

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

24 February 2025

### Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group Annual Report

#### Ordinary Decision



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### Report of Michael Laing, Interim Corporate Director of Adult & Health Services

Amanda Healy, Director of Public Health, Durham County Council

#### Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

#### Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) with an overview of the Domestic Abuse work carried out by County Durham and Darlington's Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group (DASVEG) April 2023 to March 2024.

#### Executive summary

- 2 It is estimated that 2.1million people are affected by Domestic Abuse (DA) each year (Crime Survey for England and Wales in the year ending March 2023). DA continues to have a significant impact on County Durham communities and support services.
- 3 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 placed a statutory duty on Durham County Council (DCC) and partners to identify a Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board. Locally, this is known as the County Durham and Darlington Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group (DASVEG).
- 4 Sexual Violence is a standing agenda item on the DASVEG agenda with a bespoke SV plan and a separate SV annual report, presented independently to DASVEG and the Safe Durham Partnership.
- 5 DASVEG's DA plan covers the following priority areas (see appendix 2) for further details):
  - Prioritising prevention;
  - Supporting victims;

- Tackling those who cause harm.
- 6 SafeLives were commissioned in 2023 to provide an independent review of the work currently being undertaken by DASVEG. DASVEG will review this report and the findings and recommendations be shared with the SDP when available in autumn 2024.
  - 7 Despite most DA going unreported, referrals into Harbour Support Services (HSS), provider of the Countywide Domestic Abuse Outreach Service, continue to increase each year.
  - 8 Victim/survivor voice should be central to all DA systems, to support with this, additional NBF has been allocated to continue the DA Victim Voice Champion that sits within the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner for a minimum of a further two fiscal years (for 2023-24 and 2024-25).
  - 9 New Burdens Funding (NBF) was allocated from April 2021 to ensure that local authorities could meet their statutory requirements supporting the delivery of a range of measures relating to safe accommodation. In County Durham the first allocation of funding was not spent until the fiscal year 2022.
  - 10 The most recent NBF payment in April 2023 is the last committed payment by the Government. However, as County Durham spent their first payment a year in leu, there is still one years' worth of NBF held in reserve to be allocated in April 2025.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 11 OSC is recommended to:
  - (a) note the content of this report and the Domestic Abuse Pan 2023-2025

## **Background**

- 12 It is estimated that around 2.1 million people are affected by DA each year in England and Wales (Crime Survey England and Wales year ending March 2023) this equates to around 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men.
- 13 Nationally, there was no significant change in the prevalence of DA in the last year compared with previous years.
- 14 The impact of DA continues to affect all communities and support services across County Durham.
- 15 DA is consistently the most common primary reason for referrals into children's social care and fluctuates between the second and third largest reason for homelessness in County Durham.
- 16 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 placed statutory responsibilities on local authorities and their partnerships in relation to DA, specifically to provide support in safe accommodation. In addition, the Act brought with it the first DA definition in law, which made children and young people victims in their own right.

## **Whole System DASVEG Plan 2022 - 2025**

- 17 DASVEG developed a County Durham and Darlington Domestic Abuse Plan 2022 – 2025 (Appendix 2) reflecting the priorities identified with in the DA Act.
- 18 In addition to the DASVEG plan, there is an independent Sexual Violence plan and standalone annual report.
- 19 The Sexual Violence plan and report are brought to DASVEG and the Safe Durham Partnership in addition to this report.
- 20 The DA DASVEG plan and its identified priorities are supported by three key workstreams as follows:
  - Prioritising prevention;
  - Supporting victims;
  - Tackling those who cause harm.
- 21 The three subgroups are now operational, with a chair in place for each.
- 22 The subgroups contribute to the development of the overarching DASVEG plan. The outcome of any work is reported to DASVEG as a standard agenda item at each meeting.

