



Essex Domestic Abuse Commissioning Strategy 2021-24



Essex County Council

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Foreword

The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) has established a statutory definition of domestic abuse, and places duties upon organisations to raise awareness of domestic abuse, strengthen support to victims (including children) and improve the criminal justice system.

There is a new duty on the Council to make provision for victims living within safe accommodation, and with 23 people per 1,000 in Essex affected by domestic abuse related crimes, we welcome the opportunity this new legislation brings to strengthen the work we already do with our partners to tackle domestic abuse.

As Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Early Years I am particularly pleased to see the Act recognises children as victims and the expectation to ensure they are supported to recover from what are devastating and traumatising experiences for them.

This commissioning strategy sets out our intentions for the next three years whereby we aim to create sustainable change across the system through continued partnership work and further by increasing the existing types of provision of offer to all victims in safe accommodation. We are committed to doing this in genuine collaboration with victims as experts by experience so they can have influence in decision making and design appropriate support in partnership with us and our partners.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of this commissioning strategy. Most importantly the victims who have given up their time and been generous and brave enough to share their lived experiences with us.

Councillor Beverley Egan

Cabinet Member for
Children's Services and
Early Years



1.

Introduction



The Domestic Abuse Act and purpose of this Commissioning Strategy

We know that domestic abuse is under reported, does not discriminate, and affects people regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, socio economic status, sexual orientation, or background. Domestic abuse is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in most cases by a partner or ex-partner, yet can also include a family member or carer.

The definition in the Domestic Abuse Act defines it as:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic abuse
- Psychological, emotional, or other abuse

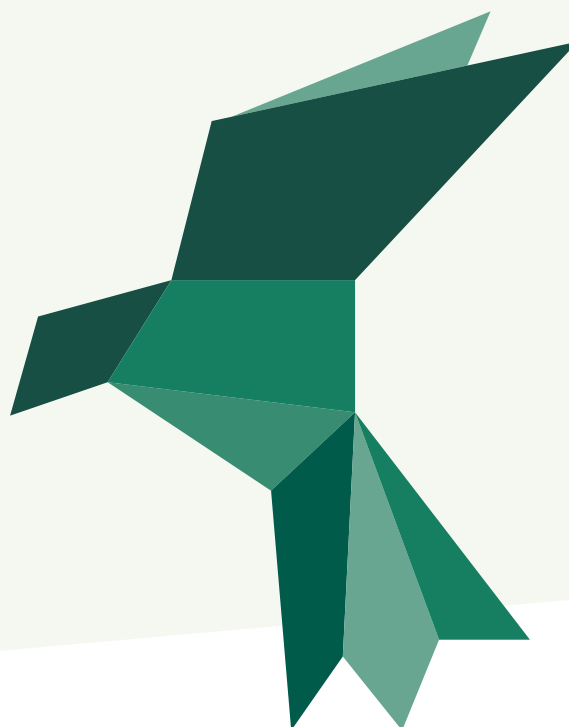
The Domestic Abuse Act (The Act) received Royal Assent on the 29th April 2021. The Act contains both legislative and non-legislative functions designed to:

- Promote awareness of domestic abuse
- Protect and support victims and their families
- Transform the justice process to prioritise victim's safety and to drive consistency and better performance in the response to domestic abuse across all local areas, agencies, and sectors.

The Act places a specific duty on Essex County Council (the Council), as a Tier 1 Local Authority, to provide support to victims of domestic abuse who are residing within safe accommodation¹, and where present, their children. The support aims to build the resilience needed for victims to recover from the trauma of domestic abuse and start to rebuild their lives.

