



# Bracknell Forest **Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy**

Review January 2025

# 1. Introduction

In January 2022, Bracknell Forest Council published its first Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy. The Strategy was produced in response to part four of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which introduced a new duty on local authorities to ensure support for victims of domestic abuse and their children within 'relevant' safe accommodation.

## **The Bracknell Forest Safe Accommodation Strategy set out to:**

1. Summarise the safe accommodation duties in the Domestic Abuse Act and outline how the Council would seek to address the new requirements.
2. Explain and report on the findings of the safe accommodation needs assessment.
3. Identify priorities and recommendations to inform future funding proposals and actions to be taken forward.

The strategy outlined four strategic priorities and a set of recommendations for improving access to support for domestic abuse victims in safe accommodation. It proposed commissioning a number of new services, supported by Government funding allocated to local authorities to give effect to the strategy.

Three years have passed since the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024 was published. This review looks at the progress that has been made in delivering the original recommendations of the strategy and considers what further work is needed following the completion of a full domestic abuse needs assessment in 2024.

## **It seeks to answer the following key questions:**

- What has been the impact of the strategy in improving outcomes for domestic abuse victims?
- What does the latest needs assessment indicate about gaps or short-comings in the provision of support for victims in safe accommodation?
- What further recommendations and actions are needed to improve domestic abuse support for victims in safe accommodation?

The overall conclusion is that the provision of safe accommodation has greatly improved over the last three years. The range of safe accommodation options has expanded, additional support provision has been put in place and multi-agency working has been strengthened. The Domestic Abuse Executive Group is playing an effective role in monitoring data on needs and reviewing progress on the recommended actions.

Nevertheless, some gaps in provision have been identified, along with some areas of improvement that could be undertaken in response to certain highlighted issues. A number of recommendations are therefore proposed at the end of the document which have been put forward to and approved by the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

## 2. Safe Accommodation Strategy Priorities

**Bracknell Forest's Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy was published in January 2022. It focused on four priorities and made a number of recommendations under each:**

### **Priority 1. Raise awareness and provide information on services and support options**

Victims should be able to access the information and support that they need at an early stage to help them leave abusive situations and to cope with the trauma of doing so. Victims should be able to access advice and support that relates to their gender or sexuality, language, disability, ethnicity, or culture.

### **Priority 2. Improve access and pathways to appropriate safe accommodation options**

The ability to access safe, secure, stable, and suitable accommodation is critical to the well-being of victims as they attempt to rebuild their lives. Victims should have a range of options including refuge, support in self-contained temporary accommodation provided by the housing service, and support and safety measures to help remain in their own homes.

### **Priority 3. Ensure effective, multi-agency working and specialist support to meet a wide variety of needs**

Providing dedicated domestic abuse support to victims approaching the housing service is a critical form of intervention. The council should actively engage with partner organisations to ensure that victims and their children have access to locally provided specialist advice and support services, including support for people with protected characteristics.

### **Priority 4. Continue to develop our understanding of needs through improved data collection and ensuring survivors have an effective voice**

Continuing to build on our learning is essential to ensure ongoing development and improvement in services to victims of domestic abuse. This means monitoring needs and trends, improving collaboration and innovation with our partners, through the Domestic Abuse Forum, and engaging victims in shaping our services and assessing our performance.

## Safe Accommodation Strategy funding proposals

A funding and commissioning plan was proposed to support the actions recommended in the safe accommodation strategy. This sought to address the need for more safe accommodation, ensure victims' support needs are fully assessed, improve knowledge and information about the range of support available, and ensure specialist forms of support are provided, where needed.

**The main elements of the funding plan are summarised below:**

- Establish a Domestic Abuse Housing Officer post to co-ordinate support for victims
- Ensure ongoing support for the borough's refuge accommodation
- Commission a dedicated outreach support service for victims placed in accommodation
- Set up a Sanctuary Scheme to support victims in their home
- Ensure engagement with survivors and victims
- Provide a furnished accommodation support service
- Identify funding proposals for specialist support services to meet gaps in provision for victims in safe accommodation
- Fund a part-time administration role to support the Domestic Abuse Executive Group.

# 3. Evaluating the impact of the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021-2024

Progress against each of the four priorities and the impact and outcomes achieved is evaluated over the following pages.

## **Priority 1. Raise awareness and provide information on services and support options**

### **What have we done?**

- Provided a series of trauma-informed training sessions to Council staff and to six other agencies.
- Updated information sheets on emergency help services and domestic abuse support services.
- Reviewed information and links to domestic abuse services on the Council's website.
- Supported a regular programme of awareness raising campaigns through the Domestic Abuse (DA) Executive Group and DA Forum.
- Funded an extension of hours for the Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA) domestic abuse helpline on a trial basis to improve availability of specialist advice at evenings and weekends.

