



**Report to:** Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Subject:** Final Report and Recommendations of the Domestic Abuse and accommodation working group

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## **Purpose of the Report**

To present the final report and recommendations of the Domestic Abuse Working Group.

## **Background**

Survivors of Domestic Abuse require significant support should they decide to leave an abusive relationship. This involves accessing a range of assistance including financial and legal advice and help with securing accommodation both in the immediate and longer term. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 creates a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, coercive or controlling behaviour or economic abuse. The Act also places an important legal duty on local authorities to deliver support to survivors of domestic abuse living in accommodation based services and that eligible homeless victims of domestic violence automatically have a 'priority need' for homelessness assistance. Gedling Borough therefore has a responsibility to support victims and their family's access accommodation, failure to provide this assistance may result in victims returning to unsuitable or unsafe accommodation or become homeless.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a working group to examine the how Gedling Borough will contribute to fulfilling the duty to secure refuge places and emergency accommodation appropriate for the needs of individuals and their families, including those with a disability and from the LGBTQ+ and BAME communities. The use of the Sanctuary Scheme to enable people to stay safely in their own homes was also explored.

The working group was informed of the following definitions relating to the different types of accommodation available.

A refuge is a safe house (shared) where women and children who are experiencing domestic abuse can stay free from fear. Any woman who needs to escape from domestic abuse can go into a refuge at any time. It does not matter whether or not you are married to or living with your abuser, or whether or not you have children.

Emergency accommodation is short-term housing for survivors in urgent need of accommodation, for example, bed and breakfast hotels and hostels.

Temporary accommodation is where a survivor may be placed when the authority has accepted the duty to house but does not have suitable, long term housing immediately available

Dispersed accommodation is self-contained accommodation with support provided.

Move-on or second stage accommodation is a stepping-stone between refuge or hostels and independent living.

## **Information**

The Domestic Abuse Bill places a duty on Tier 1 authorities, i.e. Nottinghamshire County Council to appoint a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership which will have the responsibility for making arrangements for victims and their families who need support and to prepare a strategy for the provision of support. Tier 2 authorities have a duty to cooperate. The responsibility to commission accommodation therefore lies with the Nottinghamshire County Council who are able to delegate funding and the duty for provision to Tier 2 authorities, this includes Gedling Borough.

The availability of housing accommodation is a key component when supporting individuals and families who need to escape domestic abuse. Victims forced to leave their homes to find safety, in a refuge or other type of accommodation, may sometimes relocate in another local authority area in order to be a safe distance from their abuser, however, if it is considered to be safe victims and their children will be allocated temporary accommodation in a different part of Gedling. In cases of domestic abuse, temporary accommodation will also be made available to victims previously living outside Gedling. Under the current applications procedure domestic violence cases are placed in priority band 2 or considered as a homeless application. Although domestic abuse cases have priority for housing there are not often properties available for immediate occupation and should the application have to be treated as a homeless case, refuge provision or bed and breakfast accommodation will be offered. Whilst in a refuge support will be available to assist the victims to be rehoused safely and after 56 days if accommodation is still needed the application will be moved to priority band 1. Refuge accommodation if available and suitable is

the preferred option for victims and families as it enables assessment and tailored packages to meet their specific requirements be developed

Currently there is no refuge provision located in Gedling but places are available for Gedling residents in the countywide provision and wider across the UK.

Refuge provision offers not just accommodation but also intensive emotional and practical support as a county wide resource currently is available in:

- Newark - provider Newark Women's Aid. Newark and Midlands Women's Aid are an independent refuge provider and not funded through the Notts. County Council Public Health commissioned service.
- Broxtowe - provider Midlands Women's Aid are an independent refuge provider and not funded through the Notts. County Council Public Health commissioned service.
- Mansfield and Bassetlaw - Nottinghamshire Women's Aid who operate refuge provision and is also commissioned by the Public Health, Notts. County Council to provide bed spaces.
- Ashfield - JUNO Women's Aid with Ashfield District Council properties. Juno operate refuge provision and are also commissioned by Public Health, Notts. County Council to provide bed spaces.

There are reciprocal arrangements with the support of other local authorities for refuge accommodation should it be thought safer for a family to be housed in a different part of the country.

