



Cherwell
DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Domestic Abuse Policy

2025

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1. Introduction

The Cherwell District Council domestic abuse policy aims to ensure that residents affected by domestic abuse and who approach the Council for support and advice are supported in a manner that is sensitive and non-judgemental.

The Council, at all times, will put the safety and housing security of those experiencing domestic abuse at the forefront and will drive the actions it takes. The Council will also aim to assist in holding perpetrators to account for their behaviour.

The Council will support residents who disclose experiences of domestic abuse. We aim to foster an environment that is open and supportive, ensuring that victim/survivors of abuse are and feel heard.

Domestic abuse is a very serious offence, and no person should live in fear of violence or abuse. This policy commits to deal efficiently and effectively with reports the Council receives. The Council is committed to working effectively with partners and specialist agencies in providing a coordinated response with support that is tailored to the needs of the individual, who is the victim/survivor.

The Council recognises that there can be an under-reporting of domestic abuse, and victim/survivors have barriers to reporting. The Council therefore will treat all matters reported with empathy and confidentiality.

The Council will aim to raise awareness of domestic abuse and the support that it and partner agencies provide locally. We will participate in and support national awareness raising campaigns and produce our own communications to help raise awareness and encourage those experiencing abuse to access support. The Council also aims to improve the services that it offers to residents and staff by achieving accreditations, such as the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA).

When referring to domestic abuse and for the purposes of this policy, the statutory definition of abuse applies, which is outlined within section 3.

The policy supplements with wider Oxfordshire County Council Domestic Abuse Strategy. Many of the advice and support mechanisms associated with domestic abuse are commissioned at a county level, in which the district and city councils and their residents can access. This partnership enables a range of support and safe accommodation options, including women's refuge. Certain roles and responsibilities, such as housing advice and assistance, are retained at a district level.

Within the Policy, those affected by domestic abuse are referred to as victim/survivors.

2. Aims and Objectives

The Domestic Abuse Policy aims to ensure that:

All residents are aware of the Council's role and responsibilities and where they can receive advice should they need it.

All residents who ask for support in addressing domestic abuse are able to access the appropriate advice and support, which includes the signposting to partner agencies and commissioned services, where appropriate.

All residents experiencing domestic abuse and are seeking the support and assistance from the Council can be confident that their individual circumstances will be handled confidentially, sensitively and non-judgementally.

That staff are appropriately aware and are trained on how to support and assist residents asking for assistance in relation to domestic abuse, where they be victim/survivors or perpetrators.

3. Statutory guidance

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines domestic abuse as

Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse if

- (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and*
- (b) The behaviour is abusive.*

Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following –

- (a) Physical or sexual abuse*
- (b) Violent or threatening behaviour*
- (c) Controlling or coercive behaviour*
- (d) Economic abuse*
- (e) Psychological, emotional or other abuse*

And it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

"Economic abuse" means any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B's ability to-

- (a) Acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or*
- (b) Obtain goods or services*

For the purposes of this Act, A's behaviour may be behaviour "towards" B despite the fact that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B's child)

People are "personally connected" to each other if any of the following applies

- (a) They are, or have been, married to each other*
- (b) They are, or have been, civil partners of each other*
- (c) They have agreed to marry one another (whether or not the agreement has been terminated)*
- (d) They have entered into a civil partnership agreement (whether or not the agreement has been terminated)*
- (e) They are, or have been, in an intimate personal relationship with each other*
- (f) They each have, or there has been a time when they each have had, a parental relationship in relation to the same child*
- (g) They are relatives*

Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Section 1 & 2

4. Policy Outline

4.1 Support

The Council will ensure that all reports of domestic abuse are treated confidentially and in a manner that is sensitive and non-judgmental. The Council recognises that not all people who have experienced domestic abuse will see themselves as victims and we will ensure that we are sensitive not to label them as such.

The Council will take a victim/survivor centred approach to those experiencing domestic abuse and will make the safety and well-being of the victim/survivor a priority.

All reports of domestic abuse will be handled in accordance with the relevant adults and children's safeguarding policies and procedures.