- 23 SafeLives were commissioned in 2023 to provide an independent review of all work currently being undertaken by DASVEG. DASVEG will review this report and the findings and recommendations be shared with SDP when available, anticipated in October/November 2024.
- 24 In addition to the DASVEG plan and subgroups are a number of commissioned services including;
- Harbour; the countywide DA service;
  - The Domestic Abuse Navigator (DAN) service, providing specialist support for complex cases;
  - Four locality refuges, providing safe accommodation;
  - The Remain Safe Scheme, keeping victims in their own homes;
  - The victims Voice Champion, working with the OPCC to support victims.

**Countywide Specialist Outreach Service Overview**

25 Whilst it is acknowledged that most DA goes largely unreported, referrals to Harbour Support Service continues to increase each year.

**Table 1: Referrals into Harbour Support Service 2020 - 2024**

	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/2024</b>
<b>Total number of referrals from all sources</b>	6608	7116	7577	8412
<b>Total families referred</b>	5350	5851	6191	7224

- 26 There was an increase in both adult and child referrals into Harbour of the year 2023/2024.
- 27 There was no notable change in repeat referrals rising very marginally from 24.3% to 24.8% from last year to this year. However, any amount of re-referral in DA is viewed positively as victims and survivors feel empowered to re-engage with the service.
- 28 There was an increase in referrals (plus 66) of children and young people from 340 2022-2023 to 406 2023-2024.

- 29 Durham Constabulary, remain the highest referrer into Harbour, accounting for 5270, or 62.6% of all referrals. This reflects the effective partnership work established between Durham Constabulary and the wider DA system.
- 30 Harbour continues to achieve positive outcomes for the people it supports. Outcomes relating to adult victims are as follows:
- 85% report improved safety (a deterioration from 88% last year);
  - 81% report improvement in their mental health and wellbeing) a deterioration from 85% last year).
- 31 Between April 2023 and March 2024, the number of new Children and Young Peoples (CYP) cases opened increased from 583 in 2022-2023 to 700 2023-2024. Children and young people accessing the service report the following outcomes:
- 92% of children and young people feel safer (up from 86%);
  - 85% feel their quality of life has improved (Up from 83% last year);
  - 83% feel more confident in themselves (up from 83%).
- 32 The Another Harbour commissioned workstream is the 'Preventions Service' this perpetrator focused service, offering targeted support and work to perpetrators of domestic abuse, received 448 referrals in 2023-2024. This is increase from 409 referrals the previous year.
- 33 These 409 increases in referrals to the Prevention Service did not translate into a similar increase in newly opened cases. Newly opened cases were 171 2022-2023 but only 167 cases in 2023-2024. The cause for this could be one of several reasons including inappropriate or premature referrals; Where the Police are referring perpetrators who are still in criminal proceedings and cannot engage in a service that implies guilt. Or, that there needs to be an improvement in transferring referrals into meaningful support and interventions. This data set will be looked at by the Tackling Those Who Cause Harm Subgroup.
- 34 What this data is telling the partnership is that there is an improvement in referring organisations identifying perpetrators of DA, but that there is no a notable improvement in perpetrators entering into a programme, if anything there has been a decline, something that the 'Tacking Those Who Cause Harm' subgroup will continue to address in the following year.
- 35 In the last year the following outcomes have been achieved by the preventions service:

- from 448 referrals 291 attended a Harbour intervention (65.0%);
  - from the 308 active cases 165 attended/are attending the Respect accredited programme (a rate of 36.8%).
- 36 Of the 308 active cases, 43 completed the Respect accredited programme (9.6%) (Note the course is 26 weeks long and some completed participants will be accounted for in next year's figures.
- 37 165 preventions cases were closed (planned and unplanned) in the year 2023-2024 and 123 of their victim-survivors reported feeling safer at exit. This is a rate of 74.5%.

### **Victim Survivor Voice**

- 38 Victim/survivor voice should be central to all service design and improvement work.
- 39 To ensure that the County Durham system approaches victim/survivor voice in a meaningful and respectful way NBF has been allocated to continue the DA Victim Champion role that sits with the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner with funding available until March 2026.
- 40 The post was vacant whilst an extended recruitment took place. The post has now been fulfilled and the DA Victims Champion will commence in September 2024.