Every refuge is oversubscribed and this has been made worse by the increase in cases due to lockdown and the closure of some refuges due to Covid restrictions. Refuges do not keep waiting lists, vacancies are filled by whoever is in need when the vacancy occurs. If no places are available it may result in victims returning home or moving in with relatives. Refuge provides much more than bed space, offering both support and advice which will prepare survivors to move forward with their lives. This type of accommodation is not suitable for everyone, some buildings may not be appropriate for women with disabilities and older women sometimes do not settle well in shared facilities. Refuges are female only spaces and boys aged eighteen plus are not permitted, this can cause issues for some families of teenage children requiring assistance. Move on accommodation is increasingly difficult to find and families can be left in refuge or temporary accommodation longer than is necessary.

Representatives from JUNO Women's Aid attended a meeting of the working group and explained the services they provide and the support they currently offer. As the largest domestic abuse organisation in Nottinghamshire and one of the largest in the UK, it works with women and children affected by domestic abuse in Ashfield, Broxtowe, Gedling, Nottingham City and Rushcliffe. JUNO offers information and advice, drop in and one to one support, a 24 hour helpline plus refuge and accommodation services. The 24hour helpline support is available to anyone across

the UK. There has been a 58% increase in calls to the helpline between January 2020 to December 2020 compared with the previous year. At any one time JUNO can be supporting 500-600 women and children in Nottingham City and South Nottinghamshire. JUNO works with Equation, a Nottingham based service that as part of their work provides specialist support for men experiencing domestic abuse. Equation is an LGBTQ+ friendly organisation and Equation's Domestic Abuse Service for Men also offers support to the LGBTQ+ community. Refuge provision is available for men but this is frequently underutilised and there are empty places. JUNO also offers a wide range of services for children and young people affected by or who have experienced domestic abuse, therapeutic group work sessions for young people in education, youth work and community settings promoting health relationships. JUNO also runs a pet fostering service for pets that cannot be taken into the emergency accommodation available.

JUNO accommodation provision includes refuge places for nine families and dispersed housing for six families in the Ashfield area. This type of accommodation does not just provide bed space but also support for women with issues such as safety, housing, benefits, immigration, finance, children and health. The average stay in this type accommodation is a year and JUNO works closely with Ashfield District Council to rehome families in the area. The dispersed accommodation is in Ashfield Homes properties.

Gedling Borough on behalf of Nottinghamshire County Council and the seven Nottinghamshire district authorities has, in the past, been successful in funding bids for refuge provision from MHCLG. Between 2015 and 2019 three separate bids were successful bringing in over £1.9M for Nottinghamshire refuge provision. In 2019, led by Nottinghamshire County Council, a further £500,000 was received. Without this funding 25 units, a total of 128 bed spaces, would have been lost. The impact of this would be 167 women and 320 children would have been unable to access refuge provision. The Domestic Abuse Act and associated duty has brought £1.2M into the County Council as the Tier 1 authority for 2021 – 2022.

Currently temporary accommodation available in Gedling is for the use of all applicants in need, however priority is not necessarily given to survivors of domestic abuse. Temporary provision consists of two 2-bedroom flats and two 3-bedroomed houses, leased from Derwent Homes, two, 3-bedroomed houses leased from Jigsaw homes and seven 2-bedroomed houses that are the Council's own properties. It is envisaged that this will increase in the future and borough council will have additional temporary accommodation with the developments at the Burton Road and Station Road regeneration sites. Temporary accommodation is usually occupied with a one day turnaround when vacated. Bed and breakfast, particularly when children are involved, is available as a short term solution until refuge or temporary accommodation can be secured. Each case has a unique set of needs and all are assessed on their individual circumstances. The designation of a temporary property purely for the use of domestic violence cases was considered although this was

discarded after discussion. The property would become identifiable and would need to be changed frequently for safety reasons. Establishing such properties would be expensive, CCTV may be required and additional locks and external lighting would have to be fitted.

There is a lack of appropriate and affordable accommodation for families who are ready to leave refuge or temporary accommodation both in social housing and privately rented sectors. To enable suitable permanent accommodation to be secured deposits for privately rented accommodation are available, each case is assessed individually, and benefits advice, removal and storage costs are also available

The Sanctuary Scheme administered by Gedling Borough Council Community Safety team in Public Protection supports survivors of domestic abuse to continue to live in their own homes following actual, and threatened abuse from a partner or ex-partner not living at their address. The scheme seeks to reduce victimisation, escalation in incident severity, recorded incidents and crime, and lower homelessness, emergency accommodation and refuge placements. This is done by providing additional security to the property this can include installation of replacement door locks, window locks, external lighting and where assessed a necessary, replacement door when damaged by the perpetrator. Each cases is different and assessed accordingly.

