

Cherwell District Council

Executive

3 October 2022

Domestic Abuse – Strategic Briefing and Support Services Contract Commissioning Update

Report of Assistant Director Regulatory Services & Community Safety

This report is public

Purpose of report

The Council works in partnership with the other local authorities in Oxfordshire and the Police and Crime Commissioner to commission support services for domestic abuse victims in the county. Cherwell contributes £25k per annum to the current domestic abuse support services contract with A2 Dominion. This current contract expires in April 2023 and therefore work is underway in preparation to tender for a new domestic abuse support services contract.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced new statutory duties on local authorities in relation to support for domestic abuse victims in safe accommodation. Subsequent national guidance published in the Domestic Abuse Plan 2022 includes additional recommendations for prevention and perpetrator services to help reduce domestic homicides, suicides, risks, and harm to victim-survivors.

This paper updates the Executive on progress in Oxfordshire to meet the new statutory duties and to commission a new domestic abuse support services contract.

Ensuring there is an effective response to domestic abuse in Cherwell contributes to the corporate priority to promote healthy, resilient and engaged communities. In particular it supports the commitment to work with partners to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour, and it also supports our commitment to equalities, diversity and inclusion and work with partners to address the causes of health inequality and deprivation.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To note the work taking place across Oxfordshire to meet the new statutory duties and to commission a new domestic abuse support services contract.
- 1.2 To agree that Cherwell will maintain its contribution to the costs of this contract.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Domestic abuse is a crime that can have a devastating effect on the lives of victims, children and families, regardless of income, age, or social situation. There are long-term negative impacts on victims who may experience social isolation, mental and physical ill health as a result of domestic abuse.
- 2.2 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (the 'Act') recognises the importance of a systemwide commitment to addressing domestic abuse. This includes providing access to safe accommodation to allow victims-survivors and their families to escape their abuser, which can be the first step towards a life without fear.
- 2.3 The Act introduced two key new requirements on local authorities. Firstly, the Act requires each Tier 1 local authority to develop a strategic partnership board with prescribed members from a range of organisations, including Tier 2 local authorities and people affected by domestic abuse. Secondly, that Board is required to oversee the development of a local Needs Assessment and Safe Accommodation Strategy to ensure there is adequate safe accommodation provision and support for all victims and their children who reside in relevant safe accommodation. The strategy should be implemented through commissioning arrangements. The Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) requires the Board to provide annual reports on spend from the dedicated grant for domestic abuse and annual updates on performance against strategic objectives.
- 2.4 The new duties introduced by the Act are the only direct statutory duties the council has in relation to providing support for victims of domestic abuse. However, domestic abuse contributes significantly to recorded crime and Police incidents in Cherwell and is a priority for the community safety partnership.
- 2.5 A Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership has been in existence in Oxfordshire for a number of years. This partnership developed and delivered a domestic abuse strategy and led the commissioning of domestic abuse support services for the county in 2018. The domestic abuse support services contract provides support and emergency accommodation services for adults, children, and young people. The contract is held by the County Council but is funded jointly by the County Council with the district and city councils and the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC). It is due to expire in March 2023.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 In 2021 the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership was reconstituted to meet the requirements of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to have a domestic abuse strategic board for Oxfordshire. The Board is well established, and includes prescribed representation from victim-survivors, NHS, Voluntary and Community Sector, the Police and Crime Commissioner's office and Local Authority partners from across the system. This Board has produced an Oxfordshire Safe Accommodation Strategy and Overarching Domestic Abuse Strategy in line with the statutory duties for Tier 1 Local Authorities.
- 3.2 The Board has also established a Safe Accommodation Working Group to oversee delivery of a plan under the Safe Accommodation Strategy. Cherwell is represented in

this group by our Housing Team.

- 3.3 The current domestic abuse support services contract commenced in 2018 and is held by A2Dominion. Under this contract A2Dominion provide an access/ help line, outreach support, specialist domestic abuse support for anyone affected by domestic abuse including people from minoritised communities and those with protected characteristics, emergency refuge and place of safety accommodation to ensure immediate escape from fear and danger in addition to a pathway to more sustainable accommodation and support to access help for wider health and care needs.
- 3.4 In addition Reducing the Risk, a local domestic abuse charity, provides Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) services and a Champions' network. These services are funded by a range of charitable trusts, voluntary donations, and small grants from OCC.
- 3.5 Support for child victims of domestic abuse is available through Safe!, an independent charity.
- 3.6 In July, the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment was finalised. This assessment is based on a review aiming to identify whether the needs of victim-survivors of domestic abuse, including those with relevant characteristics, are being met by the current provision of domestic abuse services in Oxfordshire. This assessment identified some areas for improvement in relation to the current service provision which need to be addressed in the new support services contract. The needs assessment will be published shortly. A refreshed Domestic Abuse Strategy was prepared at the same time as the needs assessment, reflecting the findings of the needs assessment. The Domestic Abuse Strategic Board is now taking forward work to deliver that strategy.
- 3.7 The Domestic Abuse Strategic Board has formed a sub-group to lead the commissioning of the new domestic abuse support services contract to commence in April 2023. The intention is to procure domestic abuse services via a competitive tendering process to align provision across the system. Future commissioning intentions for the Oxfordshire domestic abuse services include:
 - Safe accommodation, refuge and outreach support for people affected by domestic abuse and their children.
 - Independent Domestic Violence Advocate services to work with families with safeguarding issues and complex needs affected by domestic abuse.
 - Prevention services including for children and young people, training for professionals and perpetrator support services to assist in the prevention and reduction of harm for individuals and their children affected by domestic abuse
- 3.8 In 2021/22 a grant of £1.14million was awarded to Oxfordshire County Council by MHCLG (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, now known as The Department for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC)) for delivery of the duties under the Act. This grant is not ring-fenced. Tier 2 local authorities in Oxfordshire additionally received grants (Cherwell received £34k) to implement their

safe accommodation duty. These grants have been awarded again in 2022-23 to local authorities for the same value. The new support services Local Authorities are required to provide under the Act will be partly or wholly funded by future DLUHC grants awarded on an annual basis. However, the level of future funding we will receive is not known.

