



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Performance Management Scrutiny Committee
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<u>Item</u>
8

Report from the Rapid Action Group on Refuges for Victims of Domestic Abuse

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1.0 Summary

1.1 This paper presents the report of the Rapid Action Group on Refuges for Victims of Domestic Abuse to the Performance Management Scrutiny Committee. Their work has focussed on the funding available for refuges and support services for victims of domestic abuse, and the impact of changes to funding for all supported housing. The Rapid Action Group has developed its conclusions and recommendations based on the evidence gathered through its work.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Recommendation 1

That the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee explore opportunities for CAMHS to offer acute support to children who were staying in domestic abuse refuges.

2.2 Recommendation 2

That Shropshire Council request that the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee explore opportunities for working more closely with Telford and Wrekin Council to deliver domestic abuse support services.

2.3 Recommendation 3

That Shropshire Council respond to the government's consultation on housing costs for short-term supported accommodation, asking that the Government postpones these proposals until such time as there is more certainty about the proposed domestic abuse legislation.

REPORT

3.0 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

3.1 Assessment of risk

Proposed changes to funding for domestic abuse refuges would mean that refuges would no longer be able to claim housing benefit on behalf of eligible people who were staying in them. They would instead have to rely to a far greater extent on funding from Shropshire Council, who would instead receive block funding for all supported housing. There is no guarantee however that funding would cover all of the needs of the competing refuges and hostels, jeopardising the viability of services.

3.2 Assessment of opportunities

Block funding for all supported housing by Government would give Shropshire Council the ability to co-ordinate and plan local supported housing.

4.0 Financial implications

4.1 Shropshire Council currently provides approximately £185,000 annually to fund domestic abuse support services. As these services are not a statutory obligation, changes to government funding will not necessarily have any financial implications to Shropshire Council. They may however have considerable impact on domestic abuse support services if Shropshire Council can no longer provide the required level of funding.

5.0 Background

5.1 On 14 December 2017 the following motion was proposed to council:

The government proposals to remove Domestic Abuse Refuges and other forms of short-term supported housing from the welfare system.

On average housing benefit makes up 53% of the funding to refuges that provide a vital, sometimes life-saving service to vulnerable women and children fleeing abusive partners.

...

The government proposal will see housing benefit replaced with a grant to local authorities. However there is no proposal to ring fence this for particular forms of short-term supported housing. In addition many people

fleeing domestic violence and abuse need to relocate, and so may stay in areas where they have little or no local connection, with the possibility that the response from local authorities to their short-term housing needs will become uneven at best.

Council resolves to instruct the Chief Executive and Leader to make representations to government calling on them to remove this proposal and retain access to housing benefit for those in short-term supported housing to help secure the future of this vital service.

5.2 Following a debate, Council agreed to the following motion:

Central Government has proposed changes to Housing Benefit for people in women's refuges and temporary accommodation. These have the potential to have a significant impact on those individuals within Shropshire and how Shropshire Council is able to meet their needs.

Shropshire Council believes we need to drill down in to this issue to understand its impact. Therefore this Council resolves to refer this issue to the Welfare Reform Task & Finish Group to review and inform any response we need to make through the setting up of a one-day Rapid Action Group as soon as possible to specifically look into this.

5.3 Accordingly, Overview and Scrutiny set up a Rapid Action Group to:

- Find out more about the nature and prevalence of domestic abuse, both nationally and in Shropshire;
- Learn about the support services available in Shropshire for survivors of domestic abuse and their families;
- gain a deeper understanding of domestic abuse by hearing from survivors of abuse;
- understand how support services are funded, and the proposed changes to government funding; and
- agree recommendations to help ensure the future viability of support services.

6.0 The Rapid Action Group

6.1 The Rapid Action Group met on 16 January 2018. It was chaired by the chair of the Performance Management Scrutiny Committee and consisted of a number of members of Shropshire Council's overview and scrutiny committees.

To assist the group in their work, the following people attended the meeting:

- Committee Officer, Shropshire Council
- Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Shropshire Council
- Community Safety Manager, Shropshire Council
- Benefits Manager, Shropshire Council
- Manager, Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service
- Support Worker, SEEDS Shropshire
- Domestic Abuse Survivor Advocates, SEEDS Shropshire

6.2 As part of its work, it considered the following evidence:

- An overview of the prevalence of domestic abuse, both nationally and within Shropshire.
- Details of proposed changes to funding for short-term supported accommodation
- A presentation from Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service on the history of support for victims of domestic abuse in Shropshire.
- An overview of funding arrangements to tackle domestic abuse in Shropshire.
- Accounts of using support services from survivors of domestic abuse.

