

Sandwell Domestic Abuse Strategy 2021-2024

Final Draft



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Foreword

Domestic abuse is a serious issue in Sandwell. It has a devastating impact upon the victim, children, families and the wider community. Survivors include women and men; older and younger people; LGBT+ communities; people with disabilities and people from all ethnicities and backgrounds. It is recognised that domestic abuse has a detrimental effect on the safety, security, health and wellbeing of both adults and children. Access to safe accommodation as well as specialist community-based domestic abuse support is vital to providing an opportunity for victims of domestic abuse and their families to escape their abuser and have a chance to live a life without fear. It is important that all organisations that have a role to play in addressing domestic abuse work effectively in partnership to ensure victims and their families are safe and protected. Sandwell recognise the One Chance Philosophy – that practitioners working with victims may only have one chance to engage a victim or family in appropriate support and save lives or stop years of further abuse. Victims and their families need timely and trauma-informed responses.

The Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership (DASP) and Sandwell MBC has a pivotal role in bringing together partner organisations and agencies in a coordinated and planned way to address domestic abuse. This strategy outlines how partner organisations will work together to do that. It also sets out how Sandwell MBC will work with partners to meet the new statutory requirements set out by government within the Domestic Abuse Act to provide specialist support to domestic abuse victims and their children in safe accommodation. We will work to ensure that all victims/survivors are supported to remain safe in their own home if they wish, or access alternative safe accommodation and support.

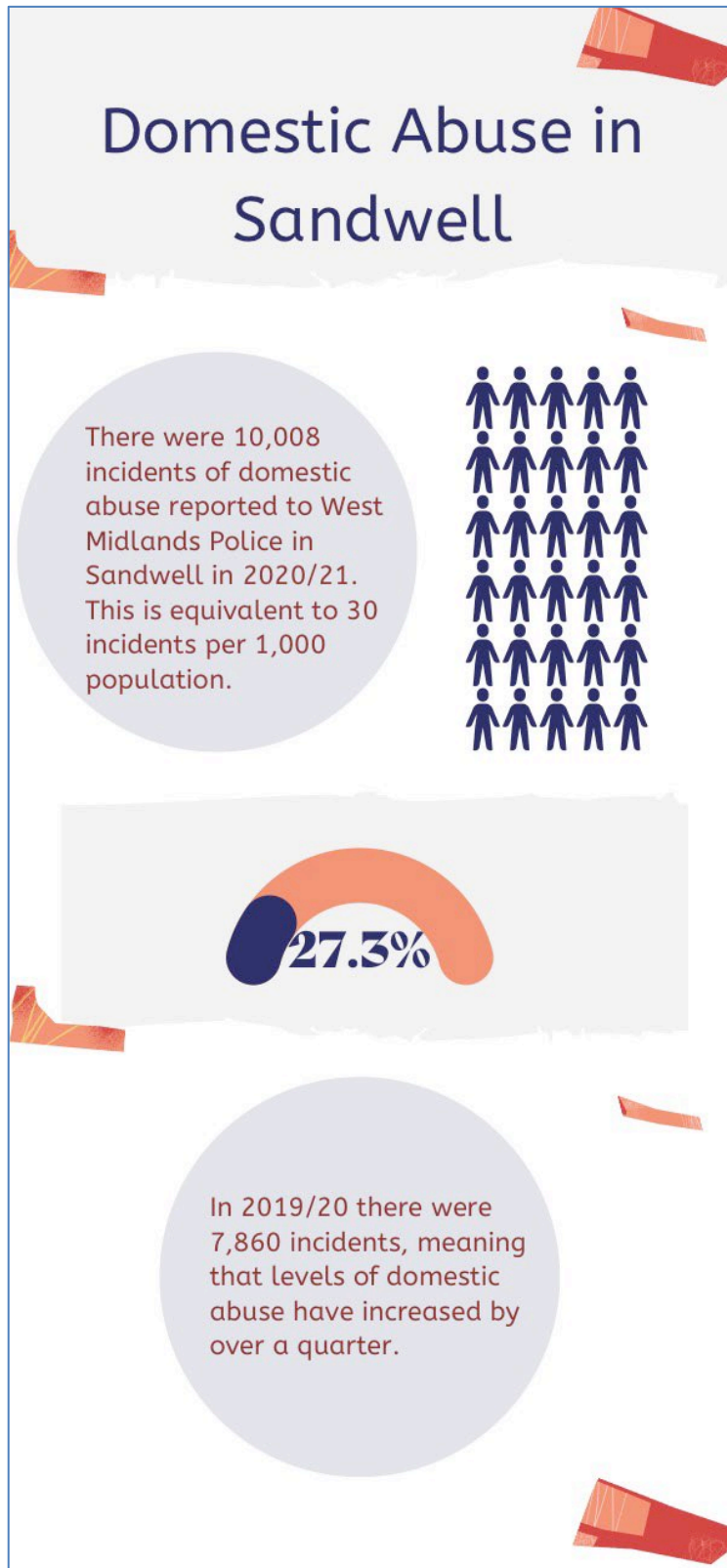
Councillor Bob Piper, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Sandwell MBC

**Alice Davey, Chair of Sandwell Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership & SMBC
Director of Borough Economy**



