P Akhtar, Deputy Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities.

## **5 Relevant Safe Accommodation**

5.1 The Act requires local authorities to provide safe accommodation for victims – dedicated specialist accommodation which meets specific domestic abuse quality standards – and a range of specialist support for victims in safe accommodation. 'Sanctuary schemes', whereby victims are helped to remain in their own home by providing extra domestic security and support, are included within the definition of safe accommodation as is some temporary accommodation provided by the Local Authority.

5.2 Services to support victims of domestic abuse were procured in 2019 and awarded to:

- Coventry Haven (in partnership with Panahghar and Relate): for community-based support to victims and children; and for a perpetrator service. This contract includes 'sanctuary scheme' provision.
- Valley House: for accommodation-based support to victims

5.3 There are currently 102 units of specialist domestic abuse accommodation in Coventry (67 commissioned by the City Council and 35 charitably funded) and commissioned capacity for 200 victims to access sanctuary scheme provision. This provides capacity to support approximately 250 - 300 victims per annum. The table overleaf outlines the different Safe Accommodation scheme available within the city:

Type of Safe Accommodation	Capacity	Description
Specialist accommodation	54 units	Mainstream CCC contracted provision
Specialist accommodation	13 units	Provision extended to 30/09/22 using the DA grant
'Sanctuary scheme' provision	200 victims	Mainstream CCC contracted provision from Coventry Haven
Specialist accommodation	35 units	Non-commissioned specialist accommodation provided by 2 different VSC organisations

## 6 Safe Accommodation Provision and support for victims

- 6.1 Safe accommodation is an important protective measure for victims of domestic abuse, including their children. The accepted minimum standard of specialist domestic abuse accommodation provision requires European countries to have a minimum of one family space of specialist accommodation per 10,000 head of population. There are currently 102 units of accommodation in Coventry, equivalent to one space per 3,400 head of population so is higher than the recommended minimum standard. The number of units of accommodation commissioned by the City Council is considerably higher than most areas in the region.
- 6.2 While the Act does not specify how much safe accommodation should be provided, it does require the local authority to assess the level of need annually. The Act also requires all victims in safe accommodation to have access to:
- 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 with protected characteristics and/or complex needs, for example, interpreters, faith services, mental health advice and support, drug and alcohol advice and support, and immigration advice.
  - children's support – including play therapy and child advocacy;
  - housing-related support – providing housing-related advice and support, for example, securing a permanent home and advice on how to live safely and independently; and
  - counselling and therapy for both adults and children.
- 6.3 The Act amends immigration rules and allows victims to apply to be given leave to remain for at least 6 months, during which time permanent status can be determined. Anyone granted leave to remain by virtue of the provision in the Domestic Abuse Act will have recourse to public funds and access to specialist accommodation and support services.
- 6.4 Guidance provided by Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities advocates the provision of the Whole Housing Approach (WHA), which aims to improve the housing options and outcomes for people experiencing domestic abuse so that they can achieve stable housing, live safely and overcome the abuse and its harmful impacts. The WHA advocates increasing tenancy sustainment options so that people experiencing domestic abuse can remain safely in their home when it is their choice to do so or do not lose their tenancy status if they relocate.

6.5 The Government provided Coventry City Council with a grant of £849,930 in 2021/22 to “fulfil the functions of the new statutory duty on Tier 1 Local Authorities relating to the provision of support to victims of domestic abuse and their children residing within safe accommodation”. Gaps in provision created by the new duties were initially addressed by investing a proportion of the new duties grant. Initial investment included:

Increasing capacity of safe accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuing the funding of 13 units of accommodation previous funded by a DLUHC grant to 30 September 2022. This will maintain the number of commissioned units at 67 until 2022/23</li> <li>Enhancement of the existing sanctuary schemes support by one FTE worker</li> </ul>
Support move-on from specialist accommodation	Introducing ‘flexible funding’, a designated funding pot that domestic abuse support workers can access quickly and easily to enable victim/survivors to achieve safe and stable housing. This is in line with the WHA
Improve specialist support for victims and children in safe accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing additional counselling and therapy for children and adults affected by domestic abuse by commissioning CYP and Family Support workers and Space2Thrive with C&amp;W Mind</li> <li>Increased access for children to the WISH project</li> <li>Providing additional specialist support for victims with insecure immigration status.</li> </ul>

6.6 To account for the time to complete the needs assessment and to cushion any impact of lower resources being received beyond 2021/22 (dependent upon the new burden assessment), spend from the grant was committed for the period up to end of September 2022. Funding for 2022/23 has now been confirmed with a grant of £852, 283 being provided.

6.7 Following the completion of the needs’ assessment, strategy and the recent confirmation of future funding from the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review, a longer-term investment plan will be developed to ensure the duties of the Act are met. Full evaluation of services to measure delivery of quality outcomes will be part of the commissioning process.

## 7 **Prioritisation of domestic abuse victims within homelessness applications**

7.1 The Act amends existing homelessness legislation (the Housing Act 1996) by extending priority need to all eligible victims who are homeless as a result of being a victim of domestic abuse. This change removes the requirement for victims of domestic abuse to demonstrate vulnerability in order to attain priority need and clarifies the remit of people affected by this change with the new statutory definition of domestic abuse.

7.2 Previously single (and childless) victims who are made homeless as a result of domestic abuse and who did not have priority need for other reasons had an assessment of whether they were vulnerable due to domestic abuse. If a victim was not considered vulnerable, local authorities would have continued to try and relieve their homelessness, however, would not have had a duty to secure emergency

accommodation. Under the new legislation, single (and childless) victims who are made homeless due to domestic abuse will receive automatic priority need without any assessment of whether or not they are vulnerable. This change has seen an increase in the number of single people being placed into temporary accommodation within the city and since October 2021 a continued increase in homeless approaches due to domestic abuse.

- 7.3 The overall ambition of the Domestic Abuse Act is to increase the confidence of victims to seek support in the knowledge that agencies will meet their needs and it is anticipated that this will increase the number of victims presenting as homeless and increase the demand for temporary and move on accommodation.
- 7.4 The local authority has been provided with an additional £32,020 within the Homeless Prevention Grant for 2022- 2023 to meet the cost of increased numbers of single victims of DA being accommodated in TA.
- 7.5 In response to the requirements of the DA Act and also the needs assessment, a Safe and Supported Accommodation working group has been established comprising of the Local Authority Housing and Homeless Team, specialist DA providers, DWP, West Midlands Fire Service and Citizen Housing to ensure that the Whole Housing Approach meets the needs of all victims of domestic abuse including those in relevant safe accommodation, their access to support services and also the transition to sustained permanent tenancies.

## **8 Potential Risks**

- 8.1 The demand on current domestic abuse provision has continually increased over the last few years and the DA Act requirements will increase that demand further. The changes to the prioritisation of domestic abuse victims within homeless applications, whilst very welcomed, has identified a gap the provision of accommodation for single people and those with complex needs. This gap is being reviewed within the working group to identify ways of addressing the issues.

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