To fulfil its duties the Council is required to appoint a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board to support it performing specific functions that are to:

- Assess the need for domestic abuse support within safe accommodation in Essex
- Prepare and publish a strategy for the provision of such support
- Give effect to the strategy through commissioning/decommissioning decisions
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy
- Report back annually to central government



¹ The definition of the types of safe accommodation include; refuge, dispersed accommodation, specialist (for those with complex needs or protected characteristics), emergency, Whole Housing Approach and victims homes where appropriate safety measures are in place

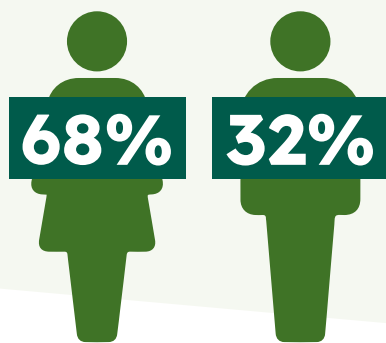
The National and Local Picture

Domestic abuse is common and can have a devastating impact on physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, housing, finances, work and, where children are impacted, their schooling and educational outcomes.

It can also result in victims and families moving away from their homes, local communities and support networks to be safe and at worst, domestic abuse sadly can result in death, leaving devastating impacts on victims' families and friends.

It is estimated

5.5% of adults aged 16 to 74 years (2.3 million people) experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales in the year ending March 2020.



Of this estimate **68% (1.56 million) were women** and **32% (757,000) were men.**

Essex has a population of 1.5 million people making it the largest local authority by population size in the East of England. It is served by Essex County Council and 12 Districts, Boroughs and a City and is predominantly rural. The rate of domestic abuse service referrals across Essex is not evenly distributed with the highest rates seen in Harlow and Colchester. This in some ways reflects the rate of Domestic Abuse investigations by Essex Police, however Basildon and Tendring appear much higher in police data in comparison to service referral data.

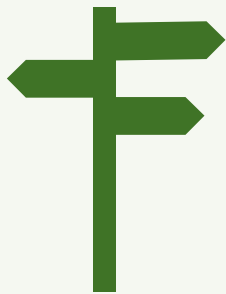
In Essex, between April 2020 and March 2021:



There were **32,398 domestic abuse investigations** in Essex with **22,789 (70%) of these recorded as a crime.**



Essex Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) **heard 1602 cases**, with 332 of these repeats which equates to a **total repeat rate of 21%.**



COMPASS, the domestic abuse single point of access in Essex had **4,716 contacts**, with **2,087** receiving information, advice or guidance, **209** signposted to specialist services and **1,755** referred to local commissioned domestic abuse support.



Jointly commissioned domestic abuse services supported **4,123 victims and survivors** with 2,129 having **4,214 children between them.**

There were **4 domestic homicides.**



1,251 victims of domestic abuse presented as homeless and sought housing from the 12 Local Housing Authorities.

Whilst the pandemic has not resulted in the increase in domestic abuse reports to Essex Police, data from domestic abuse providers has shown peaks with an increase in the number of referrals overall, with January to March 2021 seeing a surge. We expect there to be more complex cases of domestic abuse emerging and the longer-term impacts of that to be felt in the coming months and years ahead.

The Current Context in Essex

The domestic abuse agenda has been a priority for the Council for many years, and we have invested capacity and financial investment into our long-standing Southend Essex and Thurrock Domestic Abuse Board (SETDAB) arrangements and the provision of a single point of access to support and community-based services for victims.

The work of SETDAB is underpinned by the 2020 five-year strategy¹ where partners are committed to delivering together better against 5 Outcomes.