Executive Summary

Key Issues



- There were 10,008 incidents of domestic abuse in Sandwell reported to West Midlands Police in 2020/21 (30 incidents per 1,000 population). This represents an increase of 27.3% compared with the 7,860 incidents reported in 2019/20 (24 per 1,000 population).
- In 2020/21, Office for National Statistics data showed that there were 29 cases of domestic abuse per 1,000 population across the West Midlands as a whole. The figures for the most similar forces were 33 cases per 1,000 population for West Yorkshire, 27 per 1,000 for Greater Manchester and 24 for Merseyside. All these rates had also increased from the previous year.
- Research conducted on behalf of West Midlands Police, partly undertaken to judge the impact of the pandemic on domestic abuse levels, indicates that whilst reporting of domestic abuse has been increasing significantly year-on-year and particularly in 2020-21, they are lower than other similar forces. This research also states that we can expect to see continued increases in reporting of domestic abuse incidents in the future in the West Midlands, including for Sandwell.
- Sandwell MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) supports high risk domestic abuse cases and had a repeat case rate of 38% in 2020-21. This figure is within the national Safe Lives benchmark of 28-40% for an effective MARAC. Cases that go to MARAC are typically those with many previous incidents and that are escalating in severity. It is therefore not surprising that a significant proportion of these high-risk victims will experience a further incident, no matter how effective the MARAC. A lower than expected rate usually indicates that not all repeat victims are being identified and referred back to MARAC. All agencies should have the capacity to 'flag and tag' MARAC cases in order to identify any further incidents within a year of the last referral and re-refer the case to MARAC. A low repeat rate usually indicates that these systems are not or only partially in place.
- Sandwell Council currently commissions 38 specialist domestic abuse refuge places. The needs assessment outlined this figure is a sufficient number to meet current demand. However, there is a need to commission additional specialist support for victims and children in refuge, including children's support; access to therapeutic support and resettlement support for survivors leaving refuge.



Key things we need to do

We will focus our future work within three themes. These are:

1. Early intervention and enhanced survivor and whole family support;
 2. Joint working and partnership focus;
 3. Safe accommodation.
- To achieve progress on these themes all organisations will need to ensure that victims receive the right support first time using a One Chance Philosophy. This recognises that there may be just one chance to stop what could be years of further abuse.
 - We will also need to provide better connections between universal services and grassroots organisations to the specialist domestic abuse support service. All of these organisations have separate but distinct roles with all having a role in supporting victims and families appropriately.
 - We will develop further a Whole Family Approach seeking to achieve better co-ordination of our work with survivors, children and perpetrators.

Performance Monitoring and Key Performance Indicators

We will use a suite of performance indicators to monitor and report on the implementation of the strategy and progress towards these objectives. As a starting point, these performance indicators will include:

- The number of domestic abuse crimes and incidents reported to West Midlands Police;
- The number of high risk MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) victims and the percentage of repeat cases;



- The number of domestic abuse survivors who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Reporting will also include performance updates on funded interventions and feedback from survivors on the impact of these interventions and outcomes achieved.

Introduction

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 provides the key recent context for this strategy and current national policy. The Act contains a wide range of provisions with perhaps the most fundamental being an enhanced definition of domestic abuse relating to coercive control, emotional and financial abuse and controlling behaviour. Children witnessing domestic abuse are also included within this enhanced definition. It should be noted that specialist domestic abuse services have long recognised coercive control and have responded to it accordingly, but this has now been enshrined into law.

The statutory definition now states that abusive behaviour is any of the following:

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

For this definition to apply, the definition also states that both parties must be aged 16 or over and be 'personally connected'. Personally connected is further defined in the act as parties who:

- Are married to each other;
- Are civil partners of each other;



- Have agreed to marry one another (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);
- Have entered into a civil partnership agreement (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);
- Are or have been in an intimate personal relationship with each other;
- Have, or there has been a time when they each have had, a parental relationship in relation to the same child; or
- Are relatives.

The Act also places on a statutory basis the Domestic Abuse Disclosure Scheme commonly referred to as 'Clare's Law'.

The Act further outlines the requirement for support services to include a range of services namely: advocacy, prevention, advice, specialist support for both adults and children, counselling and therapy.

Other provisions include:

- Establishing in law the office of the national Domestic Abuse Commissioner;
- Providing a new Domestic Abuse Protection Notice and Domestic Abuse Protection Order;
- Prohibiting perpetrators of abuse from cross-examining their victims in person in the civil and family courts in England and Wales;
- Creating a statutory presumption that victims of domestic abuse are eligible for special measures in the criminal, civil and family courts;
- Clarifying the circumstances in which a court may make a barring order under section 91(14) of the Children Act 1989 to prevent family proceedings that can further traumatise victims;
- Prohibiting GPs and other health professionals in general practice from charging a victim of domestic abuse for a letter to support an application for legal aid; and



- Providing for a statutory code of practice relating to the processing of domestic abuse data for immigration purposes.¹

The Act also places a duty on relevant local authorities, including Sandwell Council, to support survivors of domestic abuse and their children in refuges or other safe accommodation. Additional New Burdens funding has been provided by central government to cater for this new duty. Safe accommodation is classified as being refuge accommodation, specialist safe accommodation (i.e. dedicated specialist support to victims with relevant protected characteristics and/or complex needs), dispersed accommodation (safe self-contained and semi-independent accommodation), sanctuary schemes providing target hardening of properties along with specialist support and move-on and / or second stage accommodation. These safe accommodation types are also the only types of accommodation that would be covered by the New Burdens funding. Further to this the Act ensures that where a local authority, for reasons connected with domestic abuse, grants a new secure tenancy to a social tenant who had or has a secure lifetime or assured tenancy (other than an assured shorthold tenancy) this must be a secure lifetime tenancy.

Finally, the Act gives relevant local authorities the mandatory requirement to produce and publish a safe accommodation strategy every three years and make an annual report on their progress. It outlines the obligation to maintain a domestic abuse strategic partnership including the requirements for their membership.

The Government published its updated Violence against Women and Girls Strategy in July 2021 (the first such strategy was published in 2010 by the Coalition Government). The current strategy, produced after the enactment of the Domestic Abuse Act, covers a range of topics, along with reporting on progress made in delivering actions from the previous versions. It sets out three ambitions, namely to:

- Increase support for victims and survivors;
- Increase in the number of perpetrators brought to justice; and
- Reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls.