### **Numbers**

- 66 delegates attended five 'Rise for Change' trauma informed training sessions in 2022 and 2023.
- 5 main awareness raising campaigns organised covering: stalking, honour-based abuse, post-separation abuse, male victims, and action against male violence (White Ribbon campaign).

### **What difference has this made?**

- Council and voluntary staff are better trained to understand and deal with victims of domestic abuse and to provide advice on available services.
- Staff across a range of agencies can access information on services to assist victims to seek help and access services at an early stage.

## Priority 2. Improve access and pathways to appropriate safe accommodation options

### What have we done?

- Provided ongoing funding to Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA) to support the operation of the refuge in Bracknell Forest, following a retendering of the contract in 2022.
- Commissioned and set up a new Sanctuary Scheme in March 2022.
- Established two furniture assistance funds (operated by the Council and BWA) to ensure support for victims moving into accommodation.
- Developed a safe accommodation option for victims in self-contained temporary accommodation through providing dedicated domestic abuse outreach support.

### Numbers

- 306 adults and children have been supported in safe accommodation over the last two years (106 in refuge, 84 in safe temporary accommodation and 108 through the Sanctuary Scheme).
- Up to October 2024, 78 households had benefitted from security works through the Sanctuary Scheme and 38 victims had been assisted through the furniture fund.

### What difference has this made?

- A significant increase in the overall number of victims provided with a safe accommodation option.
- Options expanded to include support in self-contained temporary accommodation and security works and support to victims to remain in their own home.
- Help provided with furniture and white goods when moving into unfurnished accommodation.

## Priority 3. Ensure effective, multi-agency working and specialist support to meet a wide variety of needs

### What have we done?

- Established a new Domestic Abuse Housing Officer post within the Council to develop and co-ordinate support services for victims in safe accommodation.
- Commissioned a specialist outreach service operated by BWA to provide dedicated domestic abuse support for victims in temporary accommodation.
- Linked victims to charitable assistance and emergency funding provided through the Welfare Service.
- Provided grant funding to trial a mental health counselling service for victims.

### Numbers

- Victims from groups with protected characteristics supported in safe accommodation over last 2 years include: 32 with disabilities, 39 from ethnic minority communities and 8 LGBT victims.

### What difference has this made?

- Victims making a homeless application receive an additional layer of support to enable them to manage and sustain their accommodation.
- Victims can be linked to more specialist forms of support e.g. male and ethnic minority victims.
- Improved access to emergency assistance and support.

## **Priority 4. Continue to develop our understanding of needs through improved data collection and ensuring survivors have an effective voice**

### **What have we done?**

- Established a part-time domestic abuse administration role to strengthen the DA Executive Group and monitoring of safe accommodation strategy actions.
- Commissioned an updated needs assessment including a review of data and engagement with survivors and victims and with DA professionals.
- Regular monitoring and review of needs and trends has been undertaken by the DA Executive Group.
- Encouraged attendance and representation of local groups through the DA Forum.

### **Numbers**

- 21 organisations represented at the DA Forum in addition to a number of Council services.
- 52 people responded to survey conducted as part of needs assessment in summer 2024.

### **What difference has this made?**

- Functioning of the DA Executive Group and Forum strengthened through additional admin support.
- Local groups actively participate in monitoring the success of the strategy and in assessing needs and trends.

### **The overall impact of the strategy, and the associated funding and commissioning plan, have been overwhelmingly positive. Some of the key benefits identified are:**

- The range of safe accommodation options has been expanded so that in addition to refuge, victims can remain in their accommodation with the support of the Sanctuary service or access self-contained temporary accommodation with support.
- Additional forms of dedicated domestic abuse support for victims in accommodation have been provided.
- Multi-agency working and the role of the Domestic Abuse Executive Group has been strengthened.
- A programme of trauma informed training for professionals has been rolled out.
- Access to emergency assistance and furniture assistance has been improved for victims moving into accommodation.
- Communication, joint working and information sharing across partner organisations has been strengthened.

# 4. Findings from the Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment 2024

In 2024, the Council commissioned Davis and Associates to undertake a comprehensive needs assessment to improve its understanding of the current domestic abuse landscape across Bracknell Forest.

In line with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, as noted above, there is a requirement for local authorities to carry out a complete refresh of their domestic abuse safe accommodation needs assessment every three years. The needs assessment was undertaken to fulfil this obligation, to reflect back on the conclusions of the previous assessment and to identify needs, gaps, and opportunities for future strategic and commissioning development.

The updated needs assessment provides a comprehensive review of quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources. This includes document reviews, detailed analysis of data provided by a host of organisations, and surveys and interviews with professionals and victims.