7.0 Findings of the Rapid Action Group

7.1 Prevalence of domestic abuse

The group heard that the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2017 calculated that in the year to March 2017 1.9 million adults aged 16-59 experienced some form of domestic abuse, either from their partners or from other family members. Of these, approximately 1.2 million adults were women, and 700,000 were men. This equated to 7.5% of women and 4.3% of men aged 16-59 in England and Wales. Women were twice as likely to experience violence from an intimate partner, and 20% more likely to experience threats or force from a family member.

In the year to March 2017, West Mercia Police recorded 2,186 domestic abuse offences in the borough, concentrated in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Market Drayton and Ludlow. This was an increase of 22% compared to the previous year. However the Office for National Statistics had noted that “this increase is likely to be, in part, driven by an increase in domestic abuse-related incidents coming to the attention of the police, improvements in crime recording practices and an increased willingness of victims to come forward.” It had pointed out that the Crime Survey for England and Wales did not measure a similar increase.

Across the force area, West Mercia Police pursued 1,703 prosecutions, equivalent to 14% of all criminal prosecutions. Within the police force area there were also 1,352 convictions, equivalent to 79% of all prosecutions for domestic violence made by the police.

- 7.2 The group also considered other evidence concerning the prevalence of domestic abuse. In the year to March 2017, the borough's multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) recorded 319 higher risk cases of domestic abuse. 182 of these were referred by the police, and 61 by health services.

In addition, West Mercia Women's Aid's Independent Domestic Abuse Advisers supported 280 clients in the county of Shropshire. In addition, Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service (SDAS) is commissioned by Shropshire Council to provide a refuge and longer-term outreach service to between 80-100 clients each year. West Mercia Women's Aid's 24 hour Domestic Abuse helpline received 1600 calls in the year to 2018, and made 1300 calls on behalf of clients. It is not clear the extent of the overlap between these three client groups, but it is likely to be significant.

7.3 **Domestic abuse refuge and support services in Shropshire**

SDAS runs a 10-bedroom refuge for women only, as well as two-bedroom property that can accommodate anyone. A further three-bedroom property will become operational in 2018. A family unit typically occupies a single room, irrespective of the size of the family.

- 7.4 Between 1 April and 20 December 2017 42 woman and 55 children used the refuges, only 40% of whom came from within Shropshire. Unlike some local authorities, Shropshire Council did not restrict access to SDAS refuge and support services to those living within the council area. Although people from elsewhere used the service, Shropshire was not a popular destination for people fleeing abuse due to its relative geographical isolation and lack of comprehensive services. Accordingly SDAS were careful to explain life in Shropshire to those coming from larger, more urban, culturally diverse towns and cities.

Members supported the principle that SDAS services were available to those from outside the local authority area, and expressed concern that moving to a service that was commissioned and funded by the local authority may result in the service being available only to Shropshire residents.

- 7.5 As well as refuge space, SDAS also organise a range of support services both for people staying in refuges and the wider population. These services

include support to access housing, training, employment and benefits, as well as counselling and advocacy.

Both West Mercia Women's Aid and SDAS employ independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs), support workers who specialise in working with victims of domestic abuse who are assessed as being at high risk of harm. IDVAs work closely with agencies such as the police, children's services and legal advisors on behalf of the victim.

7.6 While demand for refuge space is steady, there has been a steady increase in demands for support services. Last year West Mercia Women's Aid's IDVA services represented 280 people, having forecast to support just 200-220 clients. SDAS also reports growing demand which cannot be met with existing services.

7.7 Members discussed whether children who were staying in refuges were able to access NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as a priority. SDAS confirmed that there is no priority for such children. Some members felt that there ought to be, due to the acute trauma of sudden domestic upheaval following domestic abuse committed against a parent. Other members disagreed, believing that prioritising one cohort of children could possible disadvantage those with greater or even more immediate need.

The group therefore agreed that the matter should be referred to the relevant overview and scrutiny committee to look at in greater detail.

RECOMMENDATION 1: that the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee explore opportunities for CAMHS to offer acute support to children who were staying in domestic abuse refuges.

7.8 **Funding domestic abuse services**

Providing a domestic abuse prevention and support service is not a statutory function for local authorities. Nonetheless, since 2008 Shropshire Council has funded domestic abuse refuge and other support services in the county. From April 2017 this service has been contracted to Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service (SDAS), part of Connexus (formerly known as Shropshire Housing Group). The contract is worth £185,000 a year for refuge and support services, and runs for three years until 31 March 2020.

