

Item No. 7.	Classification: Open	Date: 23 October 2012	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title:		Review of Services Relating to Domestic Violence and Abuse in Southwark (Report of Housing, Environment, Transport & Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee)	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Overview & Scrutiny Committee	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the cabinet considers the recommendations of the review of services relating to domestic violence and abuse in Southwark and responds to the overview and scrutiny committee by December 2012.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. This is the final report arising from the scrutiny review of services relating to domestic violence and abuse in Southwark.
3. The review considers the support that victims receive and action taken to ensure perpetrators are held to account in order to break cycles of violence in the home. The sub-committee felt that the review was particularly timely as the council was moving to a new integrated approach to dealing with domestic abuse via the commissioning of a new contract with Solace Women's Aid, a specialist organisation.
4. The sub-committee heard evidence from the council's head of community safety, domestic abuse team, housing officers and representatives of Solace and the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime. The chair visited a domestic violence centre run by Solace.

DECISIONS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5. The overview & scrutiny committee considered the report at its meeting on 17 September 2012. The committee welcomed the report and the valuable work of the sub-committee and acknowledged the particular impact that a dedicated domestic violence court could make.
6. The overview & scrutiny committee agreed to write to the Justices' Clerk and the Chair of Bench for the South Central area, copying in the Honorary Recorder of Southwark, asking if consideration has been given to setting up a dedicated domestic violence court and encouraging this course of action.
7. The overview & scrutiny committee also agreed to write to the three Southwark MPs asking if they would support the introduction of a dedicated domestic violence court for Southwark.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The housing, environment, transport & community safety scrutiny sub-committee's recommendations are listed below.
 1. Accurate statistics - Significantly, Solace's monthly output statistics produced on the number of cases they are coming across are not matching the local police statistics (based on reported crime) either according to quantity or trend. The sub-committee feels that the statistics produced by Solace are more likely to be reflective of the real extent of domestic violence in the borough. In future, these are the statistics which should be used to inform the council and Solace's action to tackle domestic abuse.
 2. Dedicated domestic violence court - Time between incident and court hearing needs to be drastically reduced. Domestic violence courts have been very effective in other London Boroughs in reducing this time and consequently increasing conviction rates. Southwark council on its own cannot deliver this much needed reform. The sub-committee will write to all three Southwark MPs to see what influence they can bring to bear on Ministers and the courts service to deliver this change. The sub-committee would also ask that the Cabinet Member for Community Safety initiates work with Executive Councillors in Lambeth to see what further work can be done to deliver a dedicated domestic violence court. Southwark cannot continue to have such a low conviction rate, which exacerbates the problem of domestic violence in our borough.
 3. Training – The training programme for relevant Southwark Council staff and other external agencies needs to be rolled out as a matter of urgency. There should be no further delay. Priority groups for training are: community leaders (TRA leaders, faith group leaders, voluntary and community sector and councillors) and professionals (social workers, Area Housing Staff, council staff who have regular contact with residents). This is important as Domestic Abuse needs to be 'owned' by all that come into contact with it. Officers can make routine enquiries about domestic abuse in assessments etc and all should know what the next steps should be.
 4. Domestic Abuse Champions - In addition, managers in Southwark Council should identify Domestic Abuse Champions. These would be members of staff across council departments who would be given additional specialist training. They would then be a resource which their colleagues could consult if they were concerned about a possible incident of domestic violence. This has been successfully done in other London Boroughs.
 5. Linking tenancy and leaseholder status to attendance on behaviour change programme - Officers and Solace report that one recurring issue is that perpetrators of domestic violence are often extremely reluctant to attend the "behaviour change programme". Where the perpetrator is a council tenant, the council should consider making attendance on the programme a condition of continued tenancy. Officers from Solace and housing should work closely together to use tenancy as leverage to force perpetrators to attend the programme. The council could also consider taking the same approach with leaseholders, where the council is the freeholder.

6. Victims of indeterminate Immigration status, no recourse to public funds - The council does respond to those high risk victims with no recourse through the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) process, however options remain extremely limited. Southwark officers should await the outcome and recommendations of Children's Services research into cases where the victim has no recourse to public funds. On receipt of this research a further action plan on how to deal with this difficult issue should be drawn up by the council. The sub-committee will ask local MPs to write to Ministers to highlight the issue and the need for further resources.
7. Placing a domestic abuse caseworker with police – The sub-committee recommends (as per the Solace contract) that the police prioritise the co-location of a domestic abuse support worker at key days and times. This helps the police to understand the process and needs of victims as well as ensures victims have access to support services in the shortest possible time frame.
8. Risk Assessment Criteria - Concern was raised by staff working at the Southwark/Solace Advocacy Support Service that staff in different council departments and other agencies were often using different risk assessments. This may, in part, be due to statutory frameworks requiring different focus, but should not be an excuse for making the system more complex and onerous for victims. Officers and Solace should train/ work with agencies and council departments to ensure that the correct risk assessment criteria are used.
9. Changing the response from the housing department - Officers told the sub-committee that often it was the victim who was removed from his/her home, the abusive situation, to be re-housed in less than adequate accommodation. Senior managers in the housing department need to work with officers in community safety to ensure that measures are put in place to enable bespoke action plans to better meet the needs of victims.
10. Staffing levels in support service - On the visit to the Southwark/Solace Advocacy Support Service another issue which arose was staffing levels, particularly in relation to caseworkers and counsellors. The Cabinet Member for Community Safety should consider prioritising funding for two additional posts (one caseworker and one counsellor) as and when it is possible to identify funding for these posts
11. Ensuring all staff in the housing options unit take responsibility for reports of domestic abuse – All staff should take responsibility for dealing with those presenting as victims of domestic abuse. This is particularly important in high risk areas such as the housing options unit. Managers should ensure staff are trained and able to do this. Timely and high standard bespoke action planning should be undertaken and necessary referrals made.
12. Peckham area is a hot-spot for domestic violence incidents. The Solace “hub and spoke” structure in the borough needs to make sure that sufficient facilities for support meetings are available in this part of the borough. There has been some delay in securing these facilities and this needs to be addressed urgently.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Agenda & Minutes, Housing, Environment, Transport & Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee	Scrutiny Team 160 Tooley Street London SE1 2QH	Peter Roberts 020 7525 4350

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix A	Report of the Housing, Environment, Transport & Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee - Review of Services Relating to Domestic Violence and Abuse in Southwark

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Shelley Burke, Head of Overview & Scrutiny	
Report Author	Peter Roberts, Scrutiny Project Manager	
Version	Final	
Dated	26 September 2012	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Director of Legal Services	N/a	N/a
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services	N/a	N/a
Chief Officers	N/a	N/a
Cabinet Member	N/a	N/a
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team	26 September 2012	