



Strategy for Domestic Abuse Support in Safe Accommodation in Devon 2021

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1. Introduction

Devon County Council has a new statutory duty under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to assess the need and create a strategy for domestic abuse support in our area for all victims (and their children) who reside in relevant safe accommodation, including those who come from outside of the area.

References to victims (and their children) in this document refer to all victims of domestic abuse, including people without children; people who have had their children removed; people from marginalised communities and / or with protected characteristics (eg our LGBT+ communities, our BAME communities and our disabled communities). The strategy has also been written recognising the importance of intersectionality when considering needs and responses. For more information about protected characteristics and intersectionality please see Appendix 1.

This Needs Assessment and Strategy Framework has been informed by quantitative data from Police, District Councils and current domestic abuse providers and qualitative insights gained from service focus groups (Appendix 2) and the multi-agency Devon Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board. Due to time constraints no insights have been gained directly from those who have experienced domestic abuse, but it must be noted that many people involved in the focus groups and Devon Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board have lived experience of abuse themselves.

“At least 80% of our staff and trustees have experienced domestic abuse as adults or children” (CEO of a Devon Domestic Abuse Charity).

A strategic framework has been developed based on insights from the assessment of needs and this will guide the development of a delivery plan. This is however an iterative process and will be updated over time with the support of the Partnership Board.

2. Strategic Framework

Outcome 1: Victims (and their children) who are fleeing domestic abuse can access good quality safe accommodation that is appropriate to their individual needs.	
Insights	Objectives
<p>There is safe accommodation available but only for particular groups, primarily women with children fleeing from outside the area and women with complex needs from North Devon.</p> <p>There is insufficient safe accommodation capacity to meet overall demand and specific requirements.</p> <p>Most people are housed in temporary accommodation without any support. This heightens their risk and increases their chance of returning to their abuser.</p>	<p>We need to increase the units of safe accommodation available in Devon.</p> <p>We need equity of access to provision across the county.</p> <p>We need specialist domestic abuse support for victims housed in temporary accommodation to reduce their risk, particularly whilst adequate provision of safe accommodation is being developed.</p> <p>We need a network of self-contained units; some in one block with communal space for recovery/peer support/multi-agency work and others dispersed through the</p>

The safe accommodation available is geographically concentrated and there are gaps in provision for men, large families, those who struggle with communal living and those with protected characteristics.	community with outreach support tailored to the individual's needs. This offers the most flexibility to meet a variety of needs.
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Outcome 2: Victims experiencing domestic abuse who wish to remain in their home can do so safely to prevent them from becoming homeless and/or their risk escalating.	
Insights	Objectives
<p>We have created a system where people must get worse to get support and it isn't available when they need it to prevent their needs escalating.</p> <p>Most people want to remain in their own homes. It is where they work, have their support networks such as family and friends and where their children go to school. This is particularly important for people with protected characteristics, carers and those with complex needs.</p>	<p>We should focus resources on preventing people having to leave their homes and preventing their needs escalating from where they are right now.</p> <p>We need to understand what the victim wants and a tool to assess the dynamics of the relationship.</p> <p>We need a multi-agency approach that is flexible enough to keep the victim safe, remove the perpetrator and/or work with the couple to stay together safely depending on the individuals wants/needs.</p>

Outcome 3: Victims get the support they need to leave their relationship	
Insights	Objectives
<p>Many people don't get the support they need to leave their relationship. They do not ask for help because either they do not realise that they are in an abusive relationship, do not know how to ask for help and/or do not trust services. This is particularly true for individuals with learning disabilities, those from BAME communities, the 'hidden homeless' and those with complex needs.</p>	<p>We need specialist support for victims with protected characteristics and/or complex needs provided by the specialist voluntary, community and 'by and for' organisations locally. This must include interpretation services for people who are deaf or where English isn't their first language.</p>
<p>People's basic needs aren't met when they flee an abusive relationship.</p>	<p>We need practical support (e.g., financial abuse support) for people when they flee domestic abuse, particularly for those people in temporary accommodation or in managed moves.</p>

Outcome 4: A range of trauma informed therapeutic support is available to victims (and their children) to support recovery and break the cycle.	
Insights	Objectives
<p>All victims (including children) of domestic abuse have experienced some sort of loss – loss of a relationship, loss of a home, loss of friends, loss of their community, loss of their crutches etc.</p> <p>If adults and children do not get support to work through their feelings in the “here and now”, they often revert back to harmful relationships or behaviours (e.g., substance misuse).</p> <p>If people do not get support to understand the patterns of abuse and the influence of their childhoods on their choices, they can continue to choose unhealthy relationships and behaviours.</p>	<p>We need to ensure trauma informed therapeutic support is available at all stages of the individual’s (adult and children) journey.</p> <p>The offer needs to be different depending on the adult/child’s needs, the makeup of the family, their relationship status and protected characteristics.</p>

Outcome 5: Victims (and their children) have appropriate support to live safely, free from abuse	
Insights	Objectives
<p>There is no dedicated long-term support for victims and their children after leaving safe accommodation. This is particularly important for people with protected characteristics and those with complex needs.</p>	<p>We need to provide support tailored to the individuals needs to help them to seek support, remain in safe accommodation and remain independent afterwards. The length of support needs to be flexible depending on the family's needs.</p> <p>We need to ensure the support offered is part of the Early Help process to provide on-going multi-agency support to the child and family.</p>

Outcome 6: Victims (and their children) receive person centred response that is tailored to their own wants and needs.	
Insights	Objectives
<p>Our current system often requires people to accept unsuitable accommodation, and/or alienates them from services or cycles through services.</p>	<p>We need to listen to the individual and understand the real dynamics of the relationship to identify the right solutions and tailor support to their personal outcomes.</p>

Outcome 7: Services are domestic abuse informed and work collectively to support the victim and their family.	
Insights	Objectives
Individual practitioners and services do not have the knowledge or understanding of domestic abuse, its impact on individuals and families, particularly those with protected characteristics to provide an appropriate domestic abuse and trauma informed response.	We need to raise awareness of domestic abuse and impact of trauma, but also raising understanding of intersectionality and the need for different service responses for individual needs and protected characteristics, such as LGBT+, BAME, physical and learning disability.
Trusted partner relationships are key to effective multi-agency working.	We need to develop clear links from domestic abuse services into statutory and voluntary/community services to enable partner relationships to be built.