In order to achieve these ambitions four thematic areas of work are outlined these being:

¹ Domestic Abuse Act 2021: Overarching Factsheet ,Home Office, 2021



- Prioritising prevention;
- Supporting victims;
- Pursuing perpetrators; and
- Strengthening the system.

It should be noted that although the strategy is entitled Tackling Violence against Women and Girls, its focus and actions does apply to all victims including men and non-binary.²

In addition to this document the Government will also be publishing a perpetrator strategy as part of its domestic abuse work, as mandated by the Domestic Abuse Act. This is due to be published within 12 months of the enactment of the Domestic Abuse Act.

Locally Sandwell has responded to the Domestic Abuse Act in a number of ways; building on our significant previous work. These include undertaking a review of the membership of the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership (and making changes in membership as a result), commissioning a domestic abuse needs assessment and developing this strategy, setting out initial investment for the New Burdens funding and assessing local provision.

Current Position in Sandwell

We have a range of services and organisations that provide support to survivors of domestic abuse and their families, aim to prevent this abuse from occurring and work with perpetrators to address their behaviour.

Of these, Black Country Women’s Aid is the most significant. They provide a range of specialist support which are commissioned by Sandwell Council or funded by a variety of external sources including the Ministry of Justice and the West Midlands Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (WMOPCC). These services include the refuge and dispersed accommodation provision, the Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) community services, the children and young people’s service

² Tackling Violence against Women and Girls, HM Government, 2021



(including support provided in relation to Operation Encompass), a stalking and harassment focused service, modern slavery and a forced marriage service. They also are commissioned to provide the IRIS (Identification and Referral to Improve Safety) programme to improve the response of primary care to domestic abuse along with a dedicated IDVA located in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). These services are provided to both males and females and have recently been enhanced even further by the inception of the 'Ask Marc' domestic and sexual abuse male-specific service.

Birmingham LGBT is commissioned by WMOPCC to deliver additional specialist domestic abuse support to LGBT victims, including in Sandwell. A family intervention programme (Families Together) is also in place - Family Action are currently commissioned to deliver this intervention. In addition, a dedicated IDVA service was introduced in 2018 to cover the Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Hospitals Trust area. Two IDVAs are now based within the Emergency Departments at Sandwell and City Hospital (in Birmingham, but borders Sandwell). These IDVAs are funded jointly through the WMOPCC (allocated via the Safer Sandwell Partnership) and Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust. The IDVAs were initially managed by BCWA, but, from July 2021, have now transferred directly to the NHS Trust.

Statutory partners also provide support for survivors of domestic abuse and their families and to address perpetrators of this abuse. These partners include those represented on Sandwell's Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership such as adult social care, public health and housing within the local authority structure, Sandwell Children's Trust, West Midlands Police, health services (primary care, mental health and hospital trusts) and the Probation service. Voluntary and community organisations are also involved – a list of all DASP partners is included in Appendix 1 at the end of this strategy document.

We also have in place well developed and focused partnership activity including the Adult Safeguarding Board, Children's Safeguarding Partnership, the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and the dedicated Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) which aims to develop actions for higher risk victims referred by partner agencies.

Also of note is the fact that Sandwell Council's Housing Services were accredited by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) in 2019 in relation to their domestic abuse services. At the time they were only the third council in the country to receive this recognition.



At a regional level Sandwell is actively engaged with the work of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit, including the development of good practice and identification of evidence-based approaches to inform the West Midlands response to domestic abuse and exploitation.

The COVID pandemic has had a notable impact both in terms of levels of demand but also in respect of how services have had to modify their own operational delivery and partnership working. Our local services all responded to this challenge admirably to ensure that support was still available. Enabling services to recover from these challenges and incorporate alternate models of working which have proved successful will form a part of activity during this strategy period.