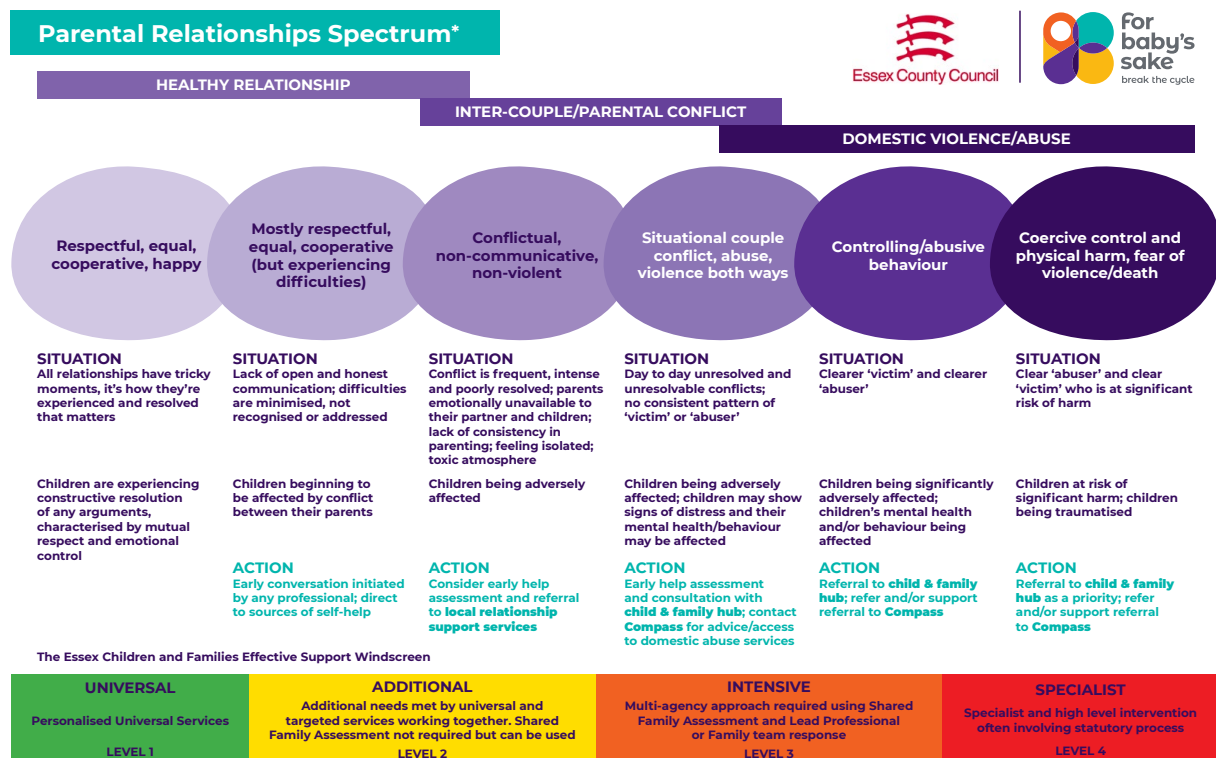
1. Children and young people can recognise and form healthy relationships
2. People experiencing/at risk of experiencing domestic abuse are supported to be and feel safe
3. Everyone can rebuild their lives and live free from domestic abuse
4. Supporting and disrupting perpetrators to change their behaviour and break the cycle of domestic abuse
5. Communities, professionals, and employers are able to recognise domestic abuse at the earliest opportunity and have the confidence to take action

The Council is committed to continuing work with our partners with the aim of aligning domestic abuse activity across the whole system, which includes developing and strengthening our early intervention and prevention offer, our approach to perpetrators and our Whole Housing Approach (WHA).

In Essex we also have a strategic approach to family conflict and recognise that whilst conflict does not always lead to domestic abuse, it does play a part within the context of early intervention and healthy relationships. Our strategic approach to family conflict includes a Relationships Spectrum, which helps to distinguish between harmful conflict and domestic abuse.

1 <https://setdab.org/about-us/>

Parental Relationships Spectrum



*Adapted by The For Baby's Sake Trust from the model developed by Dr Mark Farrall, Ignition Creative Learning Limited
www.Forbabysake.org.uk

February 2021

This 3-year commissioning strategy will build on existing work and ensure implementation of the Council's duties to support victims of domestic abuse in safe accommodation. It will use the insights from our needs assessment to work with partners and victims to plan, co-design and implement appropriate evidenced based support to victims.

2.