Outcome 8: Devon County Council and the Local Partnership Board have access to consistent, up-to-date data and the lived experiences of victims (and their children) to ensure that the Needs Assessment and Strategy for Devon is continuously developed and monitored over time to add further insights, learn from mistakes and to improve outcomes.	
Insights	Objectives
We have an incomplete picture of demand for safe accommodation across Devon.	We need consistent quantitative data from the 8 District Councils to determine need for safe accommodation.
We have valuable insights from practitioners and services but lack insights from victims and children with lived experience.	We will develop an Ethical Framework for the involvement of victims and children in the Local Partnership Board and the delivery of the strategy.

3. Resource allocation

The UK government has allocated £1.4 million to Devon County Council in 2021-22 to deliver the Council's duty to provide domestic abuse support in safe accommodation. Funding for future years will be allocated within the government spending review due in autumn 2021. This strategy will inform the allocation of resources to address the outcome areas and priority action. At this stage in the development of the delivery plan the Council does not judge it be appropriate to assign specific levels of funding to the outcomes above. These will be agreed at a later stage with the Partnership Board.

4. What is Safe Accommodation?

<p><i>"Somewhere to feel safe and start to re-build your life"</i></p> <p><i>"The location is safe and won't be disclosed"</i></p> <p><i>"Parents can start to truly meet the needs of their children and re-build their relationship"</i></p> <p><i>"A suitable environment where the needs of others do not impact your physical and emotional safety".</i></p> <p><i>"Somewhere where you aren't judged"</i></p>

The new duty holds a broad definition of 'safe accommodation' where we have a duty to provide support in recognition of the diversity of housing in which victims and their children may live. It covers the provision of support to victims and their children residing in some/all of the following, but does not include temporary accommodation, such as bed & breakfast and hotels.

Accommodation	Description
Refuge	Accommodation and intensive support for the residents
Specialist safe accommodation	Dedicated specialist support to victims with relevant protected characteristics and/or complex needs e.g. refuges for BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans -transgender, transexual), and disabled victims
Dispersed accommodation	Self-contained accommodation which is safe, secure and dedicated to supporting victims of domestic abuse
Move-on or Second stage accommodation	Projects temporarily accommodating victims, including families who no longer need the intensive level of support provided in a refuge, but would still benefit from a lower level of domestic abuse specific support for a period before they move to fully independent and permanent accommodation
Sanctuary Schemes	Properties with local authority installed Sanctuary Schemes or other similar schemes which provide enhanced physical security measures within a home
Other accommodation designated as Domestic Abuse emergency accommodation	A safe place with support that provides safe, self-contained accommodation for victims to spend a temporary period of time. Must be provided by LHAs, social housing providers or registered charity

However, 'safe accommodation' is only considered safe if it is delivered with support. This can be directly provided within safe accommodation services and as outreach support to victims in other types of relevant accommodation, including their homes in the case of a sanctuary scheme. The government is clear that the introduction of this duty should not result in any negative impact on non-accommodation based local domestic abuse services. It is expected that support in safe accommodation should sit alongside and complement the support that is already available to victims.

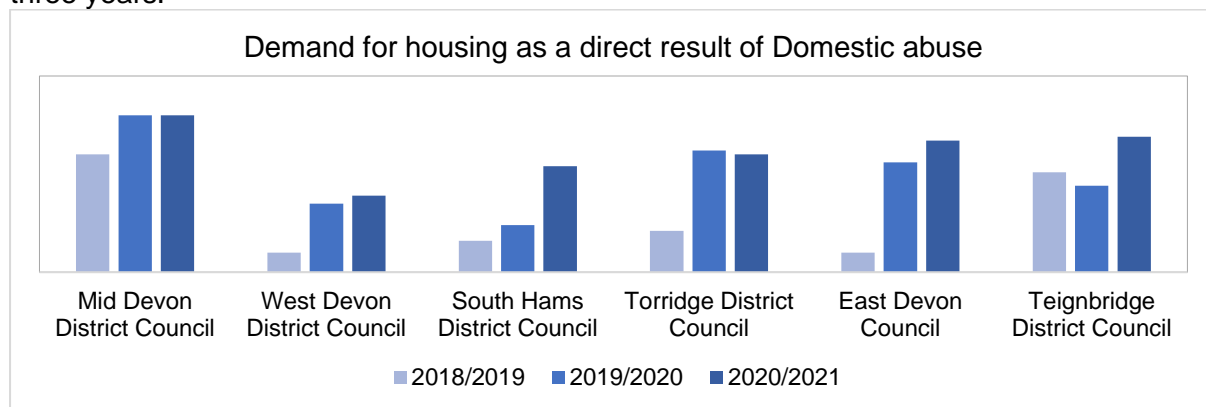
Accommodation based domestic abuse support includes:

Type of Support	Examples
Advocacy Support	Development of personal safety plans, liaison with other services (for example, GPs and social workers, welfare benefit providers)
General advice	Financial & legal support, Benefits, Support into work
Housing related advice and support	Securing a permanent home and advice on how to live safely and independently
Domestic abuse prevention advice	Support to assist victims to recognise the signs of abusive relationships, to help them remain safe (including online) and to prevent re-victimisation
Specialist support for victims with relevant protected characteristics and / or complex needs	Interpreters, faith services, mental health advice and support, drug and alcohol advice and support, and immigration advice

Children's Support	Play therapy and child advocacy
Counselling and therapy for both adults and children.	