7.9 The refuge funding from Shropshire Council covers non-janitorial support staff wages and expenses. In addition Shropshire Housing claims enhanced Housing Benefit of £270 per week per room in the refuge, covering rent, service charges and intensive housing management. The

people staying in the refuge pay a personal contribution of £16 per week towards heating and lighting, which is not covered by their Housing Benefit. SDAS told the group that these costs were realistic and that they provided a breakdown of the costs when submitting claims for Housing benefit. Because Connexus does not require a rental payment for the lease of the properties to SDAS, the service is able to charge a lower rate of housing benefit than the previous contractors. Accordingly there had been no pressure from the Department for Work and Pensions to reduce these costs.

- 7.10 Based on the 2017 occupancy rate of 82% for the two refuges, SDAS received Housing Benefit income of approximately £130,000 in 2017. In 2018 that will rise to approximately £160,000, assuming a similar occupancy of 15 rooms. Officers advised the group that if the government followed through with its proposal to replace housing benefit for people living in refuges with a block grant, SDAS would require additional funding of approximately £215,000 a year to maintain the current service.
- 7.11 In addition to the funding from Shropshire Council, and housing benefit income, SDAS has funding for a number of mostly time-limited projects:
- £115,000 from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), to be spent over two years from 2018. This will pay for 1 full-time officer to provide outreach services in Telford and Wrekin, 1 full-time officer to provide specific outreach for black and minority ethnic people throughout Shropshire, and five hours per week of administrative support.
 - £26,000 also from DCLG, to provide specialist psychotherapy services. This award is not time-limited.
 - £124,000 from Children in Need, to be spent over three years until 2019, to pay for 1.5 full-time officers to provide specific support for children.
 - £32,000 from Shropshire Council, to provide 12 hours a week of administrative support to SEEDS, a survivor-led group support project, until March 2020.
- 7.12 In addition, the West Mercia police and crime commissioner (PCC) funds two West Mercia Women's Aid projects, which Shropshire residents can use:
- £35,000 to pay for a specialist support worker for children and young period, for one year until March 2018.
 - £180,000 to increase the capacity of West Mercia Women's Aid's 24 hour Domestic Abuse helpline, for two years until January 2018.

The PCC also commissions the IDVA service from West Mercia Women's

Aid. There are two IDVAs in Shropshire and another post is shared with Telford and Wrekin to provide administrative support.

- 7.13 Members noted that different funding streams applied to different geographical boundaries. Although most funding covered services within the Shropshire Council area, a grant from DCLG funded work across Shropshire. Police and Crime Commissioner funding covered services across the West Mercia area.

Members asked whether there was any opportunity for closer working with Telford and Wrekin Council. Officers advised that Telford and Wrekin Council preferred to run its own services. Members however noted that if domestic abuse services moved to being funded directly by the local authority, it may be more cost-effective to run a single service covering the entire county. Members therefore recommended that Shropshire Council begin to explore this through its joint scrutiny with Telford and Wrekin Council.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee explore opportunities for working more closely with Telford and Wrekin Council to deliver domestic abuse support services.

7.14 Listening to survivors of domestic abuse

Two members of SEEDS, the survivor-led support network, came to the group meeting to talk about their experiences of using domestic abuse support services. Although both women had very different backgrounds, several themes emerged from their stories. Neither woman had wanted to use the refuge, but was forced to do so due to the immediate threat to their safety. Both women described a feeling of loss; of contact with friends and family, of their clothes and other possessions, of work and their daily routines. However for them this loss was more than compensated for by a sense of safety from harm.

- 7.15 Both women were now involved in the SEEDS survivors' network, supporting others who were victims of domestic abuse.

- 7.16 Members asked the members of SEEDS about the support they had received from the local authority and its partners. One survivor told the group that she had received considerable support from the police, who had alerted her to the imminent threat to her safety that caused her to flee. They had also escorted her when she needed to return home to collect possessions.

One of the survivors, because she was not eligible for Housing Benefit as she owned her own home, had to cover all of the costs of her stay at the refuge herself. This limited the time that she was able to stay at the refuge.

Both survivors had completed the Freedom Programme, which aims to help women who are victims of domestic abuse, and found it incredibly useful in teaching them that they were not at fault for the abuse that they suffered. One woman had completed the course previously, while still in an abusive relationship, at the request of her social worker. However, she had not wanted to attend and had not engaged with the course. Once she had recognised the relationship as being abusive, she was much more receptive to taking part in the programme. SDAS told the group that Shropshire Council was far less likely now to compel people to attend the programme.