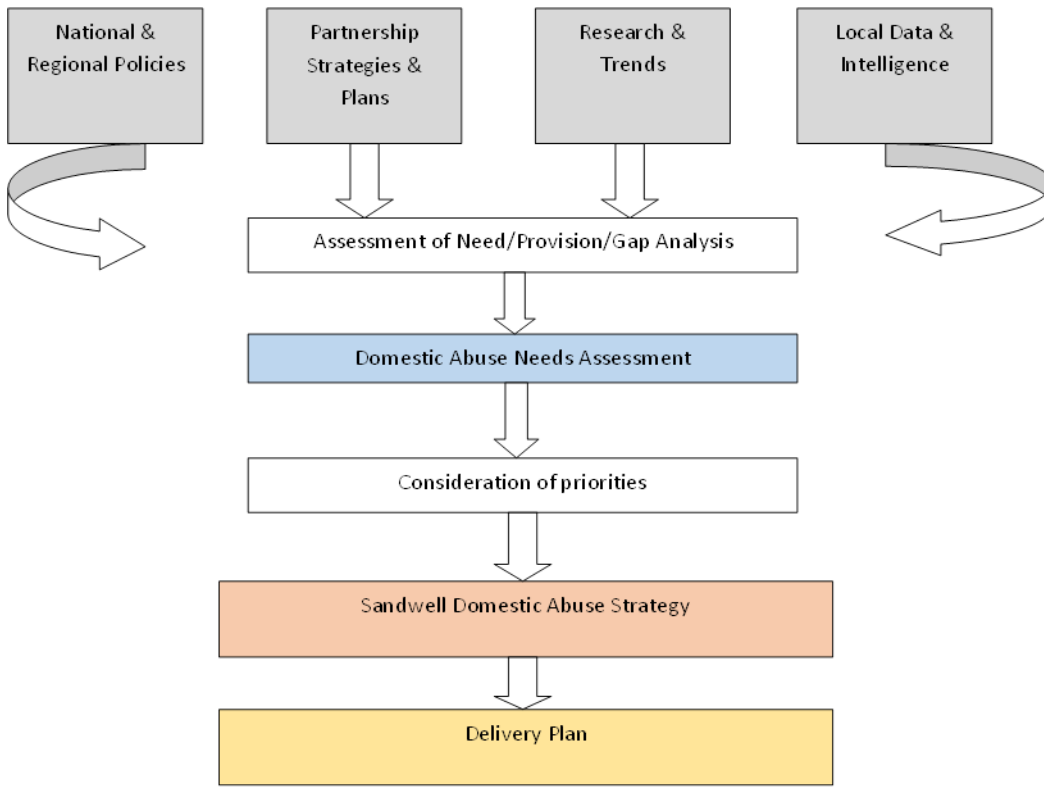
Scope

Prior to this comprehensive strategy covering all aspects of domestic abuse in Sandwell we produced a strategy focussed on safe accommodation. That safe accommodation strategy was compiled in response to the statutory duty to produce a safe accommodation strategy from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as outlined above. The final version of the safe accommodation strategy was published in January 2022 and is incorporated into this wider domestic abuse strategy. This publication schedule has been followed in order to meet the Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) deadline for production.

This strategy has been produced following a detailed domestic abuse needs assessment. The needs assessment, undertaken for us by Linxs Consultancy Limited, was compiled after a data collection and analysis programme (the safe accommodation aspect being based upon the DLUHC guidance), analysis of current services and a wide-ranging consultation programme. These consultations placed at the heart receiving the testimonies of survivors of domestic abuse and their families. We thank all those survivors who took part in this exercise, acknowledging their courage and openness in providing their experiences. Representatives from a wide variety of organisations have also provided their views and opinions.

The process followed to develop this strategy is summarised in the following process chart:





Vision

The Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership has previously agreed a vision to focus our domestic abuse work. This vision is also used for this strategy and is as follows.

Our vision is that Sandwell is a place where:

- Domestic abuse and sexual assault/abuse is not tolerated;
- Everyone can expect equality and respect in their relationships and live free from domestic abuse and sexual assault/abuse;
- The voice of victims/survivors (adults and children) are central to and fully inform our work;
- Victims/survivors and families are supported by excellent organisations working in partnership to ensure a co-ordinated community response where victims feel protected, safe and secure and recover from trauma;
- Perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and supported to change their behaviour;
- Communities are aware and are actively engaged in preventing and reducing domestic abuse/sexual assault and abuse.

Cross-cutting Objectives

To turn this vision into practice, the following three cross-cutting objectives will be used. These will drive our work over the strategy period.

- Sandwell will develop further our support for families and survivors of domestic abuse ensuring this meets the needs of all our residents regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. This will include ensuring services focus too on challenging perpetrator behaviour, making them responsible for their actions.
- Partners within Sandwell will enhance their working relationships to ensure that all play their full part in providing an ongoing duty of care to survivors and their families. All survivors should receive a consistent, trauma-informed and



supportive response to domestic abuse disclosure. In order to achieve this, professionals within our organisations will be supported to enhance their knowledge of domestic abuse issues, the availability of specialist services and how they can make a difference.

- Sandwell will continue to invest in our high quality safe accommodation offer to ensure we provide sufficient capacity to meet demand. We will strive to improve the support offered within safe accommodation still further, including the availability of therapeutic services for survivors and their children.

Performance Monitoring and Key Performance Indicators

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- The number of domestic abuse survivors who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Reporting will also include performance updates on funded interventions and feedback from survivors on the impact of these interventions and outcomes achieved.

Key findings from the Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment

The needs assessment contains a comprehensive analysis of the material gathered. Some of the most notable findings are outlined here; these are grouped using the chapter headings from that needs assessment. These findings have informed the thematic areas which we will focus upon throughout the strategy period.



Protection and Resettlement

- Policing data reveals that there has been a significant increase in the number of domestic abuse incidents occurring in Sandwell, with a particularly stark rise during the pandemic period. There were 10,008 episodes logged by West Midlands Police in 2020/21, 27.3% higher than in 2019/20. Information provided by Black Country Women's Aid and Victim Support also show that this growth in incidents has been reflected by rising referral rates and need for support. Data from Black Country Women's Aid in particular shows an association between lockdown and increasing non-physical forms of abuse (stalking, financial abuse, emotional abuse and coercive control) with sizeable percentage increases across these classifications when comparing quarter 1 2020/21 with quarter 4.
- There is a higher proportion of Police incidents than the relative Census population percentages for Indian, Pakistani and Black/British victims, suggesting that ethnicity is not generally a barrier to reporting in Sandwell for these communities. Lower than expected reporting rates are observable amongst the White Irish, Chinese, White/Black African and White/Asian mixed backgrounds although the population sizes and incident numbers here are relatively small. Of particular concern, however, are the statistics relating to the Bangladeshi community which represents 2.1% of the Sandwell population but just 0.7% of recorded domestic abuse incidents.
- Geographical analysis shows that the wards with the highest rates per 1,000 population are Princes End (111.8), West Bromwich Central (99.1) and Langley (93.3). However, Adult Social Care data shows that Princes End has one of the lowest numbers and rate of concluded safeguarding referrals where the perpetrator is a family member across Sandwell. One would expect relative synergy across domestic abuse related datasets, and this suggests that there may be more unmet safeguarding need in Princes End than in other parts of the Local Authority.
- Whilst the majority of incidents involve female victims, the proportion of male victims has increased year-on-year for the past three years, rising from 18.7% in 2018 to 22.0% in 2020. The Black Country Women's Aid IDVA service is available regardless of gender and sexual identity, but just 4.0% of clients are male. In



response to this gap in male provision, Black Country Women's Aid have recently introduced a Men's Assault Referral Centre in 2022. Titled "Ask Marc" it has male branding and will offer a combination of male and female IDVAs and ISVAs (Independent Sexual Violence Advisers) in recognition of the fact that some male survivors may find it difficult to speak to a male worker.