### **Safe Accommodation**

- 41 In line with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, DASVEG provides the oversight and monitoring of the statutory duties associated with Safe Accommodation to ensure the stipulated outcomes are achieved.
- 42 Current safe accommodation provision within County Durham includes the following:
- 4 women's refuges (with a total capacity for 32 individuals/families);
  - a Countywide Domestic Abuse Specialist Outreach Service (that includes providing support to those in dispersed properties (9 properties were available for 2023-24);
  - six dispersed properties provided via the Domestic Abuse Navigator (DAN) service. This service is for those services users with complex needs (the service also includes an outreach service to support those with complex needs in other safe accommodation and in their own homes);
  - Remain Safe (target hardening) Scheme.

- 43 The overall number of referrals for Safe Accommodation during the 2023-24 reporting period dropped slightly when compared to the previous year (1026 referrals in 2022-23 to 948 referrals for 2023-24). The number of referrals will continue to be monitored on a quarterly basis.
- 44 Work to identify the cause for the drop in referrals to safe accommodation is being looked at by the Supporting Victims subgroup and any findings will be presented to DASVEG in due course.
- 45 One potential reason for this could be the increase in funding for the remain safe scheme. The remain safe scheme, whereby 'target hardening' measures are installed, including one way window film, fireboxes and new locks, has enabled more victim-survivors to be supported to stay in their homes with additional safety features and referrals to specialist support.
- 46 For 2023/24 the total spends for the target hardening safe scheme designed to keep victims safe in their own homes (including funding from DCC Housing) was £132,587. This allowed for 309 cases to be completed. This contrasts with the spend in 2022/23 of £71,264.45, which resulted in 196 cases being completed. This highlights efficiencies in the scheme with in 113 more households being supported this year than last year.
- 47 It should be noted, that whilst more units were fitted in 2023-2024 than the year before there has been an increase in the cost per unit. This has been because of increased call out, labour and raw materials costs passed on by Corporate Property and Land (CPaL). A matter for further discussion at the November DASVEG.

### **New Burdens Funding**

- 48 Durham County Council (DCC) has received a further New Burden's Fund (NBF) settlement of £1.19m during financial year 2023-2024.
- 49 NBF is linked to the delivery of the safe accommodation duty and public health work in partnership with commissioning colleagues to spend NBF in accordance to the set parameters.
- 50 NBF is utilised to ensure that successful schemes and support service enhancements already in place have been able to continue.
- 51 NBF was initially allocated to local authorities in 2021 to allow them to implement the new duties of providing support in safe accommodation for victims, including children.

- 52 In County Durham, the first year's allocation was not spent until the next fiscal year, meaning every additional payment received, has been held back by one year before being spent.
- 53 This means that there is a year of NBF in reserve for the year 2024-2025.
- 54 There has been no announcement from the new Labour Government about NBF for the year 2024-2025.
- 55 The Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales strongly supports the continuation of the NBF for local authorities.
- 56 In her published priorities for the new Government in 'A Safer future without domestic abuse,' she strongly advocates for approaches tackling domestic abuse to remain a cross-departmental priority.
- 57 The Commissioner also recommends the Government continue to pay local authorities a dedicated and ringfenced funding stream to maintain domestic abuse services at a local level.
- 58 The Durham City refuge operated by Harbour was visited by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales February 2023. She was very complimentary and has publicly praised the support offered to children and families in Durham. She also invited members of DASVEG including DCC and Harbour staff to present at the Local Government Association conference.

## **VAWG and the SWAN hub**

- 59 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) work undertaken in 2023-2024 has been focused on early interventions work. In partnership with the Relationship, Sex and Health Education coordinator for Durham County Council, working with the Sexual Health Oversight Group and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Steering Group, who received feedback from DASVEG, Investing in Children and the Children in Care Council, a programme of work was created for the academic year 2024-2025.
- 60 The programme, delivered by three providers, enhances the current Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) offer for young people in County Durham.
- 61 Each provider will address a unique part of healthy relationships and consent that will aim to reduce VAWG long term by educating young



people early on in their lives and asking them to challenge historic social prejudices.