5. What is the demand in Devon for safe accommodation?

Demand for housing, as a result of domestic abuse, continues to increase across Devon.¹ When comparing the 12 months to March 2020 to the following year, demand has increased across the region by 26% from 232 to 449.² All regions have seen an overall rise in the past three years.



Crucially, the data provided from the local districts include the number of people in need of housing as a *direct* result of domestic abuse. Meaning their primary concern was listed as domestic abuse. What the data is unable to indicate is the additional number of people who were experiencing domestic abuse but did not list this as their primary reason for becoming homeless. For these applicants, although they may have been experiencing domestic abuse at the time, their primary reason for seeking accommodation may have been listed as rent arrears or an eviction notice. This is particularly relevant for individuals with complex needs. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain from current recorded data how many more people who presented as homeless were also experiencing domestic abuse.

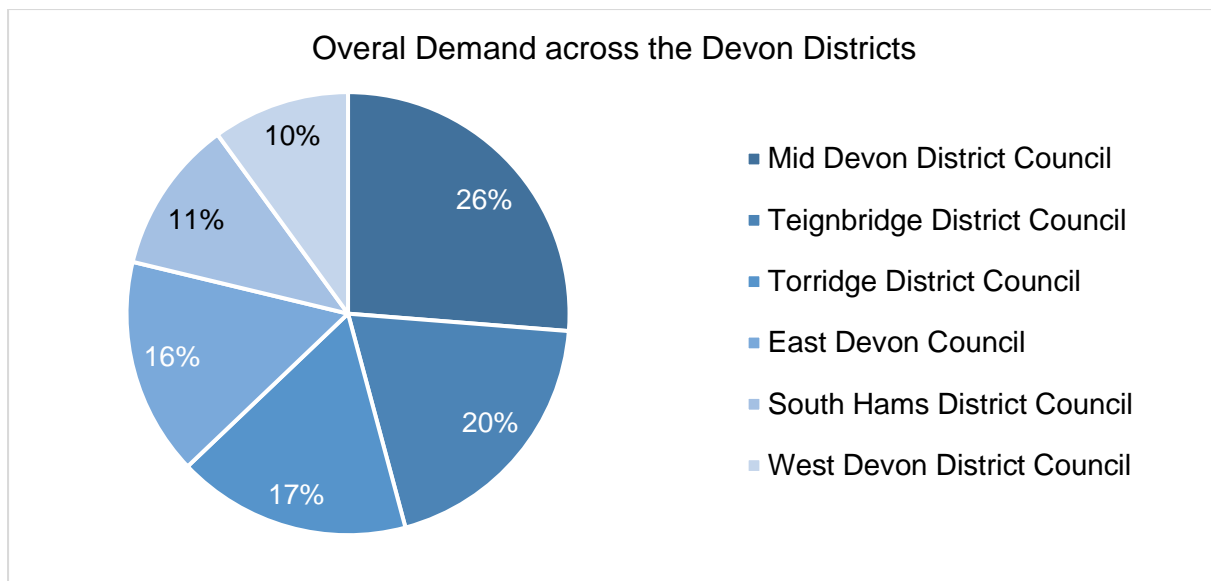
Overall demand across Devon between 2018 and 2021

From the local authority data collected across Devon

- The majority of applicants (76%) were female, 23% were male
- Over 93% of all applications recorded their ethnicity as white British
- 44% were single adults with dependent child(ren) and just over half were adult(s) with no children
- 33% were economically inactive/ long or short term ill, 23% were unemployed and 21% were employed
- 58% stated that a member of the household had a confirmed medical condition
- Almost a third of applications reported that a household member had a self-reported vulnerability including physical or mental health needs

¹ Data includes Mid Devon District Council, West Devon District Council, South Hams District Council, Torrige District Council, East Devon Council and Teignbridge District Council. Exeter City Council provided overall figures for 2020/2021. No data was provided from North Devon District Council.

² Excluding Exeter City Council data.



Demand for accommodation slightly varies across Devon, with the largest demand in Exeter Mid Devon and Teignbridge.

The age of people presenting as homeless as a result of domestic abuse varies across Devon. Some districts recorded the age of the lead applicant only, while other areas included the age of everyone living in the household. As a result, it is not possible to compare areas.

Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Local Authorities with a housing duty must consider people made homeless through domestic abuse as having a priority need for accommodation. Prior to this, victims of domestic abuse were assessed to see whether they were considered vulnerable. Only those considered vulnerable were seen as having a priority need. In principle the new legislation could greatly increase the number of people with a priority need for accommodation as a result of domestic abuse. For example, on average Exeter receives about 15 homelessness presentations a month that led to a MARAC referral. But only about 2 of those involved a homelessness duty, whereas under the Domestic Abuse act all could be eligible.