- Just 1.3% of the Black Country Women's Aid IDVA community services caseload is LGBT, but in 20% of cases there is no sexual identity recorded, meaning that the real proportion could be significantly larger. A Domestic Abuse Services Provision Mapping Study conducted by Galop and Durham University for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has highlighted the lack of specialist domestic abuse provision for the LGBT community, especially outside of London. Birmingham LGBT launched a service in September 2021 with two LGBT IDVAs for the West Midlands, one being dedicated for LGBT victims in the Black Country. Black Country Women's Aid are looking to build a relationship to improve the access for LGBT clients into the Black Country Women's Aid community and "Ask Marc" services.
- Black Country Women's Aid IDVA community services are clearly providing a high standard of care which is highly valued by survivors. During the needs assessment process, positive reflections were provided by survivors from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Black and Asian (Sikh and Muslim). Black and Minority Ethnic communities are also well-represented within referral data. Nevertheless, some stakeholders feel that the generic service is not sufficiently equipped to cope with language and cultural barriers, and that this perceived gap could be addressed either through the introduction of a dedicated service or by increased partnership and commissioned joint working between Black Country Women's Aid and culturally specific grassroots organisations.
- The Identification and Referral to Improve Safety (IRIS) and Emergency Department Intervention projects are making a valuable contribution to intervention and protection in Sandwell, noticeably providing a route into specialist support for older survivors and those who had previously not engaged with specialist domestic abuse provision. This programme being a national programme to improve the primary care response to domestic abuse, providing training and support for GP practices. The take-up of the IRIS programme by GP



practices in Sandwell is very high with 96% of practices being involved. However, in 2020/21 IRIS referrals in Sandwell were 64% lower than in the previous year, with the move away from face-to-face patient contact during the pandemic a key mitigating factor. There is also a compliance issue amongst some Sandwell GPs. Sandwell has more GP practices trained than either Dudley or Walsall yet has consistently returned lower numbers of referrals than either of its neighbours since inception. The most recent quarterly data available showed that just 13/45 fully trained practices (with a further 8 partially trained) made any referrals during the three-month period.

- The ownership issue is also reflected within Adult Social Care safeguarding referrals where the perpetrator of abusive behaviour is a family member. In 2020/21 just 45.4% of these cases were flagged specifically as domestic abuse. This is an issue known to the Sandwell Domestic Abuse Team and Adult Social Care. Training for Adult Social Care workers has seen the proportion of safeguarding referrals flagged as domestic abuse increase considerably compared with the two preceding years, but further improvement is needed. In particular, where the perpetrator is another family member rather than a partner or ex-partner the proportion falls further to just 29.6%.
- Black Country Women's Aid community services data shows a paucity of referrals from multiple sectors including Housing, Adult Social Care and Mental Health. This is also noticeable within the MARAC dataset, with more than 80% of referrals coming from West Midlands Police, far in excess of the national average (65.6%) and Safelives expected range. The most recent MARAC data shows a large increase in the number of repeat cases (50.2% in quarter 4 2020/21). However this figure could be an anomaly with the percentage of MARAC repeat cases standing at 38% for 2020-21 as a whole.
- A positive experience of civil and criminal justice court processes is a key aspect of the recovery journey. Survivor testimonies show that this is not just about achieving a positive outcome, but also centres around having the opportunity to relate their experiences, concerns and to be "listened to" by senior officials.
- National research has shown the difficulty in establishing robust evaluation frameworks to ascertain the impact of perpetrator programmes, and there are



conflicting views as to whether outcomes are better when programmes are mandated or voluntary and reliant on perpetrator motivation to change. Ultimately there is a need to ensure that future perpetrator models are flexible enough to promote partner buy-in, accommodate complex needs and, crucially, embrace a family-focused approach which recognises and supports the needs of all family members whilst using the family as a key interface for assessing change.

Safe Accommodation

- The existing safe accommodation system in Sandwell is highly effective. The range of accommodation types and levels of support provided by Black Country Women's Aid (hereafter BCWA) mean that survivors are routinely accepted regardless of level of risk or complexity of presenting needs. There is also good outcome tracking for those who are declined a space in accommodation. System effectiveness has been enhanced by the appointment of a dedicated Housing IDVA and procedural changes bringing faster resettlement. The average length of stay was 122 days in safe accommodation in 2020/21, compared with 160 days in the preceding year.
- One tangible gap where the service could be enhanced concerns children's therapy and support. For the past six years an advocate funded by Children in Need has provided support for young people in refuge and community services, working with the survivor and child in parallel as the most effective engagement model. This funding period has now expired.
- Counselling is also not currently available to safe accommodation survivors unless there is a history of sexual abuse or violence. A recent short-term uplift in early 2021 through the Ministry of Justice enabled counselling to be offered to domestic abuse survivors across the domestic abuse provider's accommodation and community services. There were 95 immediate referrals, highlighting the level of unmet need.
- The experience of clients consulted who were in out of area safe accommodation was markedly more negative than those in Sandwell. There were a number of survivors who were critical of either the lack of information or communication that they had received from Housing Solutions and indeed



regional refuge staff. The time taken to achieve resettlement for out of area survivors consulted was also noticeably longer compared with those in Sandwell safe accommodation. A new systems approach to extend the immediate direct offer system to out of area presentations is yet to be fully embedded into practice.