The Current Offer

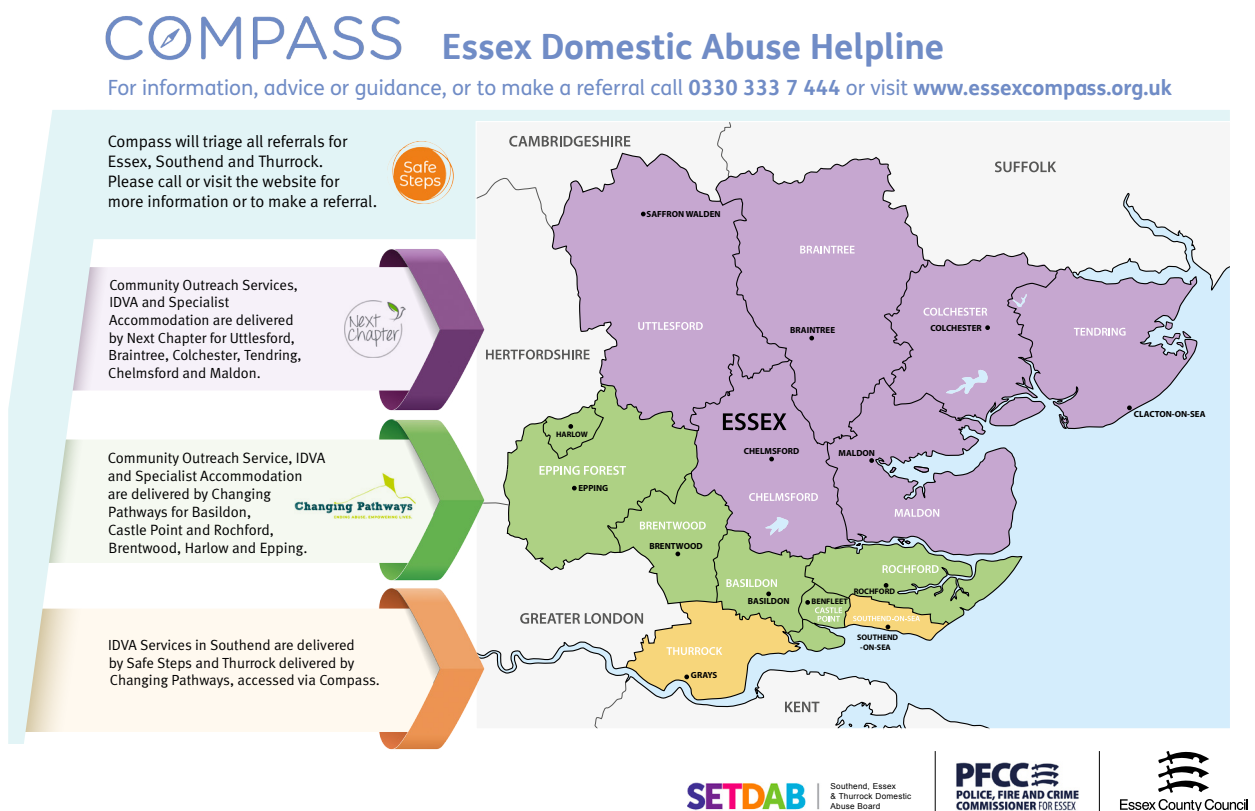


Commissioning

The Council already makes substantial financial investment in community based domestic abuse services which were recommissioned in April 2019 to March 2024. This is a joint commissioning arrangement with the Essex Police Fire and Crime Commissioner Office resulting in £2.2 million per annum investment for adult victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

The current offer comprises of a single point of access (Compass), provided by Safe Steps, and community outreach, support within safe accommodation and Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) provided by The Next Chapter and Changing Pathways.

Domestic Abuse Services in Essex from 1 April 2019



There are a range of other services supporting domestic abuse victims across the county including other domestic abuse organisations, sexual assault and drug and alcohol services, voluntary and community sector-based specialists as well as District and Borough Councils, mental health services and children's and adult's social care.

How we work

We engage with regional forums where best practice is shared, providing opportunities to discuss topics including accommodating needs to ensure every victim receives support regardless of the boundary they cross. These collaborations include Southend, Thurrock, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. We have also utilised the opportunities afforded in The Act to explore key themes and considerations such as best practice and support for victims and survivors with complex needs with other Local Authorities.