The Council will carry out or facilitate a risk assessment in accordance with the DASH model. The DASH model is a UK wide assessment process used by agencies to understand the risk posed, make onward referrals and how best survivors and children will be supported.

The Council will refer the victim/survivor to other agencies that are more appropriate to provide the specific and specialist support services that the victim/survivor may need. We will make sure that the victim/survivor is aware of the actions that we are taking or plan to take and that they, where appropriate and necessary, can agree to them.

The Council will agree with you how best we can communicate with you, whether this be by phone, video call, at a safe space etc.

The Council will encourage, where appropriate, for the victim/survivor to report what they are or have experienced to the Police, whether they are the victim/survivor themselves or a witness to abuse.

The Council will ensure appropriate safeguarding arrangements are followed when victim/survivors and their families approach the Council for support. Employees are trained in processes surrounding safeguarding children and adults and cases will be dealt with in accordance with Safeguarding Policies and Procedures. Employees also receive awareness training for domestic abuse through their corporate training package.

4.2 Housing

We will provide advice and assistance regarding alternative safe accommodation. When approaching the housing service for advice and assistance, the member of staff will be appropriately trained to discuss the next steps available to the victim/survivor. The officer allocated to the case will be the same throughout the case progression wherever possible. We will also aim to tailor the meeting to the needs of the victim/survivor, such as offering additional flexibilities over your appointment format, or offering workers of a certain gender.

The Council will offer advice and support to assist those experiencing domestic abuse and will act in accordance with our responsibilities within legislation. The Council will support in identifying potential options for the victim/survivor, whether this be rehousing, emergency housing or support to remain in their home. The Council will help access emergency accommodation or access refuge services where required. The Council will signpost and refer to other agencies who are better placed to provide advice and support on certain aspects of housing and the law pertaining to, where appropriate. Particularly in cases where joint tenancies or mortgaged property are involved.

Following the DASH risk assessment process, we will take into account the needs of the individual victim/survivor and recognise that our response and actions will need to be based on that assessment. The Council will ensure that advice is provided on all the potential courses of action, which could be immediate or longer term.

The Council recognises that victim/survivors may not want to take legal action, but we will offer advice for those that wish to and make victim/survivors aware of the options that are potentially open to them. This may include signposting or assisting in accessing legal advice around injunctions, non-molestation orders and tenancy or mortgage advice regarding ending joint arrangements.

The Council does not hold a housing stock of a significant size. The vast majority of social housing in the Cherwell district is provided by other Registered Providers. Officers will work with partner Registered Providers to consider how best the housing

options of victim/survivors may be met. This may include transfers within social housing.

Victim/survivors of domestic abuse will receive prioritised banding for housing in accordance with the Council's Allocations Scheme.

The Council ensures that its staff who are involved in the assessment of homelessness or housing applications receive enhanced levels of training, through the Safeguarding Board and Reducing the Risk, and this training is regularly refreshed. This is to ensure that victim/survivors approaching the Council for assistance receive a good service and are given the best possible advice and housing options.

4.3 The Sanctuary Scheme

The Council works with survivors of domestic abuse to enable them to stay in their own home, if they do not wish to move, and to do so in a safe and sustained manner. This scheme is also referred to as Target Hardening. The Sanctuary Scheme has no affiliation with the Registered Provider, Sanctuary.

A Sanctuary Scheme provides security enhancements and improvements to a property where the perpetrator of abuse has left the property. Requests to access the Sanctuary Scheme are generally received from a partner agency who is working with the victim/survivor on a casework and support basis. Referrals are received by the Housing Options Team for consideration.

When receiving a referrals, the Council will consider

- The landlord and tenure of the property. It may be necessary to gain permission of the landlord before completing any works.
- The likely cost of the work and whether these are viable as opposed to other options.
- Whether the works will draw significant attention to the property, if approved.
- Whether the works will leave the property potentially unsafe due to fire or other safety reasons.
- Whether alternative solutions, such as a move to alternative accommodation, are more suitable than the works being requested and the risk level.
- Whether a homeless application would be a more suitable and appropriate route.

The Council will routinely consider the following works as part of the Sanctuary Scheme.