- Sandwell Council currently commissions 38 specialist domestic abuse refuge places. The commissioning perspective is that sufficient units are currently being commissioned to meet demand. This is borne out in the needs assessment by the fact that since 2019/20 there have been less than 10 survivors per annum placed in temporary accommodation (rather than refuge) following a homeless presentation. The number of referrals declined due to no space being available in safe accommodation has also fallen significantly, with a 50% reduction when comparing 2020/21 with the previous time period.
- A first available void policy (prioritisation for local residents) has also been successful, with Sandwell residents now more likely to receive safe accommodation within the Borough. However, there has also been a surprising decline in the overall number of referrals for safe accommodation made in relation to Sandwell residents. In 2018/19, 52.0% of all referrals, and 50.0% of accepted clients came from Sandwell. By 2020/21 these figures have fallen to 33.3% and 31.3% respectively. This could be a product of the concerted levels of investment into community services (or a local consequence of the pandemic). Nevertheless, further investigation will be carried out, especially given the fact that domestic abuse homeless presentations to the Local Authority have increased in each of the last three years (with the 2020/21 figure of 276 almost twice as high as the level recorded in 2018/19).
- The demographics for the safe accommodation referral profile show that there have only been 11 referrals made for male survivors (just 1 accepted) in the past three years for safe accommodation, and all of these cases were in 2018/19. Similarly, there have been just 5 homeless presentations from male survivors in the past three years, representing a mere 0.8% of the total number of applicants.



- Demographic information relating to sexual identity shows 2% of referrals (2.2% accepted) were from LGBT survivors.
- The needs assessment examined the ethnicity profile for both the safe accommodation referral and homeless presentations datasets. The proportion of referrals and presentations for survivors from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other White backgrounds are in excess of the respective Sandwell population profile proportions, indicating that ethnicity is not an overall barrier to accessing safe accommodation locally.
- The use of temporary accommodation for domestic abuse survivors is problematic due to the lack of wraparound support, suitability assessments and safety measures in place. Domestic abuse workers provided examples where their clients had felt intensely isolated in temporary accommodation, leading to them deciding to return to the perpetrator and representing a missed opportunity to break the domestic abuse cycle.
- As part of a Sandwell Council Housing Solutions redesign, the bulk of temporary accommodation (for non-domestic abuse presentations) is to be located in specific managed units. This should ensure there is capacity in the remaining dispersed units of stock for any domestic abuse survivors still needing short-term temporary accommodation. However, the inclusion of dedicated domestic abuse support as part of their housing plan should also be considered essential.
- There is currently no dedicated Sanctuary service. However, Sandwell Council does offer a target hardening service for domestic abuse survivors delivered by Neighbourhood Officers in conjunction with the Building Surveying Team and Neighbourhood Repairs Officers. The service is tenure neutral and can also be provided to owner-occupiers, private rented accommodation and housing association properties. Between April 2019 and June 2021 there have been 84 properties 'target hardened', with works including enhanced security to entry doors, windows and gates, repaired fencing and external lighting installation. However, the tenure neutral aspect of this service appears to be not widely known, especially outside of the Local Authority. Indeed, there were two



survivors consulted who stated they had been advised by their domestic abuse support workers that they were not eligible for target hardening.

- Once a survivor leaves refuge the specialist domestic abuse provider is not commissioned to provide any continued resettlement support. This lack of an interface or continuity of care at a crucial point in a client journey was described as an issue by a number of survivors who had left, or indeed were about to leave, safe accommodation.
- There is flexibility within the safe accommodation service's commission to subsidise or offer rent-free periods for working survivors to make refuge affordable as they are not in receipt of housing benefit. Nevertheless, working survivors interviewed indicated that they had been informed by various agency representatives that they would be unable to access safe accommodation, revealing a significant procedural barrier to support.
- Respondents representing the refuge provider stated that there is a lack of collaborative working once a survivor enters safe accommodation with the statutory agencies having fulfilled their responsibilities, leaving the specialist provider responsible for all their needs moving forward.
- Other supported accommodation providers (e.g. teenage pregnancy) were consulted as part of the needs assessment. Representatives stated that they all had domestic abuse survivors to a greater or lesser extent, either historic or current. They further indicated that in many cases, domestic abuse was not recorded within the referral information, and was only discovered through later conversations between worker and client. However, the extent to which providers subsequently proactively helped survivors to obtain specialist domestic abuse support varied considerably. Indeed, current commissioning specifications for supported accommodation providers do not include mandatory domestic abuse training for staff.

Prevention and Early Intervention

- Sandwell Children's Trust data reveals that whilst the number of contacts relating to domestic abuse has increased in each of the last three full recording years,



there has been a noticeable decrease in the proportion progressing to MASH or Children's Social Care (44% in 2018/19 compared with 15% in 2019/20 and 2020/21). A Children's Trust representative indicated that this may be due to improvements in Early Help, triage and screening meaning that domestic abuse is now managed better rather than all cases escalating to MASH. However single assessment data (social worker-based assessments) for the last three years shows that the percentage completed which are linked to domestic abuse has also fallen, with a particularly large decline in the first quarter of 2021/22 (22% compared to 34% in the previous year). Further exploration and ongoing monitoring of both of these findings is required by Sandwell Children's Trust to ensure that domestic abuse is being identified and managed effectively.

- A 'dip sample' provided by Sandwell Children's Centres and the Working Together with Families Programme revealed 88 cases where domestic abuse had been identified. In the majority of these cases (77) it was known at the time of referral but only 34 accepted an offer of Black Country Women's Aid support or had already engaged with them. Case studies drawn from this sample highlighted some of the difficulties experienced by Children's Centre staff in attempting to engage their clients into domestic abuse support. However, better family outcomes for those who had engaged with Black Country Women's Aid were also evident.
- A family support model (Families Together) is in place in Sandwell working with families of low-risk victims of domestic abuse. Children are not supported. Alternative models nationally include a wider range of partners, seek to intervene with associated risk factors and work with children as well. A continuation of family support in some form was supported by many of those consulted, and indeed the current service has reported a number of successful outcomes. However, the precise model used, the partners involved and the scope of the support provided should be investigated further.
- Consultation with representatives from the Black Country Women's Aid young person 'Our Future' programme highlighted a service gap relating to young males showing signs of perpetrator behaviour. The current service has received numerous referrals for such clients but does not have the remit or capacity to support them under existing arrangements.



