

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 22 January 2025 at 6.00 pm in Council Chamber, Third Floor, Southwater One, Telford, TF3 4JG

Present: Councillors E Davies (Chair), E Aston, S Handley, P J Scott and G Thomas

In Attendance: T Mercer (Senior Public Health Commissioner), H Onions (Director: Health & Wellbeing) R Phillips (Registrars, Public Protection, Legal & Democracy Service Delivery Manager) and P Starkey (Senior Democracy Officer (Scrutiny))

COMSC14 Declarations of Interest

None.

COMSC15 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2024 be agreed and signed by the Chair.

COMSC16 Domestic Abuse Grants

The Director: Health & Wellbeing and Senior Public Health Commissioner presented an update to the Committee on the work of the Telford & Wrekin Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (DALP).

In 2021, the new Domestic Abuse (DA) Act set out obligations for local authorities which would involve a partnership approach with thematic sub-groups of partnership boards. Following the implementation of the new Act, key actions for local authorities included establishing a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board, conducting a needs assessment around safe accommodation every three years, providing sufficient safe accommodation and publishing a strategy for support provision for the Borough.

In 2022, the Telford & Wrekin Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board was established in conjunction with the national Domestic Abuse charity Safe Lives and the process to refresh the Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy commenced. Although the act focused on accommodation-based support, the DALP adopted a wider approach incorporating prevention and community awareness schemes such as the White Ribbon campaign and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) initiative.

The Council's domestic abuse grant for the 2025/26 financial year was estimated at £0.582m and would support the expansion of safe accommodation and support for victims and families but would not be able to

be used for work with perpetrators. Additional funding would be sought from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) and corporate sources.

Members heard that the Council started its commissioning process in 2022 which would lead to a new service and support offer in operation from June 2023, provided by Cranstoun and West Mercia Women's Aid. The new service would complement other services provided by the Council including refuge points and Family Hubs. The service offered a single point of contact and 24hr helpline as well as a specialist independent advocacy service for male victims commissioned by the OPCC, with a focus on supporting victims in the criminal justice system. There was also a range of group programmes for adult survivors and support systems for children and young people affected by domestic abuse. As awareness of the new service grew, capacity issues emerged and Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors for high-risk females were funded by the OPCC. Referrals for these services could be made by professionals or victims via email or the helpline.

The Council's Children's Safeguarding services included programmes such as Power to Change, The Voice and Crush, which focused on prevention and skills for avoiding abusive relationships. The Council also managed a direct access refuge for victims of domestic abuse including an 8-bed unit, whilst Cranstoun managed self-contained temporary accommodation units in partnership with local providers. At the time of the meeting, there were three operational units, with a further two units coming online in the near future. Members also heard that the A Better Tomorrow service provided additional accommodation for women and victims, particularly those with mental health, drug, or alcohol issues, incorporating a peer support ethos.

The current Domestic Abuse Strategy was approved by the Council's Cabinet in February 2023 following a period of consultation and outlined the Council's commitment to addressing domestic abuse through a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Key elements of the strategy included:-

- Partnership working – establishing and maintaining strong partnerships with various agencies and organisations to drive change shaped by survivors.
- Prevention and early intervention – focusing on preventing domestic abuse through education, community awareness, and early intervention initiatives to reduce the incidents of domestic abuse.
- Provision – providing a range of support services for victims including safe accommodation, advocacy and specialised support for children & young people to reduce the impact and minimise harm.
- Pursuing and protection – providing effective and timely response to protection including implementing programmes which hold perpetrators accountable and provides opportunities to change behaviour.

Following the presentation, Members asked a number of questions:-

Given that families, particularly those who are victims of domestic abuse often stay in hotels for refuge, how did the Council ensure that children have safe sleeping arrangements, such as access to a cot or Moses basket and that those families with small babies have access to necessary items such as sterilisers?

The Director: Health & Wellbeing advised that ensuring safe sleeping arrangements was a crucial factor whilst supporting families for short periods of time and that the Council had conducted several campaigns on this topic and were continually reviewing safer sleep arrangements.

Taking into consideration that other local authorities send victims of domestic abuse to the Borough for safe refuge, how did the Council ensure that it was working with safe landlords?

The Senior Public Health Commissioner informed Members that additional accommodation had come online in the past 12 months, however local providers have been slow to provide accommodation and there were concerns about accommodation not being occupied, leading to financial losses. The Council were working to explore more innovative ways to encourage providers to come on board and ensure accommodation facilities were being utilised effectively.

How many cases of Domestic Abuse did the Council handle annually and how many families stayed together once they had gone through the support system?

The Director: Health & Wellbeing advised that as the service was relatively new, the number of cases had increased, however, it was difficult to determine the need accurately as the needs assessment focused on who would require accommodation and the vast majority of couples had chosen to stay together. Data had shown that there had been season trends with a spike in referrals in January and also September. For the Children and Young People service, young people could refer themselves without needing parents or carers to consent.

When families reunite, does the Council specifically work to ensure that children can return to a family situation?

The Director: Health & Wellbeing advised that a vast number of families usually want to stay together and therefore work had been conducted by the Council to support this. Additionally, the Council's local perpetrator training programme had provided support to families wishing to stay together as often male perpetrators had been identified with additional support needs and the programme had allowed them to access the necessary support streams.

As part of future White Ribbon campaigns, could the Council clearly state that domestic abuse affects men as well as women?

The Director: Health & Wellbeing reassured Members that whilst the White Ribbon campaign was a national initiative that focuses on male violence against women, the Council had not lost sight of the different types of relationships affected by domestic abuse and that the services provided by the Council included elements that also addressed the needs of male victims as well as female victims.

The presentation outlined the accommodation available for females with children, but what accommodation is available for males? Have there been situations where males take their children out of abusive relationships and if so, do they seek refuge at hotels or is there specific accommodation available for males?

The Senior Public Health Commissioner advised that the current programmes do not provide refuge accommodation for male victims and that male victims would instead be placed in temporary accommodation such as hotels until more permanent arrangements could be made which would likely result in refuge outside of the county area.

Were the grants provided for the service brought forward into the following year because the amount of funding for that year had not been confirmed?

The Senior Public Health Commissioner confirmed that before commissioning the new integrated service, the Council had been funding various integration projects which resulted in an underspend and therefore the funding was consolidated.

It is pleasing to see that there is now online provision available for the Freedom Project as historically, victims would be required to physically go to a location, which could be a barrier if they couldn't escape the home environment. Was the move to online provision a conscious decision to address this issue?

The Director: Health & Wellbeing advised that practitioners had found that survivors preferred group or face-to-face support sessions provided through the Voice Programme however the Council was aware of the need to provide alternative provisions through the Freedom Programme.

COMSC17 Work Programme Review

The Service Delivery Manager: Registrars, Public Protection, Legal & Democracy presented the updated work programme to the Committee. The next formal meeting was scheduled to take place in March 2025 where Members would receive an update on the Council's affordable warmth strategy.

COMSC18 Chair's Update

The Chair advised Members that following a recent workshop conducted as part of the Committee's work to review of fly-tipping in the borough, the final

version of materials produced by the Council's Neighbourhood Enforcement Team would be circulated to the Committee for comment before production.

The Chair also suggested that the Committee participate in a further round of the mystery customer testing as part of the Committee's input into the Customer Service Strategy refresh presented at the last formal meeting.

The meeting ended at 6.57 pm

Chairman:

Date: Wednesday 12 March 2025