We have strong partnerships across Essex and with our neighbouring authorities of Southend and Thurrock. There are a variety of activities driving developments of the SETDAB Strategy across the partnership, including the Whole Housing Approach (WHA). Whilst housing is the responsibility of the 12 Essex Districts/Boroughs/City, it is integral to the delivery of this strategy.

The WHA aims to improve and provide a range of housing options for those affected by domestic abuse through a whole system approach which is trauma informed, across all types of housing including private housing (rented and owned), social housing, refuges, and supported housing. The SETDAB Housing sub-group have been exploring the WHA, working with housing partners to develop and embed a WHA offer across Essex and recently developed Sanctuary Scheme protocols and guidance.



3.

What We Know



What we know

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 places a duty on the Council to assess the need for support within safe accommodation for all victims and survivors and their children. Building on our existing needs assessment we have undertaken a robust qualitative and quantitative review to extend and deepen our knowledge to understand:

- The needs of those supported in safe accommodation
- The level of demand for safe accommodation
- The types of services available in Essex and if these match need
- Current pathways to support

This was an extensive piece of work that engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including domestic abuse service providers and victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We used a range of methods including data collection through surveys, qualitative data from interviews with victims and survivors, and system wide information through a series of workshops.



Safe Accommodation

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) definition of the types of safe accommodation is;

- **Refuge**
- **Dispersed and move on accommodation,**
- **Specialist (for those with complex needs or protected characteristics)**
- **Sanctuary schemes**
- **Whole Housing Approach**

We believe that safe accommodation should also include the victims and survivors' home, where this is their preferred option and where it is safe for them to stay. This would need to include safety planning that considers any additional safety measures and where the perpetrator is not living in the home.

There are currently 5 refuges across Essex, which can accommodate up to 49 adult victims and 98 babies, children and young people at any one time. This includes one specialist recovery refuge for single women with no children that have a drug/alcohol dependency. There are also around 40 units of dispersed refuge accommodation across Essex consisting of: houses, privately owned flats, single bed units and flats with two bedrooms.

We know that there is a lack of safe accommodation for some groups, either as a result of not being able to meet a specific need such as, victims with large families or for domestic abuse marginalised groups. For example, there are limited safe accommodation options for men in Essex, who are often restricted to single unit housing, which can then impact on accessing peer support networks. Victims with no recourse to public funds are also reliant on pro-bono arrangements with providers of safe accommodation.

We know that in 2020/21 there were 904 referrals for safe accommodation in refuge, 220 were accommodated with 684 not accommodated. Of those not accommodated 26% were due to lack of space and capacity, 24% where the victim declined the accommodation offer and 10% as the accommodation did not meet their needs.

In 2020/21 an additional



victims were supported to stay in their own homes through a **Sanctuary Scheme** or through other forms of similar safety measures.

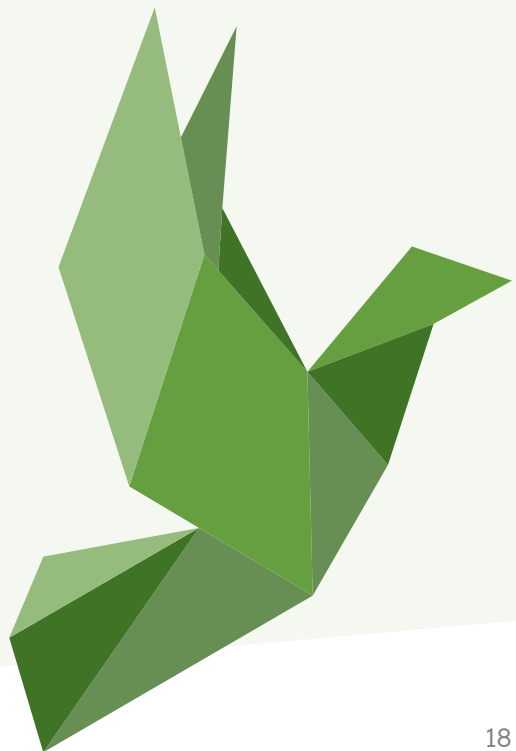
It is likely this number is considerably higher as limited information was available as housing providers are at different stages in implementing this support at a local level.

