

Item No. 6	Classification: Open	Date: 15 February 2023	Meeting Name: Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission
Report title:		<i>Domestic abuse; change of council commissioned domestic abuse service providers from Solace to Refuge, and impact of cost of living crisis.</i>	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
Report author(s):		Sharon Ogden, Safer Communities Team Manager	

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Domestic abuse (DA) is defined as any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can include, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional.
2. The council and its partners have recognised DA as a priority for many years and it is a fairer future commitment to tackle all forms of gender-based violence. Tackling DA and its long-term effects is also a shared priority for the Community Safety Partnership (CSP).
3. A 5 year Domestic Abuse Strategy was launched in 2015 and Solace Women's Aid was commissioned to deliver Southwark's integrated Domestic and Sexual Abuse service. Building on the Domestic Abuse Strategy, July 2019 saw the launch of a new VAWG Strategy (2019-2024). This extended the partnership priorities to tackle all forms of gender-based violence. These are:
 - Supporting victims
 - Tackling perpetrators
 - Prevention and early intervention
 - Partnership working
4. The Council's main DA support is commissioned through the Southwark Advocacy Support Service (SASS), delivered by Solace Women's Aid. The service provides; Survivor advocacy and support, Sanctuary scheme, Perpetrator Programme, Child therapy, Counselling, IRIS programme (GP support and training), Survivor group work programme, training and awareness raising,
5. Other commissioned services by the council include:
 - Refuge service; 26 beds including family units

- Independent Domestic Violence Advocate - full-time housing Senior IDVA working with survivors of VAWG presenting as homeless.
- YUVA - service for young people using or experiencing violence in close relationships.

CHANGE IN DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICE PROVIDER

6. From the 6 February 2023, the councils commissioned domestic abuse service provider will change from Solace Women's Aid to Refuge. This will see the continuation of the services listed above with some changes in delivery mechanism:
7. **Independent Gender-Based Violence Advocates (IGVAs)** – work with people who are resident in Southwark from the age of 16. The IGVAs will support all levels of risk; high, medium, standard and provide information advice and guidance, effective case management and intensive advocacy for survivors of gender-based violence and abuse.
8. **Homelessness IDVA** - Specialist support for survivors of domestic abuse with complex housing issues. Co-located within Southwark Housing Solutions Service and referrals directly received from housing teams.
9. **Sanctuary Scheme** - aims to minimise the number of households, families and individuals who must leave their own home because of domestic abuse by exploring safe alternatives where appropriate such as implementing safety measures in victim's homes.
10. **IRIS Advocate Educator** - specialist advocacy and support to clients with referrals received specifically from GP surgeries.
11. **Perpetrators Service** - The overarching goal of the service is to increase the safety and wellbeing of domestic abuse survivors and any children involved by intervening with perpetrators to hold them accountable and provide them with opportunities to change through 1-to-1 intensive case management sessions. To do this the survivor also needs to be referred to the IGVA service so we can offer them support and assess any ongoing risks to them.
12. **Survivor group work programme** - 12-week group, which supports women to regain ownership of their lives when they have been subjected to abuse or violence.
13. In Partnership with Bede House, we will also be delivering:
14. **Counselling** - 16-week 1-2-1 counselling programme for survivors of domestic and/or sexual abuse. The service is for women and girls who are 14 years and over who are resident in or have a connection with Southwark and have experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse.

15. **Children's Therapeutic Support** - Qualified Children's Therapist to provide a 1-2-1 12 week play and arts based therapeutic intervention to children and young people.