Case Study: The number of applicants with a relief duty owed due to Domestic Abuse Between April 2020 and March 2021 Exeter City Council recorded 74 households who were owed a relief duty³ due to domestic abuse. Of the 74 households, 218 additional support needs were identified. 60% of all applicants were recorded as having three or more additional support needs.

Exeter City council had an equal distribution of single adult females (35%) and single adult males (35%). However, when the household structure involved children, all but one applicant was a female parent with dependent children. Adults with dependent children accounted for 26% of all applicants. The majority of applicants were adults with no dependents (74%).

Applicants with a relief duty owed due to Domestic Abuse with additional support needs - Exeter City Council

History of mental health problems – 61%
Physical ill health and disability – 32%

³ Meaning the applicant did not have an alternative housing arrangement available such as staying with friends or family

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Offending history – 30%</i> <i>History of repeat homelessness – 27%</i> <i>At risk of / has experienced sexual abuse / exploitation – 26%</i> <i>At risk of / has experienced abuse (non-domestic abuse) – 24%</i> <i>History of rough sleeping – 19%</i> <i>Drug dependency needs – 19%</i> <i>Alcohol dependency needs – 16 %</i></p>

Based on households with a relief duty owed due to domestic abuse in Exeter, more than half of all applications listed a history of mental ill health problems with just under a third of all applicants listing physical ill health and disability, offending history and a history of repeat homelessness as a support need. The complexity of support needs indicates that many of the households in need of accommodation as a result of domestic abuse have a range of additional needs. These needs should be considered when seeking suitable accommodation for families affected by domestic abuse.

N.B This data is limited to applicants who were defined as being in priority need⁴ and eligible for an accommodation offer. As a result, these applicants were more likely to have complex needs. Data collected did not include victims of domestic abuse who were not considered in priority need.

6. What safe accommodation is currently available?

Devon County Council commissions a Devon wide domestic abuse support service that provides support to victims in the community. The council has not directly funded support in safe accommodation for six years and the current commissioned service does not include this explicitly. There are 41 bed spaces of safe accommodation in Devon (Table 1) and all are a result of local housing or domestic abuse organisations establishing and maintaining the provision independently. This is low in comparison to other local authorities (Table 2).

Table 1: Safe Accommodation Available in Devon

Scheme	Targeted Group	Accommodation
North Devon Refuge	Women over 18 years old with children fleeing DVA	27 bed spaces A purpose-built 8-bed property. Plus 2-bed self-contained property
Women's First Partnership	Single women over 18 years old with multiple complex needs	10 bed spaces 1x4-bed for high needs 1x4-bed for low/medium needs 2x1-bed exclusively for women experiencing DVA.
Places of Safety	High risk victims with children	4 bed spaces 2x2-bed self contained properties
Sanctuary Schemes	Victims remain safely in their own homes	Operating only in North Devon and Torridge

⁴ To be considered 'in priority need' a person would need to be pregnant; have dependent children; aged 16-17; or if a care leaver aged 18-20; vulnerable as a result of mental illness, disability, risk of domestic abuse or time spent in care, prison or the armed forces.

Table 2: Bed Spaces in other Local Authorities

Local Authority	Population (2019)	Bed Spaces	Population per bed space
Devon	802,375	41	19,570
Cornwall	569,578	53	10,746
Plymouth	262,100	27	9,707
Torbay	136,264	29	4,698
Kent	1,581,600	107	14,781

6.1 North Devon Refuge

North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA) has run a refuge for women over 18 years old and their children fleeing domestic abuse since 1975.

The refuge is a purpose-built property in North Devon. There are eight rooms and can offer 25 bed spaces in total. There is one room on the ground floor that has been adapted to accommodate wheelchair users. Residents have their own room that they share with their children and the rest of the living is communal (bathrooms, kitchen, dining room, TV room area, and laundry facilities). There is access to a playroom and an outside space for families to use. The refuge is staffed during office hours 9am-5pm Monday–Thursday and 9am-4.30pm on Fridays. Outside of these hours it is covered by an on-call service for crisis or emergency support.

The women in the refuge are offered:

- practical support such as accessing housing, support with benefits advice, locating legal services
- emotional support and counselling
- group work for the mother and children to re-build their relationship
- individual and group therapeutic work for the children

Over the period 1st April 2020-31st March 2021, the refuge received 126 referrals. The majority (77%) were from outside Devon County Council geographical boundaries. Of these referrals, 22 women and 31 children were accepted into the refuge. Half of the women were aged between 25-34 years and the majority of women had children (83%). Of these 81% of the children were under 11 and 40% of women had three children. The average length of stay in the refuge was 120 days. Only one of the women was from Devon and only one other re-located to Devon after her stay.

83% of referrals were declined (104) and of these:

- 100% had complex needs
- 87% had complex mental health needs
- 59% had a history of drug and alcohol use
- 30% felt communal living would be unsuitable for their children
- 24% would have been unsafe due to their local connections

- 12% wished to continue a new relationship whilst in refuge
- 10% had offending history linked to violence and/or arson
- 8% had a history of assaulting professionals

NDADA estimate that at least 12 referrals (six of which were Devon based with children) could have been accepted into the communal refuge if there had been 24-hour cover with strong links to safeguarding teams.

6.2 Specialist Safe Accommodation

Devon has specialist safe accommodation in North Devon for women with complex needs (housing, mental health, substance misuse and domestic and sexual abuse) and one soon to be established in Exeter.

• The Women's First Project

The "Women First" project is a partnership between Encompass Southwest (ESW), North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA) and MIND to support women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence and are rough sleeping, sofa surfing or living in temporary accommodation. This includes women discharged from hospital and prison with no address.