- It was expressed by numerous participants that there is currently a gap in relation to the scale and extent of healthy relationships work in schools and colleges. An expansion of this style of work covering appropriate behaviours and relationships should be seen as a priority.
- Sandwell has produced a variety of publicity campaigns in recent years aimed at raising awareness of domestic abuse and to encourage disclosure. Future campaigns could focus on men and LGBT communities, especially as dedicated support is being made available for these population groups.

Partnership

- Throughout the needs assessment reference was made to a wide variety of partnership arrangements that are in place in Sandwell. These relate both to statutory requirements such as the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership, MARAC and MAPPA arrangements, Domestic Homicide Review prescribed structures along with day-to-day working arrangements between service providers/support organisations and commissioners. Many stakeholders have commented that these relationships and linkages are mature and work well.
- However, despite this strong multi-agency commitment to the domestic abuse agenda in Sandwell, the needs assessment demonstrated key areas where this does not necessarily translate fully into practice in terms of a continuity and duty of care throughout a survivor's recovery journey:
 - Low referrals from certain sectors into Black Country Women's Aid Community IDVA Services and MARAC (e.g. Adult Social Care, Mental Health and Housing);
 - Lack of recognition of *domestic* abuse within safeguarding adult cases (even when abuse has been identified), especially when the perpetrator is not a partner or ex-partner;
 - A non-uniform response to disclosure (*one conversation*) which has resulted in survivors in Sandwell failing to access timely support or indeed withdrawing completely (e.g. Police and GPs);



- Partners seeing refuge as an end-point and as a discharge of duty rather than as a process and opportunity to wrap support around a survivor and secure long-term recovery;
- Lack of a robust information sharing process in some areas such as in relation to lower level risks, for example information sharing with other agencies where Police have been called out for domestic abuse incidents.

What we will do

Based on this analysis we will focus our activity upon the following three themes. These will be delivered via a range of actions and initiatives that were also contained in the needs assessment and the safe accommodation strategy which can be added to over the strategy period. The themes are:

1. Early intervention and enhanced survivor and whole family support;
2. Joint working and partnership focus;
3. Safe accommodation.

To make a start on delivering these themes we will use the recommendations drawn from the extensive consultation process and data analysis contained in the needs assessment. These recommendations have been translated into actions for each of the three themes below.

Theme 1 - Early intervention and enhanced survivor and whole family support

We will:

- Undertake further refresher IRIS training within primary care. This will have the aim of gaining greater primary care ownership of the domestic abuse agenda to ensure that all practice staff understand the broadening definition of domestic abuse and their responsibilities to support disclosures.
- Continue to promote and develop the early intervention aspect of the IRIS programme. This will include further proactive engagement work with GPs around supporting disclosures through remote appointments, exploring the possibility of using primary care venues as safe spaces for reporting domestic abuse and



expanding the training to other healthcare settings and services such as sexual health services and maternity navigators.

- Seek to reintroduce a dedicated court IDVA providing a supportive court presence for survivors and enable more expedient safety planning. As Sandwell does not have its own dedicated court, the potential development of this IDVA will engage with other regional partners.
- Work with local and regional partners to develop an integrated and flexible perpetrator intervention model which embraces a family-focused approach.
- Examine how to implement a more systematic specialist service offer for the families of survivors. This needs to be a longer-term sustainable support offer that is holistic and collaborative in focus and based on effective case management, recognising that many of the services that do provide support for children in particular are developed through short term funding regimes.
- Seek to expand healthy relationships work in schools and colleges covering appropriate behaviours and relationships.
- Ensure that training and awareness raising work with our partners will be continuous and delivered in both single and multi-agency settings in order to maximise understanding of domestic abuse, how to support disclosures and knowledge of specialist services and referral pathways. Developing further the one-chance philosophy will be a key focus.
- Review Children's Trust data relating to domestic abuse contacts and single assessments on an ongoing basis in order to provide assurance to the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership that families experiencing domestic abuse are being identified and managed effectively.
- Utilise learning and lessons from domestic homicide and serious case reviews, including the sharing of good practice to influence and improve our services.

Theme 2 – Joint working and partnership focus

We will:

- Encourage cooperation and collaborative partnership working between Black Country Women's Aid and grassroots organisations. There is a need to ensure in



developing this that the roles and responsibilities of each organisation are clearly delineated; this can include the grassroots organisations providing initial support as long as sufficient training has been provided.

- Encourage the development and mobilisation of the third sector to enhance the service offer for harder to reach communities.
- Ensure that policies, procedures and practice within partner agencies recognise the one-chance philosophy in order to support survivors effectively and consistently to make disclosures.
- Focus future publicity and awareness raising campaigns on men and LGBT communities, especially as dedicated support is being made available for these population groups. Challenging perpetrator behaviour will also be a part of this future programme.
- Concentrate further partnership activity upon enhancing the level of referrals from non-Police partners to IDVA services and MARAC (including from Housing, Adult Social Care and Mental Health Trust), and improving the flagging of domestic abuse within safeguarding adult cases (especially where the perpetrator is not a partner or ex-partner).
- Seek to improve the suitability and compatibility of information systems to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of data and data exchange. This will include greater recording of protected characteristics and geographic data at a small area level.
- Establish an outcome focused (victim-centred) domestic abuse system to ensure ongoing links and a mutual duty of care between services throughout the victim journey. Better information exchange will be examined as a focal point of future commissioning and support. One result of achieving this goal could comprise the introduction of a single domestic abuse monitoring system.
- Seek to enhance and strengthen the survivor voice in the future. A sustainable and meaningful engagement model will be developed to ensure that their experiences are routinely integrated into the design of services and responses.