7.17 Changes to funding for women's refuges

In October 2017 the Department for Communities and Local Government, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, issued a joint policy statement on funding supported housing. It proposed to replace existing arrangements for funding through Housing Benefit to a local, ring-fenced grant fund for short-term and transitional supported housing, including supported housing for:

- homeless people with support needs
- people fleeing domestic abuse
- people receiving support for drug and alcohol misuse
- offenders and young people at risk and
- care leavers

This change would mean that domestic abuse refuges would no longer be able to claim housing benefit for eligible people who were staying in refuges, and would instead have to rely to a far greater extent on funding from the Council. At the same time as publishing the policy statement, the government had announced a consultation on these proposals.

7.18 Members asked whether people using refuges could apply for funding from the Discretionary Housing Payments fund, rather than apply for Housing Benefit. Officers advised that they could only do so if they were entitled to either Housing Benefit or the housing component for Universal Credit.

7.19 It was noted that the government's proposal to move to a grant-based system would allow the local authority to determine the contribution that each person using the refuge would make. This could mean that people who were not eligible for Housing Benefit would not necessarily have to cover the entire cost of staying at the refuge.

Members expressed concern that such a move could jeopardise the viability of existing services. The grant fund could put refuges in competition for funding with other support services, and there would be no guarantee that the grant fund would cover the needs of every service. In addition, unless the proposed grant fund was not ring-fenced specifically for refuge space, Council could decide at a later date to not fund domestic abuse refuges at all.

- 7.20 The group noted that the government had proposed to introduce a draft domestic violence and abuse bill to parliament. Although the government had given some indications about the contents of the draft bill, it had published neither a draft bill nor a white paper on the proposed legislation. This indicated that the government was proposing significant changes to how it funded domestic abuse before it had decided on changes to underlying legislation. Members felt that the government should therefore delay any changes to the current funding system until the proposed legislation had received royal assent.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That Shropshire Council respond to the government’s consultation on housing costs for short-term supported accommodation, asking that the Government postpones these proposals until such time as there is more certainty about the proposed domestic abuse legislation.

List of Background Papers

- Performance Management Scrutiny Committee Housing Benefit for Refuges Rapid Action Group Terms of Reference
- Rapid Action Group briefing note
- Crime Survey England and Wales 2012-2017
- West Mercia Police reported crime data 2016-2017
- multi agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) 2017 data
- West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner: grants awarded 2015-2017
- Department for Communities and Local Government and Department for Work and Pensions: Funding Supported Housing – Policy Statement and Consultation
- Shropshire Community Safety, Crime Reduction and Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017 - 2020

Cabinet Member

Cllr Lee Chapman– Portfolio Holder for Health and Adult Social Care

Local Members All Members
Appendices Shropshire Council response to consultation on funding for supported housing

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Appendix 1: Shropshire Council response to consultation on funding for supported housing

In October 2017 the Department for Communities and Local Government, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, consulted on proposals to replace existing arrangements for funding through Housing Benefit to a local, ring-fenced grant fund for short-term and transitional supported housing.

The rapid action group responded to this consultation on behalf of Shropshire Council as follows:

Shropshire Council is responding to the proposals for changes to the funding of housing costs for short-term supported housing. We have concerns that these proposals could have a significant impact on the sustainability of refuge provision for victims and their families leaving violent relationships. We would also strongly suggest that this consultation is premature, given the government's proposals to introduce a domestic violence and abuse bill to Parliament later this year.

The element of the proposed changes that will impact upon refuge provision is the establishment of the Local Grant Fund for Short-term and Transitional Supported Housing.

The proposals are designed to place the scale and shape of refuge provision for the victims of domestic abuse entirely within the scope of local decision-making. This will add to the vulnerability currently felt by providers – not because they cannot show both quality and the capacity to meet local need, but because they will be completely dependent upon local authorities at a time when councils themselves have insufficient capacity to meet local need and plan for the future.

The proposal requires the undertaking of further strategic planning by local authorities and partners at a time when their capacity to do so is under immense pressure, in order to produce a supported housing strategic plan that will place all short-term supported housing within the same frame and budget envelope. Local authorities will then be required to prioritise on the basis of local need, placing refuge provision in even greater competition with a range of other supported housing provision than it is at present. This will be at a time when, additional funding notwithstanding, local authority resources are already insufficient to meet local need

This proposal also comes at a time when the Government is simultaneously working on landmark legislation designed to tackle domestic abuse. The

Council believes that until this legislation receives Royal assent, it is inappropriate to make such significant changes to the existing funding arrangements. As well as creating the risk that the changes will not be appropriate for future legislation, it also risks creating instability to services twice over; once with these proposed changes and again when the proposed bill comes into force.

Shropshire Council therefore ask that the Government postpones these proposals until such time as their certainty about the proposed domestic abuse legislation.

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