The project was set up in December 2019 and delivers

- 2 x 4-bed female only accommodation and 3 x 1-bed accommodation exclusively for women experiencing domestic abuse.
- A multi-disciplinary team that works with women individuals and through a co-located drop-in. This includes access to a trained MIND adviser, Domestic Violence IDVA, drug & alcohol adviser and housing support.
- One to one and group pattern changing courses.
- A women peer network to encourage engagement and support move into independence.

The project supported 87 women with a connection to North Devon and Torridge between 1st April 2020-31st March 2021. Of these,

- 60% were assessed as high risk of domestic abuse
- 70% were under 35 years old
- 68% were economically inactive and had no income
- 98% were white
- 14% had children

The average length of stay is approximately 13 months because very few of the women are ready to move on successfully before this time.

• Breathing Space Project

Co-Lab in partnership with Exeter City Council, Julian House and Key Change was successful in securing funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for safe accommodation for homeless women at risk of domestic abuse and other forms of violence and exploitation. The project will start in October 2021 and the funding is for two years. The expectation is Breathing Space will support approximately 45 women over a 12 month period. The support offer will include:

- Accommodation: 9 respite rooms for women which will be available up to 6 weeks. Evidence of placements and local need over the past year suggests that 9 emergency

bedspaces will be sufficient to meet the need in the city. The Respite Room model consists of 5 one bedroomed flats with concierge and four en-suite rooms with a shared kitchen. The accommodation will be across two locations in the city.

- Dedicated and flexible support: this will include a Housing Caseworker and two support workers. Real Life Psychology will provide additional psychological interventions delivered through weekly clinics.
- Home Vision: Commissioned by OPCC is a 12 week programme of support, reflection and future planning. Delivered in 4 x 3 week blocks, to align with stages of a woman's journey.

6.3 Dispersed Accommodation

There are six units of self-contained dispersed accommodation in Devon with confidential addresses. One is managed by NDADA and three are managed by Encompass Southwest. The clients who stay in this accommodation receive the same planned package of therapeutic and practical support as those in the centre-based accommodation.

There are two additional Places of Safety in Tiverton and Honiton that are managed by Splitz support service. These are for victims at high risk who live in Devon and are supported by an IDVA. Nine victims have accessed these over the last three years – all but one had children. The idea is that these units can meet the needs of survivors for whom communal living might not be suitable – including disabled women, LGBT+ survivors, women with larger families/older male children, those with mental health and substance use support needs. The average length of stay is 123 days, but this has reduced year on year to an average of 84 days in 2020-21.

4.4 Sanctuary Schemes

A Sanctuary Scheme is a multi-agency victim centred initiative which aims to enable households at risk of violence to remain safely in their own homes by installing a 'Sanctuary' in the home and through the provision of support to the household⁵. The victim will remain in the home with the children so as not to further isolate the family from their support networks, preventing children being disrupted from education and allowing them to maintain their home comforts.

Sanctuary Schemes used to operate across Devon. The Crime Prevention Officer employed by Devon & Cornwall Police would assess the risk to the accommodation and make recommendations to the relevant District Council for physical measures to be made to increase safety. There is only one Crime Prevention Officer left in Devon who covers North Devon and Torridge. Several of the other districts do respond to requests from MARAC for target hardening but this is very rare.

4.5 Housing for Perpetrators

Housing for perpetrators model builds on the Sanctuary Scheme and starts from the premise that the best outcome is for the perpetrator to leave the home to maintain continuity for the victim and their children. It has been identified that perpetrators are reluctant to leave the family home when advised to do so by Children's Services (for the safety of their family), because they do not have anywhere to go. Perpetrators do not have a priority need for housing. If a perpetrator does not agree to leave the family home, the family may be forced to seek temporary accommodation.

⁵ [Sanctuary schemes for households at risk of domestic violence: guide for agencies - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/sanctuary-schemes-for-households-at-risk-of-domestic-violence)

A pilot is being run in South and West Devon where the District Council provides a furnished 1-bed accommodation for a perpetrator where it is identified that they need to leave the family home for a period of time to manage the risks of domestic abuse in the home. The perpetrator must be engaged with the Behaviour Change Independent Domestic Abuse Advisor (BC IDVA) from Splitz Support Service and have children that are subject to Children's Services at Child In Need (CIN) or Child Protection (CP) level or above. The victim will be allocated an Independent Domestic Abuse Advisor (IDVA) for continued support from Splitz. All children over the age of 5 will be offered support from a Children and Young Person's Safety and Resilience Worker (CYP SARW) from Splitz, where their primary carer gives consent. Splitz and Children's Services will work closely together to manage risks and monitor change. Where it is deemed not safe for the perpetrator to return to the family home, the District Council can assist the perpetrator to find permanent accommodation as appropriate.

7. Insights

7.1 Accommodation

- Most people want to remain in their own homes

Most people want to remain in their own homes. It is where they work, have their support networks such as family and friends and where their children go to school. This is particularly the case for victims with physical disabilities whose home may have been specially adapted and they know their way around the house and community and for those with learning disabilities who may have spent many years learning how to use their own appliances in the house or how to take the bus from their home. Also, many carers don't want to leave the person they care for, even if they are the perpetrator because they are worried about who will look after them.