The scheme aims to offer an alternative to temporary accommodation and prevent leaving accommodation and the necessity to seek temporary accommodation and is a significant cost saving to the authority while avoiding family disruption and making the survivor feel safer. The Group felt that it was something to be proud of that Gedling Bough Council is a leading contributor to the work of such an important scheme.

The working group was very interested in the potential cost savings and benefits of the Sanctuary scheme. In 2020-2021 the average spend on a Sanctuary Security installation was approximately £800 which provided a basic level of improved security to a property. This may have included some or all of the following; replacement door locks, window locks, sash jammers, external PIR lighting, gate locks, fire proof letter box, anti-shatter film for windows and Ring door bell. Total spend was just under £10,000 with 14 households benefiting. There were a further 6 properties who benefited from security improvements installed by their housing provider.

Comparing this to cases where the family do not feel safe to remain in the existing family home, information provided by Gedling BC Housing Needs states that the average cost of a homeless application to the authority is £5,000. This can be higher if there are 3 or more children as the cost for bed and breakfast accommodation can be in excess of £120 per night. This cost does not include officer time involved in the

case which may be quite significant depending upon the complexity. The time spent in temporary accommodation that may be a refuge, a hostel or Gedling BC temporary flat accommodation can be in excess of 12 months so survivor/applicants are encouraged in seeking accommodation in the private sector and the authority pays towards a landlord liaison officer to assist in the process. The authority also offers financial support for deposit and/or rent in advance which can add between £500 and £1,500 on top of the average costs.

The cost saving to the authority of providing Sanctuary Security measures can therefore be significant by allowing the family to feel safer and remain in the existing family home. Further, the negative emotional and psychological impacts are likely lessened as in remaining in the family home can allow the maintaining of local community and family contacts, children being able to remain in the same school environment and no financial impact of costs the authority cannot meet or will recharge for, for example moving and/or storage costs for furniture and personal belongings.

## **Conclusions**

Access to safe housing options is essential, lack of access to safe secure housing is a major barrier to escaping abuse and features strongly in decision making about whether to stay or leave an abuser. If survivors do not have access to suitable accommodation and are at risk of homelessness they may decide to stay in unsafe accommodation and / or with the abuser.

Provision of refuge accommodation is the safest and most effective approach to support high risk victims of domestic abuse. It enables each case to be individually assessed and support packages to be designed to meet individual and family need. The provision of refuge places for victims and their families exceeds the refuge accommodation that is currently available and Gedling Borough should work with the County Council to ensure there is sufficient safe and supported accommodation for victims and families who are leaving abusive relationships.

Information should be available in Gedling Borough facilities promoting what constitutes domestic abuse and the damage that is caused by violence in relationships. Gedling Borough should encourage and support this message and develop closer links with JUNO and other local community based service providers.

## **The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that:**

- 1) The Executive recognises the financial savings achieved and the benefits to clients of the Sanctuary Scheme and ensures that the service continues to receive funding at a level that fully meets the needs of families to enable them to live safely.

- 2) Work is undertaken to Increase awareness for both the public and staff members of domestic abuse and the services available to address this issue using the website, Contacts magazine and council owned buildings, leisure centres, community centres, Intranet etc.
- 3) The Council pro-actively works with organisations such as JUNO so that they can be given access to council owned buildings to provide outreach/drop-in session.
- 4) Compulsory training on identifying and interacting with victims of domestic abuse is given to front line officers and elected members and that this is delivered at future member inductions.
- 5) A section on safeguarding considerations including domestic abuse is included as a specific section in committee and decision reports.
- 6) The Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Public Protection and Housing continue to monitor the need for refuge provision with a view to providing an adequate level of funding for delivering dispersed refuge and “move on” accessible accommodation in the Borough.
- 7) Partnership working across the country for the provision of refuge spaces continues offering accommodation on a reciprocal basis. This should be based on need rather than geographical residence in Gedling.