- 3.9 DHLUC has defined reporting requirements to ensure the effective delivery of the Domestic Abuse Act duties and funding allocation. This reporting requirement includes needs assessment data, updated annually, regarding the range of accommodation provided, specialist Domestic Abuse support and provision for people with protected characteristics. The completion of this data return has proved challenging since it seeks data that partners were not previously aware we would need to collate. Improved data collection will be needed for future returns.

New Support Services Contract Costs

- 3.10 The County Council will continue to receive funding from DLUHC in relation to the new domestic abuse duties. The scope of the domestic abuse support services contract will need to be increased from the existing contract to reflect the new duties and accommodation-based support needs. The County Council DLUHC funding may contribute to the increase contract costs. However, whilst the DLUHC funding is being provided to support local authorities to meet the requirements of the new statutory duties, the amount of funding for future years is not yet known. It is likely that the new contract will be commissioned against a set contract price, with providers setting out the services offered for that price.
- 3.11 The needs assessment identifies that domestic abuse is often a hidden crime. It highlights that overall demand for support services has grown since the current contract was established and therefore there is a need increase support service capacity.
- 3.12 Due to changes in some partners' funding arrangements for victim support services there have been some reductions in funding for the general domestic abuse support services contract. Public Health have asked each District Council to identify the amount of funding they will contribute to the future domestic abuse support services contract. Cherwell currently contributes £25k p.a. This funding comes from Housing Services and is built into base budget. South Oxfordshire DC and the Vale of the White Horse DC contribute a similar amount for each district, whilst the City Council and West Oxfordshire contribute slightly higher amounts.
- 3.13 It should be noted that the needs assessment identifies that Cherwell has a higher rate of recorded domestic abuse incidents per head of population (13.4 per 1000 population) than the other districts (Oxford City is next highest at 12.6 per 1000 population).
- 3.14 Public Health, as the lead commissioner, are asking partners to agree their contributions to the new contract cost as soon as possible. We have indicated that our current budget plans include continuing to contribute the same amount towards this contract.

Capacity

- 3.15 The Assistant Director of Regulatory Services and Community Safety currently leads

on domestic abuse related matters for Cherwell. However, domestic abuse is relevant to a number of other service areas, particularly housing and community engagement. There is no dedicated capacity in the council supporting the council's work on domestic abuse.

- 3.16 Oxfordshire County Council provided £50k to Cherwell to support a dedicated Domestic Abuse Lead Officer post. This post will provide the capacity that Cherwell requires to coordinate work on domestic abuse internally and with partners, with a view to better understanding Cherwell's needs and how well services meet those needs to inform our engagement with the Board and commissioning group. The post will also provide capacity for proactive educational and awareness work and to support complex housing cases. An attempt to recruit to this new post in July was unsuccessful and therefore a further recruitment campaign is being planned for October.
- 3.17 The Executive may also want to consider whether the council should seek White Ribbon Accreditation. This accreditation would demonstrate the council's commitment to ending male violence against women. But seeking accreditation would require capacity to coordinate the work required. If we are successful in recruiting a Domestic Abuse Lead Officer we are likely to have the capacity to seek this accreditation.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 The new statutory duties relating to domestic abuse and the need to commission a new support service contract for Oxfordshire are driving considerable partnership activity in Oxfordshire. Work is progressing to bring in additional capacity to support Cherwell with this work.
- 4.2 The Executive are recommended to-
 - a) Agree that we will continue to contribute to the cost of the Domestic Abuse support services contract for Oxfordshire at current funding levels.
 - b) Agree that proposals for seeking White Ribbon Accreditation should be developed if the council is successful in appointing a suitable candidate to the new Domestic Abuse Lead Officer post.

5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 No consultation is required at this stage.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 6.1 The Council could withdraw its funding for the Domestic Abuse Support Services Contract. This was discounted since this would result in the Council not meeting its statutory duties and would also lead to a significant reduction in domestic abuse support services in the district.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report as the current and proposed future contribution of £25k p.a is held within existing budgets.

Comments checked by:

Kelly Wheeler, Finance Business Partner, 01295 221570, Kelly.wheeler@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 7.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report, however this Council should act on the relevant legislation as a minimum and take all proportionate steps to engage with and provide support services proactively.

Comments checked by:

Helen Lolas, Team Leader Legal Services, 07801400941, helen.lolas@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Risk Implications

- 7.3 There are no risk management implications arising directly from this report. Any arising risks will be managed through the service operational risk and escalated to the leadership risk register as and when necessary.

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Interim Assistant Director – Customer Focus,
Tel: 01295 221556, Celia.prado-teeling@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Equalities and Inclusion Implications

- 7.4 There are no equalities nor inclusion implications directly arising from the contents of this report. The proposal is consistent with our commitment to Equalities, inclusion and diversity as stated in our equalities and inclusion framework

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Interim Assistant Director – Customer Focus
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Sustainability Implications

- 7.5 There are no sustainability implications to consider.

Comments checked by:

Ed Potter, Assistant Director Environmental Services. ed.potter@cherwell-dc.gov.uk
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8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision:

Financial Threshold Met: No

Community Impact Threshold Met: No

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

As outlined in the purpose section in the main report.

Lead Councillor

Councillor Eddie Reeves, Portfolio Holder for Safer Communities

Document Information

Appendix number and title

None

Background papers

None

Report Author and Contact Details

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