"Unless there is a serious immediate risk to the victim or their children, I will always try to support them to stay in their home, with a robust safety plan and support in place. However, navigating this with housing, police and social care can sometimes be a challenge. Why should victims have to up and leave their home? Move the alleged perpetrator instead!"
(Splitz Support Service)

"Social Workers have been known to tell a victim they have to leave the area or else their children will be taken away. But they don't want to and end up coming back anyway without the support of services and so being more at risk".
(Splitz Support Service)

"People with physical disabilities, brain injuries and other additional needs may require 'reasonable adjustments' to be made to safe accommodation such as stairlifts, wheelchair access, bathroom adaptations, assistance walking, support with emotional regulation and extreme fatigue.. "
(Headway)

But it is also important to remember that "sometimes it is traumatising for the victim to stay in the same place where the abuse took place and so it is better for them to move" (Splitz Support Service). Therefore, it is so important for support services such as housing, police and social care to listen to the victim and their IDVA who will advocate on their behalf.

- The lack of safe, secure and appropriate accommodation in Devon for the length of time they need it means people stay in abusive relationships or return to them or cannot recover.

*“Women will stay in abusive relationships in fear that they don’t have anywhere to go”
(Splitz Support Service)*

*“Putting timescales on the length of stay there means the client just focuses on the end,
rather than their journey and cannot recover” (Encompass Southwest)*

There is a lack of safe, secure and appropriate accommodation in Devon. As a result, victims are placed in temporary accommodation such as low budget hotels, Bed & Breakfast accommodation and hostels. These can be insecure so perpetrators can get in through windows/doors, in close proximity to other perpetrators and those with aggressive and violent behaviours and present very challenging conditions to live in, particularly with young children. If a victim chooses to leave this type of accommodation because they feel unsafe, they are often told that they have made themselves intentionally homeless.

A young Mum with her two-year-old daughter was placed in a flat with drug addicts outside. One day she came home to blood splattered all over the outside wall. It retraumatised her.

“I don’t feel I can support her [the victim] to leave because I can’t guarantee where she will end up. It might be worse than where she is now and severely detrimental to her and her children” (Co-Lab)

“The quality of the accommodation shows people what they are worth...some accommodation is in such poor condition that the alternative of staying with an abusive partner is better”. (Encompass Southwest)

“They go back to their abusive relationships because there is nowhere to go, they look for safety in a man, but we need to provide the safety for them” (SAFE)

- Centre based accommodation cannot meet everyone’s needs

“Women want their own front door and a space where they can cook, do their laundry and shut themselves away” (Splitz Support Service)

“Women we support tell us they want their own front door and not to have to share with other people when they move out of our accommodation”. (Encompass Southwest)

Communal accommodation creates a range of difficulties for residents and staff.

The North Devon refuge struggles to accommodate women with complex needs (mental health, substance misuse, history of violence). This is because of the potential impact their behaviour can have on other residents and in particular children. “asking them to leave feels terrible as they have nowhere to go. But we can’t have children witnessing fighting and bad language” (NDADA).

There are benefits of communal living as it can encourage residents to bond and support each other’s recovery. But “we do end up spending a lot of time dealing with falling out between residents, rather than meeting their individual needs. It keeps the residents in crisis, rather than helping them move into recovery” (Encompass Southwest).

Unless they are in a specialist refuge, communal living can also make women with protected characteristics such as LGBT+, BAME, learning disabilities and physical disabilities feel excluded and misunderstood.

“An autistic woman went to a refuge but just couldn’t cope with the communal living. She was in sensory overload all the time, was struggling to cope and had melt downs. But the staff didn’t understand her needs and thought she was just being difficult”
(Dimensions for Autism).

Accommodation with communal facilities means that not everyone can be accepted and/or needs met. As a result, there is currently no/little provision for

- Women with large families (over 3 children) and particularly those with older sons
- Male victims and those with children
- 16/17 year olds
- Women outside North Devon with complex needs

7.2 Support insights

“We need to provide the right support at the right time for the right length of time” (SAFE)

- Many people don’t get the support they need to leave their relationship

Many victims do not ask for help because either they do not realise that they are in an abusive relationship, do not know how to ask for help and/or do not trust services. This is particularly true for individuals with learning disabilities, those from BAME communities, the ‘hidden homeless’⁶ and those with complex needs.

“The silent sufferers. There are those that simply don’t have the words to describe or report the abuse, those who are non-verbal, those who may have a learning disability and those from backgrounds where it is regarded as normal. Never let us forget, there are those who simply can’t articulate their difficulties and may not be able to use the words needed to report or to obtain support” (Living Options)

Housing services and specialist domestic abuse services are often inaccessible to those with protected characteristics. This is especially true for those whose English is not their first language, are deaf or have a learning disability for services that can only be accessed by phone or on-line.

“There is a lot of hidden domestic abuse within the Deaf community. Many have no one to talk to as most support groups just have a phone helpline or if they want to attend in person there is no funding for interpreters. The abuser can be the carer or even interpreter they rely on”. (Living Options)

“We make accessing support so difficult for people with learning disabilities. Just think of the answer phone message you get when you ring the GP surgery. It’s long and sometimes has options to press. This is too much for someone with a learning disability or a brain injury and so they just hang up” (Headway).

“The language barriers are huge. Sometimes people can get by in English but they can’t express themselves fully. They need to be able to have a proper conversation, they need an interpreter even in that situation. And the victim needs to feel comfortable with the interpreter. A friend can’t be relied upon. That is not right in this situation. If we get language wrong, we might be sending a woman to her death” (Sunrise Diversity)

Victims will only disclose to someone who they have built a relationship with and can trust. This is often someone who they seek support from on a more regular basis such as

⁶ This includes people who become homeless but find a temporary solution by staying with family members or friends, living in squats or other insecure accommodation.

community or voluntary organisations. It is the person they trust that is best placed to educate and support them to understand what abuse is, to help them safety plan and prepare to leave if necessary.