DOMESTIC ABUSE STATISTICS

16. For 2021/22 Southwark was ranked 15th highest volume borough for DA offences in London (out of 32). Since FY 18/19, our ranking has improved year on year from being 5th highest.
17. Between 2013/14 Southwark saw a 52% increase in the number of Police recorded DA offences from 2357 recorded offences in 2013/14 peaking at 3578 in 2018/19. Since 2018/19 recorded offences have decreased year on year with 3242 offences recorded in 2021/22, a 9% decrease from since the 2018/19 peak.
18. 118% increase in number of referrals to the councils commissioned DA Service (2013/14 v 2020/21).
19. Children's Social Care - for financial years 19/20 and 20/21 domestic violence was the primary reason for 53% of all contacts received. For 21/22 and 22/23 this has decreased to 38% (22/23 year to date Dec 2022).
20. During Covid (20/21), the Police saw a slight increase in reported offences, however our local DA service saw a much more significant change with a 21% increase in referrals. Children's Service saw a 28% increase in domestic violence contacts in 20/21 compared to 19/20. 21/22 saw a return to more normal levels however this was still 10% higher than 19/20.
21. The latest police data available for Southwark shows a 6% reduction in total DA offences financial year to date (01/04/22 – 08/01/23 vs 01/04/21 – 08/01/22). If we look at the medium term (last 12 weeks: 17/10/22 – 08/01/23 vs 25/07/22 – 16/10/22) there has been a slight increase of 2.7% and short term (last 4 weeks: 12/12/22 – 08/01/23 vs 14/11/22 – 11/12/22) 5% reduction.

IMPACT OF COST OF LIVING CRISIS ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

22. The most recent police offence figures above (point 21 above) doesn't suggest any overall increase in recorded DA offence levels as a result of the cost of living crisis.
23. In relation to council Housing Services, there has not been a noticeable increase in cases. However If the financial crisis is preventing survivors from fleeing their home to escape the abuse, then we would not expect to see an increase in cases approaching housing services for accommodation, these would be largely unknown to housing services.

24. Three local domestic abuse providers; Solace Women's Aid, Refuge, and Bede House were approached to ask what they are experiencing as a direct result of the increase in cost of living. Unfortunately, services do not have any direct recorded data in relation to the cost of living, but anecdotally providers have been able to give an indication of the impact that they are seeing.
25. **Solace Women's Aid**
- Increased requests for financial assistance/foodbank vouchers.
 - Impact on safe accommodation particularly for single mothers who are currently working with a secure tenancy as the cost of Temporary Accommodation would be out of their reach.
26. **Bede House** – Last year (21/22) we saw 66 clients who completed risk assessments and engaged. This year we have see 133 clients, an increase of 102%. We can't say if this increase is wholly due to the increase in cost of living, however we have had to support more clients through the winter with food vouchers and hampers. 80% of the referrals are first time callers who have never called a DA service before. We have seen that 21% of clients have been in the abusive relationship between 3-5 years (during the start of cost of living). The added stress period of COVID and cost of living has resulted in the increase of referrals.
27. We are certainly finding that clients are having to make the decision of staying with the perpetrator because of finances. It is also impacting clients wishing to apply for non-molestation orders¹ due to the cost being prohibitive (the means testing for legal aid can be harsh). We had one client who was charged £900 to obtain an order; she is on benefits and is now on the breadline. She stated, "If I had known I had to pay that much I wouldn't have got the order and managed the risk myself." Clients are having to make the choice of staying safe verses being able to feed and clothe themselves and children. We are having to support and referral more clients to other agencies (such as benefit's agencies, local food banks) to receive more support. We have partnered with local business and charities' to provide food parcels and toiletries for clients this Christmas.
28. Impact on Bede as an organisation - As an organisation we are hearing more and more stories of clients being more financial dependent on abusers. We are having to research local organisations that can help clients financial, and source food and clothes donations. During Christmas we saw a 90% increase in clients needing food and warm clothes. We have seen an 80% increase in clients that need financial support and this has added to our workload as a whole.

¹ A non-molestation order is aimed at preventing the perpetrator from using or threatening violence, intimidating, harassing, or pestering the survivor (and/or children), in order to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the survivor and/or their children