- 62 The work will be evaluated for effectiveness once concluded and findings reported to relevant management teams and DASVEG and the SDP.
- 63 The VAWG agenda is further supported by the attendance at the OPCC's Scrutiny Panel. The panel meets six times a year to scrutinise:
- Violence Against Women and Girls;
  - Domestic Abuse;
  - Sexual Violence.
- 64 The Safety of Women At night (SWAN) hub is currently reaching the end of the original block of Safer Streets funding.
- 65 There is an evaluation of the SWAN hub taking place. Details of the evaluation and recommendations will be brought to the SDP for consideration when the evaluation is complete.

### **Operation Encompass**

- 66 Operation Encompass is the name for a notification system that ensures staff in schools receive timely information about police attended incidents of domestic abuse and can understand how to support children in school the next day.
- 67 Durham County Council have been working in partnership with Durham Constabulary and Harbour to offer Operation Encompass notifications to school for many years.
- 68 Operation Encompass only recently became part of law under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.
- 69 As part of system improvements an updated notification system was trialled earlier this year. The trial was a success, and the new notifications system is now fully operational for all schools in County Durham as of 2 September 2024 for children in Reception to Year 11.
- 70 Expansions to the scheme from September 2024 to July 2025 will include notification to early years settings and post 16 provisions.
- 71 There is a multiagency Operation Encompass working group that meets regularly and will work to deliver on the planned 2024-2025 improvements.

## **White Ribbon Accreditation**

- 72 White Ribbon is the UK's leading charity engaging men and boys to end violence against women and girls.
- 73 Durham County Council is a White Ribbon Accredited employer. This commitment means that as employer, the council has been working hard to commit to transformational changes in the staffing culture, systems and communities.
- 74 White Ribbon re-accreditation will be due in October 2025, and the White Ribbon steering group continues to work on the current action plan with annual updates to the relevant management groups.
- 75 This year's White Ribbon Day on the 25th November and the following 16 days of action theme is 'It starts with men' this theme highlights that violence against women and girls is rooted in harmful masculine traits and by starting with men this is where these attitudes can be challenged and changed.

## **Domestic Abuse Workplace Champions**

- 76 Durham County Council recognises the importance of supporting colleagues affected by domestic abuse, one of the ways that this is done is through the network of Domestic Abuse Workplace Champions.
- 77 The Domestic Abuse Workplace Champions:
- provide colleagues with initial support and signposting to specialist services;
  - raise awareness of domestic abuse throughout the council;
  - act as point of contact within teams / service area;
  - promote local and national campaigns.
- 78 Full support and information is provided to all Domestic Abuse Champions, including a half day training, plus regular updates and emails to keep the group informed.
- 79 In 2023-2024 the Domestic Abuse Workplace Champions group continued to grow, and they will be part of the 16 days of action work planned for November 2024.

## **Conclusion**

- 80 DASVEG continues to provide a system-wide approach across County Durham and Darlington to implementing the DA Act (2021) at a local level.
- 81 The future of New Burdens Funding remains uncertain. Whilst no announcements have been made there are indications that funding maybe maintained. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office continues to lobby on behalf of Local Authorities.
- 82 DA delivery at a local level continues to result in positive outcomes for victims/survivors, their children, and perpetrators. This includes work within Durham Constabulary, commissioned services, SWAN Hub, Operation Encompass, DCC's White Ribbon Accreditation including the 16-days of Action and DCC's Workplace Champions.
- 83 The delivery and capacity for Safe Accommodation within the county continues to align with the priorities highlighted in the national DA act 2021.
- 84 County Durham has undertaken three DHRs during 2023/24 and 2004/25. Two out of the three independent reviews have been submitted to the Home Office. All recommendations and actions from the reviews have been progressed regardless of delays in the Home Office processes for sign-off and publication.
- 85 As the development work continues to progress with the subgroups, the SafeLives report and the expansion of the Operation Encompass scheme regular updates will be shared with members of the SDP for their consideration and approval and required.