Support in safe accommodation

Victims and survivors residing in safe accommodation in Essex have access to a variety of support through 1:1 and group work programmes ranging from safety planning, financial management, counselling, play work, advocacy, parenting, educational programmes etc.

The support offer is variable across safe accommodation and is often dependent on short term funding, with providers citing lack of funding to support psychological and emotional wellbeing support for both adults and children.

Legal advice, whilst available through external organisations such as local law firms working pro bono and online self-serve organisations such as FLOWS, there are challenges to sourcing legal advice and information where cases are complex, particularly around child access, family courts residency etc.



Views from Experts by Experience

We have been doing work to establish the views and needs of victims and survivors, through service mapping, case studies and conducting interviews.

The views of these ‘experts by experience’ has been integral to developing this strategy, and it is recognised that so much more needs to be done to ensure we are collaborating and developing appropriate support with as many different ‘experts’ from marginalised groups such as men, and those with protected characteristics.

Overall, their experiences of support within safe accommodation were generally positive. Smooth referral processes and help provided quickly when needed with strong relationships with practitioners was a common theme. Counselling and other forms of emotional wellbeing support were also shared as a positive experience.

“Once I spoke to them, I was here within 2 days...they really **did all the hard work for me.**”

“So good here because they encourage you into recovery, **it’s so perfect**”

“Amazing support **from IDVAs.**”

When asked if there were any key challenges, access to affordable and appropriate housing was highlighted, which impacts on moving out of temporary safe accommodation. Victims and survivors also shared their experiences of limited support around finances, benefit entitlement and legal advice with challenges around the different court systems. Although there was positive feedback about counselling and emotional wellbeing support whilst in safe accommodation, not all victims and survivors felt ready to embrace this, and then struggled to access it once they had left the accommodation.

“quite impersonal, felt like it could be a bit more human, especially with young children involved...all they said was you can keep bidding on properties.”

“would have liked to see Police support allowed into the family court”

“I will make sure I’ve got support in place. It’s not being sent out without it as it can set people up to fail.”

When asked what could be improved, victims and survivors shared that there needed to be more awareness around domestic abuse, particularly where it is not physical abuse, for example coercive control. They also shared that finances were a struggle, including accessing the right advice and support. More support for whole families was also raised, particularly for children of different ages and help to encourage more peer support. Awareness raising for perpetrators' families was also mentioned as victims and survivors felt families needed to be included in conversations and made aware of the signs and impact of domestic abuse.

**“kids don’t
want to talk to
adults”**

**“People aren’t
always aware – it’s
trying to catch
someone before
it’s too late”**

**“They don’t think their
son could do that sort
of thing - perpetrator
families need **to listen
to the story.**”**

Summary of our key findings

Whilst there are some limitations to the needs assessment and more we need to learn, the extensive activity that has been undertaken so far has enabled us to establish 6 key themes for focussing our commissioning activity:



Support for children - Around **79% of victims** accessing support have children, however support for child victims is variable and the funding not sustainable.



Long term housing - There is a lack of affordable and appropriate housing across Essex, and advice is not always helpful or consistent.



Safe accommodation - **20% of victims have 3 or more children**, yet safe accommodation, such as refuges are not equipped to serve people with multiple children and housing for larger families is harder to source.



Mental health support - Mental health support needs were perceived and reported as present in nearly **half of all victims**.



Legal advice and support - Victims face challenges navigating the legal system.



Marginalised and protected characteristics groups - We must consider how we can **better support** marginalised cohorts and those with protected characteristics and if the current offer is appropriate to meet their needs.

4.

Delivering the Strategy



Our commissioning principles

The Domestic Abuse Commissioning Strategy aligns to the principles set out in the Councils overarching Commissioning Strategy for Children, Young People and Families:

- Commissioning for outcomes
- Fairness and transparency
- Early Intervention and prevention
- Evaluation and learning
- Servicer user involvement in design and decision making
- Safeguarding
- Equality and diversity
- Working in partnership across the system
- De-Commissioning for improvement
- Embedding social value within proportionate sourcing and procurement
- Market shaping for provider diversity and supply of services

Outcomes

Outcomes are the positive changes we expect to deliver as a result of this commissioning strategy.