The needs assessment concludes with a set of learnings and findings in relation to safe accommodation. These have been comprehensively examined by members of the Domestic Abuse New Burdens Fund working group within the Council and in discussion with partner organisations. The results of this analysis are summarised below.

## 1. Refuge capacity

The needs assessment identified that expanding refuge services in Bracknell Forest could help accommodate growing demand, particularly for victims with complex needs, such as mental health and substance misuse issues.

Further examination of this issue identified that:

- The development of safe accommodation options has resulted in a fall in demand for refuge accommodation and so no expansion of existing refuge provision is planned.
- Refuge is only able to accommodate a certain number of victims with complex needs without upsetting the balance with other residents. Supporting victims in self-contained safe accommodation is the best way of expanding provision for this group.
- Support for victims with complex needs such as specialist mental health support is difficult to access and is a key issue that needs to be addressed.

## 2. Specialised accommodation for vulnerable groups

Ensuring that refuges and housing services are equipped to meet the specific needs of disabled victims, older people, and ethnic minority communities was recommended in the needs assessment.

An assessment of the data and issues relating to these specific groups and of the available provision has been undertaken, with the following findings:

- There is adapted accommodation for disabled victims at the refuge and in temporary accommodation, and although limited, it is considered adequate; victims with sensory disabilities are also able to be supported at the refuge.



- Older victims are often in relationships of care with the perpetrator which require Adult Social Care involvement and arrangement of specialised accommodation.
- Ethnic minority victims make up only a small proportion of the total. The data suggests some under-representation of Asian victims. BWA has a number of non-commissioned services for this group as well as Diverse Communities worker for ethnic minority victims. Overall, the existing provision is considered good.
- Access to interpreting services works well and language issues are not considered to be a problem.

### **3. Safe accommodation for male victims**

A gap in refuge spaces for male victims of domestic abuse was highlighted in the needs assessment, with a recommendation that other safe accommodation options are explored for this group.

- The number of male victims remains small and would not justify specialist refuge provision; evidence suggests low interest among male victims in refuge accommodation.
- Male victims may be placed in self-contained temporary accommodation by the housing service, with support offered through the outreach service; current take-up of support is low.
- There is a non-commissioned male victim support service provided by BWA which operates across the wider area including Bracknell Forest.

### **4. Private landlord engagement**

The needs assessment proposed more engagement with private landlords to increase access to affordable housing for survivors of domestic abuse and funding for dedicated landlord engagement programmes.

- Access to affordable accommodation in the private rented sector is challenging.
- The housing service already has landlord engagement and private sector incentive schemes in place and is devoting more resources to this to secure additional accommodation for all groups, including domestic abuse victims.

### **5. Access to the sanctuary scheme**

It was recommended that more be done to raise awareness about the Sanctuary Scheme to ensure victims, particularly older people, can remain in their homes safely when appropriate.

The data shows that the Sanctuary service is well used with a high number of successful referrals.

- Awareness of and referral to the Sanctuary Scheme among partner organisations such as the Police and BWA is good.
- There is however no information for victims on the Sanctuary service or other housing options on the Council's website.

### **6. Long-term housing solutions**

The needs assessment proposed that availability of long-term, affordable housing options for domestic abuse survivors should be expanded to reduce dependence on short-term refuge stays.

Currently, the difficulty accessing affordable private rented accommodation means that rehousing through the housing register is the main long-term option for many victims.

- Move-on from refuge was not considered to be problematic; new residents are encouraged to apply on the housing register as soon as possible, to increase the likelihood of a successful move to permanent accommodation.

- The current average length of stay at refuge is 6 months with a maximum length of stay of 12 months, which is considered appropriate.
- At the end of 12 months, the housing service will usually arrange a placement in temporary accommodation until long-term accommodation becomes available. Placement in short-term emergency accommodation at this stage is usually avoided.

## **7. Housing assistance for victims with no recourse to public funds**

It was proposed that safe accommodation funding might be used to support victims with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), to ensure they can access housing services and support.

Housing data show only small numbers of victims with NRPF that could not be assisted. However, other organisations such as BWA have reported dealing with a significant number of NRPF cases.

- Victims with NRPF are actively supported to seek assistance through the migrant victims domestic abuse concession, which allows benefits to be paid for up to three months.
- Victims with children can apply for assistance to Children's Social Care for temporary payments for accommodation; however, in some cases only short-term payments are agreed which can hinder placement in refuge accommodation.
- Victims with NRPF, who do not have children, may receive assistance from Adult Social Care in certain limited circumstances, e.g. where they have care and support needs or are at risk of exploitation.
- Safe Accommodation Funding is public funding, and so it would not be permitted to use it to assist victims with NRPF.