“Black and minority ethnic communities are very tight knit and small in Devon and so everyone knows everyone else’s business. In some cultures, they will never have talked about their relationship or sex with anyone. So, women tend to seek support from a BME specialist organisation because they can attend a women’s group for instance, build a relationship with someone and seek their support without drawing attention or raising suspicion within the rest of the community” (Sunrise Diversity)

“Many of the women we support have opted to stay in unsafe relationships rather than ask for help because they are scared of rejection, judgement or re-traumatisation”.
(Encompass Southwest)

“The system is very closed system to anyone who doesn’t conform to stereotype of white, middle class and capable” (Sunrise Diversity)

- Finance is a barrier to leaving

Women with insecure immigration status and have no recourse to public funds cannot access benefits. This can be a barrier to accessing safe accommodation which often relies on housing benefit to cover the rent. *“She was sent away and so she had to go back. The perpetrator becomes more abusive because he knows she cannot leave”* (Sunrise Diversity)

At the other extreme, having access to capital and income can also be a barrier. An example was given of one woman who worked full-time had to give up her job and claim housing benefits so she could afford to go to a refuge. If this happens locally, NDADA subsidises the rent from reserves so individuals can stay in these situation, but this is not systematic or a sustainable solution.

- People’s basic needs aren’t met when they flee an abusive relationship

“We have to make it easier to leave and stay [in safe accommodation], than to go back”
(NDADA)

A 19 year old women was placed in a Bed & Breakfast. She had to move out over the weekend as they had bookings and was sent to Bath. She had no phone to find directions and no money to get there. In the end she stayed in her sister’s university room while she was away, otherwise she would have been on the streets.

Far too often when victims leave abusive relationships, they struggle to meet their basic needs and have no support with this. This is particularly apparent for people who are moved into temporary accommodation such as B&Bs or hotels and have nowhere to cook or do laundry. Even those in managed moves, need help with the practicalities such as the cost of moving,

A mum and her five children had to live in a Travelodge in two rooms for a year. She has no cooking or laundry facilities. One of her children had cystic fibrosis and Mum struggled to get his medical needs met because she had moved out of area and so had lost her medical support and there was not enough space for her to do his physiotherapy with him.

storage of belongings and linking in with local services, such as GP, Children's Centres or relevant community organisations.

Once people have moved, some individuals need support in "life skills" such as setting up a bank account, budgeting, applying for benefits, paying bills, cooking etc as they have not done this before. This is particularly true for people with complex needs, learning disabilities or from BAME communities who may need extra practical and enabling support that is tailored to their individual needs. For example, someone with learning disabilities may need extra help to understand their new home and the layout of the local area. One person may be able to cope with a video of how to use the cooker, heating etc, whereas someone else will need to be supported to do it multiple times over a period of time before they build up their confidence to do it independently.

"We put too much responsibility on families in times of crisis" (SAFE)

"Rebuilding your life is exhausting, we need to make it as easy as we can..." (SAFE)

- Victims need support out of hours

Victims need support beyond 9am-5pm. Victims flee at all hours of the day and night so it is important that someone is available to welcomed into their safe accommodation and help them to settle in. Also, once in safe accommodation, people need support in the morning and evening for a range of reasons.

- Parents might need parenting support around breakfast and bedtime routines.
- People who have been traumatised can also struggle to sleep and being alone at night and so need extra reassurance.
- People who are working full-time are unable to receive support if it is only offered during office hours.
- Arguments, prejudice, discrimination and abuse between residents in communal accommodation often happens in the evenings when staff are not around.
- People who have physical or learning disabilities often need support to help with their day to day care
- Victims experience great loss and need help to deal with this

"We need to validate them, to make them believe they have made the best decision to leave"
(SAFE)

"All that is on offer is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. But that doesn't work for those without the cognitive ability to do the tasks". (Dimensions for Autism)

All victims of domestic abuse have experienced some sort of loss – loss of a relationship, loss of a home, loss of friends, loss of their community, loss of their crutches etc. But there is very little support to help people deal with this and associated behaviours, such as anxiety, insomnia, melting down. It is particularly difficult to access this support for people who are still in abusive relationships or actively using alcohol or drugs. If people do not get support to work through their feelings in the "here and now", they often revert back to harmful relationships or behaviours.

"A lot of women with complex needs have divergent or bad behaviour. They get into a cycle...they reduce their substances and that makes them remember their loss, so they

revert back to unhelpful behaviours such as drinking or drugs to stop them feeling. You can still work with someone under the influence on their feelings, emotions and triggers, you don't have to wait". (Encompass Southwest)

"Most supported accommodation eviction rates are near 70%, ours is 13% because we are present, hold the space with compassion and kindness, let them act out but are there to pick up the pieces" (Encompass Southwest)

A high percentage of the women with complex needs have had children removed due to their abusive relationship and not being able to keep them safe. Encompass Southwest have started to see an increase in the number of pregnant women accessing their service, specifically pregnant homeless women who are in violent or coercive relationships with other rough sleepers. Whilst a woman is pregnant, she receives lots of support for her unborn baby from the midwife and social workers. The child is taken away as soon as it is born, and all the support is removed. *"She needs meaningful support when she is pregnant to help her deal with the loss and trauma, so she stops getting repeatedly pregnant to fix her loss. She needs empathy, not judgement"* (Encompass Southwest).

- There is no dedicated long-term support for victims after leaving safe accommodation. This is particularly important for people with protected characteristics and those with complex needs.