For children and young people:

- Better able to maintain positive relationships and safe exit from unhealthy relationships
- Have an improved ability to develop healthy coping strategies to prevent reliance on unhealthy strategies (risky behaviours, substance etc)
- Have increased access and engagement with education services to help them achieve their potential
- Feel safer and better equipped to remain safe
- Have improved mental and physical health, including improved emotional wellbeing

For adults:

- Feel safer and better equipped to remain safe
- Where appropriate, and if they want to, supported to stay in their own home safely
- Have improved mental and physical health, including improved emotional wellbeing
- Able to manage financial difficulties; and become financially stable and independent
- Access to opportunities to develop their education, skills and employment opportunities
- Be able to recognise and maintain positive relationships and safe exit from unhealthy relationships

For Families:

- Feel better connected to and safe in their communities
- Have improved relationships and communication with each other
- Have the tools to be better able to manage conflict
- Parents/carers are better able to repair bonds with children and support them in their recovery moving forward
- Will build the resilience needed to recover from the trauma of domestic abuse and start to rebuild their lives

For the system - providers, partners, and professionals:

- Communities, professionals, and employers are better able to recognise domestic abuse and take action
- Pathways are clearer for all services that are accessible
- Multi-agency working across the system is improved and cohesive, including those from neighbouring authorities
- There is an increased awareness of domestic abuse provision and the support available



Our commissioning objectives

The Council is in receipt of £2.8 million ‘new burdens funding’ from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in 2021/22 to support with implementing the new duties.

This is to ‘enable them to fulfil the functions of the new statutory duty relating to the provision of support to victims of domestic abuse and their children residing within safe accommodation’.

At the time of publishing this strategy there is uncertainty about future funding allocations and thereby limitations to commissioning for our longer-term intentions. Therefore, we have taken a pragmatic approach to ensuring those providers, whether currently commissioned or not, who are already delivering against our new duties, have been allocated funding to secure continuity of service for victims residing in safe accommodation until March 2022 when we expect there to be more surety on future funding allocations. Subsequently, the following commissioning intentions set out where we have allocated the new funding to fulfil our duties as well as our longer-term ambitions post 2022.



Objective 1: Children and young people residing in safe accommodation can access support that meets their needs.

We know that a large proportion of victims and survivors residing in safe accommodation in Essex have at least one child. Our research has shown that although children are well supported within safe accommodation, the offer is variable and is often restricted due to funding. Parents value support for children where it is available, and there is a need to support children to provide parents the space to work on their own needs. Parents have told us that they want their children more involved, sharing what they need from their own perspective. There is also limited information available nationally on ‘what works’ to support children affected by domestic abuse. The response needed to children and young people of different ages needs to be trauma informed, and consideration given that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ answer.

What we will do

We will support those already making provision in safe accommodation by allocating funding to ensure delivery of services up to March 2022

We will build on research regarding ‘what works’ for children affected by domestic abuse residing within safe accommodation, utilising the ‘voice of victims’ programme of work to reach out and explore this further with children and young people.

We will test new ideas and approaches to ensure excellent support for children and young people of different ages.

We will engage with providers to identify ways we can work together to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people, ensuring their involvement in these developments.



Objective 2: Victims and survivors of domestic abuse can access support to improve their psychological and emotional wellbeing and recover from trauma

Psychological and emotional wellbeing support needs were present in nearly half of all victims and survivors in refuge and those in the community. We recognise that the term ‘mental health’ is often used interchangeably with emotional health and wellbeing, as such, we need to better understand what the ‘mental health’ needs of victims are.

There are existing services available to support with mental health conditions in the community, however, feedback from victims, survivors and providers shared concerns about timely accessibility, alignment with safety plans and barriers to engaging. Providers have been sourcing grants and other funding opportunities to be able to provide counselling and therapeutic support when it is needed. However, this is not sustainable or designed against the holistic needs of victims, for example inclusion of a recovery model once the victim has resettled.