## **Other useful documents**

- Previous reports / None

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 imposes statutory duties on local authorities and partners, requiring adherence to safe accommodation standards and the proper handling of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs). Compliance with new legal definitions, such as recognising children and young people as victims is essential. The evolving legal framework (e.g., potential renaming of DHR to DARDR) necessitates regular review and adaptation of local procedures, ensuring that policies remain aligned with national guidance and legislative changes.

### **Finance**

Funding arrangements, including New Burdens Funding (NBF), are critical to the delivery of safe accommodation and other statutory services. The delay in initial NBF expenditure and the existence of a reserve for 2024–2025 requires careful financial planning to mitigate the risks of potential funding shortfalls. Contingency measures are being developed to address uncertainties in future, ensuring that service provision is not compromised.

### **Consultation and Engagement**

Meaningful engagement with survivors, service providers, and key stakeholders is essential to ensure that service design reflects the lived experiences of domestic abuse victims. There is no current work requiring public consultation. Any new consultation would include a range of people and communities to gather a broad range of perspectives to inform any new work.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

Policy and service delivery must be underpinned by a commitment to equality and diversity, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation, receive appropriate support. Intersectional considerations should inform practice, addressing the unique barriers faced by victim survivors with multiple protected characteristics or complex needs. Compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty necessitates ongoing training for staff and the integration of diverse perspectives in all stages of policy development.

### **Climate Change**

Where practicable within the contracting process, service providers should consider sustainable practices in the design and operation of safe accommodation facilities, such as energy-efficient building improvements and

resource management. Any future resilience planning should incorporate environmental factors that may affect service delivery, ensuring that facilities remain functional during extreme weather events or other climate-related disruptions.

## **Human Rights**

Ensuring the human rights of all victims and survivors is paramount, with a focus on dignity, safety, and equality in service provision. Policies and interventions are designed to protect the rights of individuals experiencing domestic abuse. Continuous training and awareness-raising is necessary to support staff in upholding these standards across all services.

## **Crime and Disorder**

Domestic abuse is intrinsically linked to broader issues of crime and disorder, necessitating close collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Effective response mechanisms, including multi-agency risk assessments and MARAC referrals, are essential for reducing the incidence and impact of domestic abuse-related crimes. Data collection and analysis shared with DASVEG is a proactive measure aimed to identify emerging trends and address gaps in the criminal justice response.

## **Staffing**

Sufficient and well-trained staff are critical to the successful delivery of domestic abuse services. Investment in ongoing professional development, including specialist training on trauma-informed approaches and risk assessment, ensures staff are equipped to support victims and perpetrators alike. The recruitment and retention of skilled staff, along with support mechanisms such as the Domestic Abuse Workplace Champions network ensure the workforce is well trained and capable.

## **Accommodation**

Meeting statutory obligations for safe accommodation is a core responsibility under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Continuous monitoring of referral trends and service capacity is needed to ensure that safe accommodation options remain available and meet the evolving needs of victims and survivors. Collaborative work between the local authority, service providers, and housing agencies is necessary to address any shortfalls and to incorporate innovations (e.g., target hardening measures) that enhance the safety and sustainability of accommodation.

## **Risk**

Risk assessments are conducted as part of the multi-agency review process, ensuring that high-risk cases receive tailored interventions. The development work of the Domestic Abuse Related Death Review process, will overtime, create learning from the most high-risk cases to be used in future practice to continually mitigate risk for Victims and survivors. The integration of data from diverse sources (such as MARAC and police reports) supports informed decision-making and effective risk reduction strategies.

## **Procurement**

Procurement processes must be transparent and compliant with public sector guidelines to secure services and products required for domestic abuse interventions. Strategic procurement focuses on cost-effectiveness and quality, ensuring that investments in safe accommodation, training, and support services yield measurable benefits. The procurement framework helps facilitate, at times, agile responses to emerging needs, allowing for the rapid scaling of services due to changes in demand or funding.