Theme 3: Safe Accommodation

The safe accommodation strategy used these following three sub-themes as a way of focussing activity to address the recommendations from the needs assessment. These three sub-themes are:

1. Improving the survivors' recovery journey;
2. Enhancing the ability for survivors to stay in their own home;
3. Developing a more responsive and cohesive system.

The recommendations have been translated into the following actions. We have already begun work on implementing these actions and have a dedicated implementation plan to assist us in monitoring progress.

1. Improving the survivors' recovery journey

We will:

- Address the gap in relation to children's support in safe accommodation. New Burdens funding will be used for two posts in 2021/22 but longer-term planning will be undertaken to ensure sustainability.
- Develop an offer for a therapeutic resource or more psychologically informed services (e.g. a visiting clinical psychologist) that can be accessed in safe accommodation or through the resettlement period in a timely manner.
- Commission a dedicated domestic abuse service to support resettlement for survivors, preserving specialist support throughout the safe accommodation journey. The resettlement service could also be used to support other specific cohorts, such as teenage parents leaving supported accommodation and survivors who have presented as homeless who have been rapidly moved to a new permanent tenancy.
- Explore further the service offer and its marketing for male victims. There is an absolute paucity of male referrals for safe accommodation and homelessness



presentations for domestic abuse. The Black Country Women's Aid 'Ask Marc' male service which was launched in late 2021 should improve accessibility of services and provide greater awareness of the availability of dispersed safe accommodation. This should be bolstered through a combined communications initiative between Black Country Women's Aid and Sandwell Council/Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership.

- Develop a domestic abuse specialist service to provide wraparound support for any domestic abuse survivors in short-term temporary accommodation, bringing a continuity of care through to refuge and resettlement.

2. Enhancing the ability for survivors to stay in their own home

We will:

- Support survivors to stay in their own homes and provide enhanced security and feelings of safety for survivors moving to new properties by working towards the instigation of a full Sanctuary scheme. The current scheme, despite being tenure neutral, does not appear to be well known outside of Local Authority departments. A Sanctuary scheme would also bring an even more holistic service for survivors than is currently in place, combining physical security with safety planning and integrated support from a specialist domestic abuse provider.
- Undertake a review, where necessary, of policies, practice and procedures relating to the rehousing of perpetrators. This will have the aim of establishing a more robust case management system to make rehousing a more viable option.

3. Developing a more responsive and cohesive system

We will:



- Use the Sandwell Council Housing Solutions redesign and training regime to foster a culture of enhanced and open conversations with survivors to remove ambiguity from the system and promote transparency concerning processes and housing outcomes. This is due to a number of survivors feeling uncertain and insecure about the bidding and direct offer processes despite the proactive Housing IDVA role.
- Introduce additional Housing staff to maximise communications with survivors and system efficiency. This will be particularly beneficial in preserving dialogue and support for survivors in out-of-area refuges.
- Continue to develop ownership by asking all agencies with a role in recovery to systematically review their processes. It is crucial for an effective recovery journey that safe accommodation becomes a 'process' for multi-disciplinary support for survivors, rather than being seen as an end-point where other agencies' duties of care are discharged. All partners will reaffirm their commitment to developing the best outcomes for individuals.
- Raise standards and consistency of the process for accessing support and working with survivors of domestic abuse for supported accommodation providers. This will include mandating domestic abuse training within the commissioning of supported accommodation providers. This will increase staff knowledge of referral pathways and enable them to support domestic abuse disclosures more proactively.
- Use our Council's Domestic Abuse Team to co-ordinate communication work with partners to ensure there is awareness of the safe accommodation available and the nature of support offered, addressing the decline in the overall number of referrals for Sandwell residents.
- Remove the barrier preventing working survivors from entering safe accommodation. We will produce a clear position statement for all relevant agencies in Sandwell detailing how working/homeowner survivors can access safe accommodation provision.



Governance and Delivery

Progress against these thematic areas and individual actions will be overseen by the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership along with any sub-groups or short-life groups that are formed. A detailed implementation plan outlining timescales and responsibilities for implementing these actions is also available and will be updated periodically.

In keeping with requirements from the Domestic Abuse Act the progress in achieving these actions will be reviewed formally every year and reported to government as required; this process will include assessing whether any additional priorities have emerged. A new needs assessment and strategy will be produced in three years' time.

Funding

Sandwell MBC has received £841,812 New Burdens funding in 2021-22 to support the implementation of the statutory domestic abuse duty. Central government has indicated its commitment to providing funding in future years to support the implementation. At the time of publication, a 2022-23 allocation of £844,142 had been announced, but specific allocations for 2023-24 are yet to be announced. New Burdens funding will be used to respond to the areas highlighted in the domestic abuse needs assessment and will be invested in:

- The provision of holistic, specialist support to adults and children living in domestic abuse refuge in Sandwell, including support for complex needs; children & family support; and provision of psychologically-informed therapeutic interventions in refuge;
- Specialist community-based support to victims in safe accommodation outside refuge (including floating support & re-settlement of victims leaving refuge; support to victims in sanctuary and other safe accommodation);
- Officer and costs to support the implementation of the statutory duty and the New Burdens funding programme development and management.



Appendix A – Sandwell Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership membership

Organisation
Sandwell Council
Sandwell Children’s Trust
West Midlands Police
Probation Service
Black Country Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
Sandwell & West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust
Black Country & West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group
Primary & Secondary Schools Head Teachers Representative
Black Country Women’s Aid
Richmond Fellowship
Cranstoun
Sandwell Victim Support
Family Action
Victims’/Survivors’ representative
Safer Sandwell Partnership Police & Crime Board
Sandwell Children Safeguarding Partnership
Sandwell Safeguarding Adults Board
Sandwell Health & Wellbeing Board
WM Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner / WM Violence Reduction Unit
Ask Marc
Birmingham LGBT