29. **Southwark case study**

30. Survivor Mary had been married to her abuser for 5 years; she had shared experiences of financial, sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Mary had successfully left him 4 years ago and had a child contact order in place for him to see the children. During COVID Mary was furloughed, after the lockdown period the business she worked at closed and she found herself without work. Her abuser offered to help her financially; he stated, “he didn’t want the kids to suffer”. Mary described the contact with him as a slow drip, he would show up to her house with food and toys for the kids and she felt grateful for the support. One weekend the kids wanted him to stay over, before she knew it, he was staying over every week. Mary was grateful as he was helping her with food and electric when she was short. Mary referred herself to Bede In Nov 22. Mary described how the abuser was using her financial situation to control her. The abuser would put enough money on the electric meter when he was home, he would turn on all the lights, turn the heater on full blast and turn on every electrically appliance on. When the meter was on low he would leave the home. Mary would come home to see the meter was on emergency. Mary would have to stay in the dark and cold until he came home and would top up the meter. Mary described her main concern was not her physical safety, as he had physical assaulted her when she had told him to stop this behaviour. Mary was concerned how she would be able to pay the bills and provide for her children without his help.

31. **Refuge** have published a national report on the cost of living crisis [New data from Refuge warns that cost of living crisis is forcing survivors of domestic abuse to stay with abusive partners. – Refuge.](#) The report published in November 2022 includes has the following key findings:

- Refuge’s specialist technology-facilitated and economic empowerment team has seen an 87% increase in referrals for support with complex cases – they say this can be directly linked to the impact of the crisis.
- 77% of frontline workers surveyed said that the cost-of-living crisis is stopping women from leaving their abusers, forcing women to choose between remaining with their abusive partner or risking destitution. More than 50% of Refuge frontline staff surveyed said that the cost-of-living crisis is leading survivors to return to their abusers.
- Over three quarters (77%) of Refuge’s frontline workers also said the cost-of-living crisis is impacting survivors’ mental health. Refuge’s services staff shared that survivors are being pushed into debt or further debt as income from work and/or benefits is not enough to pay for essentials. This includes food and clothing for themselves and their children,
- Perpetrators are also taking advantage of the cost-of-living crisis to increase economic abuse and control. Some perpetrators are restricting food and heating and attempting to gain custody of

children on the basis that survivors simply cannot afford to maintain a warm home and enough food.

- Refuge warns that it will need an additional £1 million pounds to address the rising costs of running its specialist services.

32. **Southwark case study** – below is a case study from Southwark refuge housing provision

33. *Have you been affected by cost-of-living crisis?*

The most serious issue was access to benefits. Living off £60 pound per week carer's allowance, which after paying the service charge, putting money on the oyster, and buying food I am left with nothing. Before I came here, I was working and looking after myself, it has been really hard to do that on the money I get now and the cost-of-living crisis has made it worse.

34. *What was the impact on you?*

The lack of funds has made it difficult to make the long-distance journeys to visit my child and to adequately attend to my mother who I care for. I am unable to afford basic needs and rely on my mother and father to support me. I like to eat healthy due to my body dysmorphia this is made difficult with the cost of living as food costs more. I used to own a car which I have had to sell as I could not afford to keep it, I now must pay for transport which I cannot always afford.

35. *How did it make you feel?*

I have been quite depressed, all over the place really. When I was with my ex-partner I was working and driving and able to look after myself. I feel I was in better position financially before I fled. Whilst I feel safer physically, I do feel financially affected.

36. *Have you received support from others?*

My mother and father have financially supported me when they can. My Father works and my mother receives PIPs, they have done a lot for me to keep me going.

37. *Implication?*

I never felt that I needed to go back to my ex-partner as he relied on me for money. I feel that I would be worse off if I was not in the Refuge. I feel inadequate because it feels like I am living off my parents and as an adult I really do not want to be doing that.

38. *Refuge Support?*

My refuge worker supported me to access the Southwark Hardship Fund and they provided me with £130 shopping vouchers for Sainsbury, this has helped me buy food and sustain myself. I was also supported to access my universal credit to add the hours that I care for mother, this as shown that I should receive an increase in carers allowance, and it will be backdated 3 months. I have also been supported to apply for PIPs due to my anxiety and depression. I hope that through the support I am getting I can also get back to work.

AUDIT TRAIL

This section must be included in all reports.

Lead Officer	Sharon Ogden	
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Version	Final	
Dated	6 February 2023	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Law and Governance	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Governance	No	No
List other officers here		
Cabinet Member	To be presented at LMB on 9 February 2023	
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team / Scrutiny Team	7 February 2023	