- Changes to locks and replacement keys
- Improvements to door security and letterboxes

- Improvements to window furniture, such as window locks and keys
- Alarms
- Exterior lighting improvements
- Improvements to fencing and gates
- Interactive doorbells and similar technology

The following works will generally not be considered as part of the Sanctuary Scheme

- Installation of safe rooms or panic rooms
- Installation of bars, boarding up or blocking up exists or windows
- Installation of CCTV systems
- Any other referral that is contrary to building regulations or that would create a hazard in accordance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

Upon receipt of the referral, the Council will liaise with the landlord, tenant or both, as appropriate.

The Council would expect Registered Providers to carry out works to their own properties, to facilitate the improvements, or reimburse the Council if it carried out works with their agreement.

The decision of whether the security improvement is approved and appropriate will be made by the Housing Options Manager or the Head of Housing as appropriate.

4.4 Perpetrator Management

The Council will take into account the wishes of the victim/survivor and not make assumptions that they will want matters to be reported to the Police, or that they want a shared living arrangement to end.

Where it is appropriate and the victim/survivor wishes for the Council to assist in doing so, the Council will make a report to the police.

In the course of dealing with a case of domestic abuse and where property is involved, the Council may have a role or receive representations from the alleged perpetrator of the abuse for support with their housing. The alleged perpetrator will receive housing support and advice in accordance with our responsibilities within legislation.

The Council will assess any potential application to the Housing Register from the alleged perpetrator in accordance with its Allocations Scheme. Officers assessing the application will consider whether clause 4.9.1 Unacceptable Behaviour applies.

The clause contains specific reference to domestic abuse. If applied, this can lead to disqualification from the housing register.

Where counter allegations of abuse exist, the Council will work with specialist partner agencies to ensure that appropriate support is provided.

The Council will ensure that, where appropriate, information and support is available to perpetrators of abuse who wish to address their behaviour and seek support and signpost accordingly.

4.5 Partnership Working

The Council will retain up to date information and services available for victim/survivors and will routinely provide this on our website.

The Council will work proactively in partnership and participate in partnership activities relating to domestic abuse including:

- The Multi Agency Risk Management Conference (MARAC)
- Attending and being an active member of the Strategic Management Board of MARAC
- The Cherwell Community Safety Partnership
- The Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategic Board and Safe Accommodation Subgroup
- Co-commissioning and oversight of the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Services.

The Council will share information with other organisations to ensure that victim/survivors receive the appropriate support in accordance with their specific circumstances. The Council will do so with the permission of the victim/survivor, unless provisions relating to the urgent safeguarding of an vulnerable adult or child apply.

4.6 Prevention and Awareness

The Council is committed to improving practice and will provide staff with appropriate training and awareness and will offer additional and enhanced training to front line employees. Awareness throughout the Council will be promoted and facilitated by the network of domestic abuse champions, which are embedded within individual service areas.

The Council will actively raise awareness of domestic abuse and the support available. This applies to residents and staff.

The Council will raise awareness of domestic abuse through its media channels and other communications and with relevant partners and agencies.

The Council will seek to learn and improve services through accreditation processes, when appropriate.

4.7 Equality and Diversity

The Council has a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to promote disability, race and gender equality. The Council recognises that domestic abuse occurs in society, regardless of age, sex, gender identity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, pregnancy, wealth, level of educational attainment and whether they live in an urban or rural area.

We recognise that domestic abuse is a gendered crime and disproportionately affects women and is disproportionately perpetrated by men. Domestic abuse can affect anyone. Some victim/survivors might be disproportionately affected or particularly vulnerable and some groups are affected by specific forms of domestic abuse. The Council also understands there are cultural and other barriers to reporting domestic abuse. We will take all of this into account in the support we provide.

We are committed to ensure our services are accessible to everyone and residents can access services in the way they need.

4.8 Monitoring Performance and Review

The performance against the policy will be reviewed regularly by the service.

The policy will be monitored and reviewed on a 5 yearly basis and will be reviewed more frequently if there are changes in legislation or guidance that affect the policy, for instance.

Minor changes which make no significant difference to service provision will be made to the document with the agreement of the Assistant Director – Wellbeing and Housing and the Portfolio Holder for Housing.