What we will do

We are committed to developing and making provision for psychological and emotional wellbeing support where gaps in provision are identified. To do this we will undertake a robust service design exercise to understand the problem at depth and design the right solutions for early help, crisis and recovery. This will be done with key stakeholders and experts by experience in order to understand what will work well and deliver the best outcomes.



Objective 3: Victims and survivors of domestic abuse will have improved access to safe accommodation through good quality information, advice and guidance.

We know that there is a lack of affordable and appropriate housing for those affected by domestic abuse and feedback suggests that housing advice to victims and survivors is not always appropriate. We also know that this issue cannot be solved without considering the needs of perpetrators.

We acknowledge and value the role that refuges and dispersed accommodation plays in keeping victims and survivors safe. However, there is a growing need to consider other housing options, to meet the needs of a very diverse group of individuals, including victim and survivor choice to stay in their own home where it is safe for them to do so.

The SETDAB Whole Housing sub-group have been driving work forward, working with key stakeholders to embed the whole housing approach (WHA). The WHA aims to improve and provide a range of housing options (not limited to those in refuge) for those affected by domestic abuse through a whole system approach which is trauma informed led.

What we will do

We will allocate funding to the 12 local District/Borough/City Councils to increase their local systems of information advice and guidance to ensure victims receive high quality support.

We will continue to collaborate with the SETDAB housing sub-group, working with housing providers to embed the WHA.

We will work with SETDAB partners to improve the information that is available to organisations regarding domestic abuse housing options to ensure victims and survivors are receiving consistent messages.

4

Objective 4: Victims and survivors of domestic abuse will be better informed of their legal options

We know that the legal system is complex and there are separate pathways and long waiting lists which can add to the stress of resolving issues. Domestic abuse providers often utilise contacts with universities and known legal firms to seek advice for victims and survivors, however, this is often dependent on capacity and whether legal aid is available.

There is also a breadth of information available online, with some offering self-serve options, however, this can be difficult to navigate, and victims often do not have the capacity to do this when facing and managing other complex issues on a day to day basis.

What we will do

We will explore through regional forums the issues of legal advice and provide feedback to central government for discussion and action on the wider impact.

We will work with key stakeholders to identify the different elements of legal advice and support that is needed, and where there are potential gaps, we will identify ways to address this.



Objective 5: Victims and survivors of domestic abuse will play their part in the co-design and decisions on provision, and influence the wider domestic abuse agenda in Essex

We know that domestic abuse victims and survivors are involved in decision making at a local service level. We know that there are pockets of good practice around co-design, however, this is varied and fragmented, with no systemwide opportunities for victims and survivors to engage, share their views and influence decision making.

It is extremely challenging to ensure there are representative views of the many victims and survivors because every victim's and survivors experience of domestic abuse is unique to them. However, we are committed to finding a range of alternative ways through which they have their voices heard and when they want to participate, engage, influence and make decisions with us and our partners.

What we will do

We will continue to work with victims/survivors as 'experts by experience' to establish best practice for ensuring they are at the centre of influence and decision making to drive change and ensure the inclusion of those with protected characteristics and from marginalised groups, so that these cohorts are empowered to have their voices heard.

We will develop and co-design a range of approaches to engagement and representation so that victims and survivors of domestic abuse can have their voices heard in the way that suits their needs and not ours.

5.

Monitoring and Evaluation



Monitoring and evaluation

Delivery of this commissioning strategy will be conducted against a robust performance framework that will enable us to monitor the progress we are making against planned programmes of activity and measure the quality of our work, the impact we are making and ultimately that the desired outcomes are being delivered.

Where possible we will standardise monitoring and reporting mechanisms to strengthen our data collation and further develop our needs assessment which will be refreshed every year.

Where appropriate we will conduct informal and formal evaluations of commissioned support and activity to build on and share good practice and develop the evidence base for what works for victims and survivors.



Keeping in touch with us

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Essex County Council