Both North Devon Refuge and the Women's First Project offer at least six weeks of support after the women has left their accommodation. There is some flexibility depending on their needs, but it is never enough. There is a lack of awareness of what services are available to support people. Services have found the Domestic Violence connector role helpful but there needs to be more support from and transition to community services.

"Women from Black and minority ethnic communities need longer term support, up to two years. The risk ebbs and flows depending on the perpetrator, but they need extra help to be independent, particularly if there are language barriers and because they have left their community, they have no one else to ask for help" (Sunrise Diversity).

Women also need support to access positive activities and to become part of the community.

- Support to understand the patterns of abuse and the influence of their childhoods on their choices is ad hoc.

Provision to help victims understand patterns of abuse and how their childhood has influenced their choices is ad hoc with no consistency across the county. This long-term therapeutic work can only be accessed once the victim is in a safe space. But unless this work is done people will continue to choose unhealthy relationships and behaviours and the cycle of abuse will continue.

- Children need support too

The Domestic Abuse Act acknowledges that children are victims in their own right. They will need support to process their emotions and deal with their loss. However, a big part of their recovery will depend on their parent's engagement to support them to feel listened to and understood, put appropriate boundaries in place and to start re-building a positive relationship with their non-abusing parent.

"Parents often want support for children, but not themselves. Recovery only works if the non-abusive parent engages" (SAFE).

- Peer support is very powerful recovery tool

Peer support groups whilst in accommodation and, also once in the community, for adults and children alike can be a powerful tool for recovery. In the North Devon refuge children support each other and bring great comfort and you often see the older children helping the younger ones.

“Women on the street can be really nasty to each other...it’s all about survival. Group work helps the ladies to start look after each other and encourage each other, like stopping each other seeing ex-partners and it can actually reduce the conflict in the house”.

(Encompass Southwest)

7.3 System Insights

- Our binary lens forces more people into the wrong accommodation, and/or alienates them from services or cycles through services

Our system views domestic abuse through the lens of victim or perpetrator and our services are structured around this binary view. However, in practice we know that it is more complicated than that. There are victims that are perpetrators and perpetrators that are victims at different times and situations. Without understanding the dynamics of the relationship, the victim or perpetrator can be labelled, and an inappropriate service offer given. Similarly, the system does not routinely really listen to the person in question about what they want from the relationship and if they want to separate or not so that the system and services can work with them, rather than against them.

“A couple had been in a relationship for 15 years. It was abusive, violent and they were constantly fighting but they always got back together..they couldn’t live without one another. After a particularly nasty argument, the man was evicted immediately. There was no opportunity to encourage them to talk and explore what had happened. Of course, she followed and then they were both on the streets without support”. (Co-Lab)

A couple were in a toxic dysfunctional relationship. The female repeatedly presented at the housing team as homeless due to domestic abuse and was re-housed. She always went back to the relationship. In the end, the council provided two flats which could be securely locked next to each other so that when she presented as wanting to flee, she could safely go back home and lock her partner out. This worked but the couple did not receive any support to manage their relationship safely.

- We have created a system where people must get worse to get support

Over the last ten years thresholds for services have increased as resources have got less. However, this creates a system where people must get worse to get support and there are not the resources available when they need it to prevent their needs escalating.

- Domestic Abuse is everyone’s business

There is a general lack of understanding about domestic abuse, trauma is causes and impact it can have on someone’s housing options. There is also a more specific lack of understanding about how protected characteristics can impact a person’s ability to access help, to leave and the additional support required.

“One housing Association does a google search on all applicants and this can determine if someone who is fleeing domestic abuse is accepted or not. It’s completely unethical. The information might not even be true”. (Co-Lab)

Multi-agency partnership working is essential and most successful when this understanding is there and a key relationship with a practitioner in a partner agency has been developed. For example, North Devon Council has assigned a housing officer to work with all the women in the North Devon refuge. This means a trusted working relationship has been built up and the housing officer listens to the refuge workers on what the women need for a successful transition into the community and tries to accommodate this wherever possible. However, this is not mirrored in children’s social care where there is always a different social worker and no relationship can be built. This means responses are not always appropriate, timely or consistent from a domestic abuse point of view.

Appendix 1: Glossary of terms

Intersectionality - Put simply, intersectionality is the concept that all oppression is linked. More explicitly, the Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”. Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. First coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw back in 1989, intersectionality was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2015 with its importance increasingly being recognised in the world of women’s rights.

Ref: Womankind Worldwide: [Home - Womankind Worldwide](#)

Protected characteristics - It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of:

- [age](#)
- [disability](#)
- [gender reassignment](#)
- [marriage and civil partnership](#)
- [pregnancy and maternity](#)
- [race](#)
- [religion or belief](#)
- [sex](#)
- [sexual orientation](#)

These are called protected characteristics. You are protected under the Equality Act 2010 from these types of discrimination.

Ref: Equality and Human Rights Commission: [Home Page | Equality and Human Rights Commission \(equalityhumanrights.com\)](#)

‘Victims (and their children)’ – in this document refers to all victims of domestic abuse, including people without children; people who have had their children removed; people from marginalised communities and / or with protected characteristics (eg our LGBT+ communities, our BAME communities and our disabled communities)

Appendix 2: List of organisations involved in focus groups

Co-Lab
Devon and Plymouth Racial Equality Council
Devon Link Up
Dimensions for Autism
Encompass South West
Headway Devon
Hikmat
Intercom (through individual meetings)
Living Options Devon
North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA)
Splitz Support Service
Stop Abuse for Everyone (SAFE)
Sunrise Diversity
The Olive Project