## **8. Prevention strategies linked to housing**

The needs assessment highlighted rising homelessness rates in Bracknell Forest, particularly among single adult households, and a need for robust prevention strategies for domestic abuse victims.

Homelessness data has been examined and it was found that some historical data appears incorrect or inconsistent giving rise to some misinterpretation of the data.

- The finding that domestic abuse cases are much more likely to be dealt with as a relief duty rather than prevention duty is to be expected, as the scope to enable victims to remain in their home is limited in these cases.
- Data suggesting that domestic abuse cases may be under-represented or not being picked up is not considered reliable and there is no evidence that this is the case.
- The housing service is generally regarded as responsive and understanding in dealing with domestic abuse victims.
- There is currently no information on housing and housing options on the Council's webpages dealing with domestic abuse.

# 5. Safe Accommodation

## Review: Conclusions

### **Information, training and awareness**

There is a good level of information about support services for professionals working with domestic abuse victims, with 'cue cards' on emergency help and support services having been recently updated and made available on the Council's website. This information will need to be reviewed and updated in future. The main need that has been identified is for more information and advice for victims to be provided on the Council's website, including information on housing options.

### **Specialist support for groups with protected characteristics**

There is an appropriate level of provision of safe accommodation and support for victims with a disability, older victims, male victims and ethnic minority victims, in relation to the level and types of needs identified. There are a number of non-commissioned services that provide specialist services to these groups. No additional specialist service provision is considered necessary at this time.

### **Gaps in provision**

The single biggest gap in support for victims in safe accommodation is the need for specialist mental health support. A large number of victims experience trauma, depression and stress, with smaller numbers experiencing significant mental health and other complex issues. The need for mental health counselling services and improved access to existing specialist provision have both been highlighted.

### **Multi-agency working**

Provision for victims with NRPF is an area that may benefit from improved co-ordination between agencies, especially where the ability to accommodate victims depends on discretionary funding from adult or children's services. Also, whilst the housing service works well with domestic abuse organisations such as BWA, there is scope for improving co-ordination and joint working through increased and regular engagement in future.

### **Funding**

The current funding plan focuses on providing additional safe accommodation options, commissioning various forms of support and assistance for victims moving into and from safe accommodation, and strengthening joint working and partnership arrangements in Bracknell Forest.

It is proposed that future funding should continue to focus on these areas, assuming the continuation of the Government's grant allocation to local authorities for safe accommodation.

Service	Proposed funding
BFC Domestic Abuse Housing Officer	Continue, with an increase for pay inflation
Ongoing support for refuge accommodation	Continue, with agreed inflationary rises
Dedicated outreach support service for victims in accommodation	Continue and review in 2026
Sanctuary Scheme	Continue, with a small reduction to reflect current demand levels
Furniture assistance service	Continue, with an increase to meet higher demand
BFC Administration officer to support the Domestic Abuse Executive Group	Continue, with an increase for pay inflation
BFC staff costs	Continue, with an increase for pay inflation
Specialist mental health service	New service to be funded either inhouse or commissioned

The main need for additional funding that has been highlighted relates to the provision of specialist mental health support for victims. This is identified as a high priority in future. In addition, the demand for funding for furniture assistance is outstripping the Council's current allocation for this, and so it is proposed to increase the funding allocated to this service.

# 6. Recommendations

The final part of this review of safe accommodation sets out some recommended actions for the next three years to ensure that victims of domestic abuse have access to appropriate support in safe accommodation.

They include some specific actions to address gaps in provision and information. There are also proposals to undertake further work, in conjunction with partners and victims, to explore how specialist support for victims from particular cohorts and those with complex needs can be improved.

Theme	Action	Who
Refuge	Monitor ongoing demand for refuge accommodation and explore long-term options for reshaping this provision.	BFC and BWA
Specialist support	Consider options to fund or commission a mental health support service for victims which can assist in accessing specialist mental health services where needed.	BFC
Specialist support	Work with partners to provide information on and access to a range of counselling and therapeutic services.	BFC, NHS and other partners
Outreach support service	Review safe accommodation outreach support for victims placed in temporary accommodation and whether it should be offered as a combined accommodation with support package.	BFC and BWA
NRPF	Engage with and support the work of the NRPF task and finish group to develop a toolkit and improve pathways for assisting victims with NRPF.	BFC and other partners
Homeless prevention	Improve information for victims on the Council's website on safe accommodation options and support (including information on the Sanctuary service), informed by user feedback.	BFC
Housing options	Set up ongoing engagement meetings between the housing service and BWA to improve housing information and referrals.	BFC and BWA
Victim engagement	Seek opportunities for engagement with victims on safe accommodation services through BWA's Lived Experience initiative and other similar opportunities.	BFC, BWA and other partners

