FAIRER HOUSING

City of Westminster

HOUSING SERVICE DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY

August 2025

Introduction

Nationally, we know that on average two women are killed every week by a current or former partners, and one in five women have experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16. This issue also takes place here in Westminster and it is estimated to affect one in three women and girls at some point in their lifetime.

This policy, agreed with key services in the Council, and with the lead advocacy service, Advance, sets out the approach that the housing service – including both the managed and homelessness service - takes to ensure that victims and survivors of domestic abuse are supported and protected in their homes.

It will be reviewed every three years.

Our commitment

Domestic abuse is everyone's business.

It is an abuse of human rights, and often escalates over time in frequency and severity, and may affect the victim/survivor's mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

At Westminster we are committed to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We will promote a coordinated community response to ensure the best outcomes for victims and survivors.

We will treat all incidents of domestic abuse reported to us as high priority. We will always work with victim/survivors and respect their wishes and take action where we have the power to do so.

This policy sets out how Westminster Council's housing service will support and assist any service user experiencing or threatened with domestic abuse.

We commit to a person centred approach, to ensure that our response is person led with the service user's voice clearly heard. We will engage with service users in a conversation about how best to respond to their needs and thereby ensure their involvement in the outcomes.

It applies to all our tenants, leaseholders and members of their household, including their children, and to anyone approaching the service who is either homeless or threatened with homelessness.

It also sets out how the landlord service will respond to any tenant or other person perpetrating domestic abuse.

Contents

1. Why is this policy important?
2. Definition of domestic abuse
3. Raising awareness of domestic abuse
4. Stalking
5. Spotting the signs of domestic abuse
6. Managing disclosures of domestic abuse
7. Assessing risk
8. Safety planning
9. Holding perpetrators to account
10. Working with our partners and commissioned services
11. Housing and homelessness
12. Joint tenancies
13. Support for staff
14. Case management
15. Equality, diversity and inclusion (Intersectionality)
16. Communication
17. Consultation
18. Data protection
19. Monitoring and learning
20. Linked policies.

1. Why is this policy important?

Domestic abuse is chronically under reported.

Research estimates that it accounts for 16% of all violent crime and will affect one in four women and one in six men in their lifetime. It has more repeat victims than any other crime.

While both men and women may experience incidents of violence and abuse there are important differences between male violence against women and female violence to men. Women are more likely to be seriously hurt or killed than male victims of domestic abuse.

It is also important to understand that domestic abuse is deeply rooted in structural inequalities between women and men.

One in seven children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse at some point in their childhood. (Women's Aid)

Nationally on average two women are killed every week in England and Wales by a current or former partner. [1]

2. Definition of domestic abuse

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created a new statutory definition of domestic abuse, which is based on the cross-government definition. This is:

"Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those ages 16 or over who are or have been intimate family members or partners, regardless of gender or sexuality."

The statutory definition encompasses emotional abuse, coercive or controlling behaviour and economic abuse as well as physical violence:

It also includes the following:

- So called honour based abuse – this includes practices committed to protect or defend the "honour" of the family and / or the community.
- Female genital mutilation – this describes procedures where the female genitalia are deliberately cut, injured or changed but there is no medical reason for this to be done.
- Forced marriage – this describes any situation where physical or emotional pressure is placed on someone to marry against their will.

The definition in the Act is in two parts.

The first part deals with the relationship between the abuser and the abused.

[1] (Data on violence against women and girls (endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk) (ONS 2020)

The second part defines abusive behaviour.

The full definition can be found at: Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (legislation.gov.uk)

In the first part the behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is defined as domestic abuse if:

Person "A" and person "B" are aged 16 or over, and

They are "personally connected" to each other.

"Personally connected" is defined as: intimate partners, ex-partners, family members, relatives or individuals who share parental responsibility for a child. There is no requirement for victim and perpetrator to live in the same household.

In the second part the behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic abuse
- Psychological, emotional or other abuse.

It does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a pattern of incidents.

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

The Act recognises that children affected by domestic abuse will automatically be treated as victims, regardless of whether they saw or heard the behaviour.

Physical and sexual abuse can include: hitting, punching, kicking, slapping, hitting with objects, pulling hair, pushing, shoving, cutting, stabbing, restraining, strangulation, choking, rape, coerced sex and anything else that injures or endangers that person.

Violent or threatening behaviour can include: physical assaults, and threats to kill.

Controlling or coercive behaviour can include: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, and regulating their everyday behaviour. Coercive behaviour is defined as an act or pattern of acts of threats, humiliation, assault and intimidation or other abuse that is used to punish, harm or frighten their victim.

Economic or financial abuse can include: controlling money and bank accounts, running up debts in the victim's name, not allowing the victim any say on how money is spent, refusing to allow the victim to earn any money themselves. It can also include controlling access to and use of things such as transport and technology which allows the survivor to work and stay connected. It can include destroying items and refusing to contribute to household costs.

Psychological, emotional or other abuse can include: isolating the victim, using threats against them or their family or friends, putting the victim down, gas lighting, and any other form of abuse that impacts on the victim's psychological welfare. Emotional abuse can include: intimidating and controlling behaviour including criticising, embarrassing, shaming and blaming such that the victim loses any self esteem or self confidence.

3. Raising awareness of domestic abuse

We will publicise our approach to managing domestic abuse in the following ways.

We will:

- Promote a clear message through our website, newsletters and social media that we will not tolerate domestic abuse.
- Promote on-going campaigns in our communications plans.
- Promote our approach at appropriate events organised for residents.
- Promote our approach where possible in Westminster's most spoken languages.
- Ensure that our Tenant and Lessee handbooks are kept up to date with information on our approach to managing disclosures of domestic abuse.
- Ensure that all new staff joining the housing service receive domestic abuse awareness training as part of their induction and that all staff receive refresher training annually.
- Ensure that frontline staff receive additional training relevant to their role.
- Work with local and national organisations to promote useful resources and available support.
- Work with local by and for specialist services where possible when planning staff training.

4. Stalking

Stalking is a criminal offence and may occur within a relationship. It may continue post separation when the risks are likely to increase. It can include technology facilitated abuse such as using tracking apps. It is a high risk factor for domestic homicide. Women's Aid describe it as "a pattern of persistent and unwanted attention" that makes the victim feel "pestered, scared, anxious or harassed". The police use the following tool –

FOUR – to describe stalking:

Fixated
Obsessive
Unwanted
Repeated

We will ensure our staff are trained to respond to reports of stalking to ensure that these risks are properly assessed.

5. Spotting the signs of domestic abuse

As a housing service we are well placed to spot the signs of domestic abuse. We believe that our service users should not live in fear of violence, abuse or harassment from a partner, former partner or any member of their family.

We will:

- Ensure that all staff with any customer facing role are trained on spotting the signs of domestic abuse and taking appropriate action to respond to concerns.
- Ensure that staff understand that domestic abuse impacts our diverse communities in different ways.
- Provide staff with clear practical guidance and support around responding to disclosures of domestic abuse and supporting victims / survivors.
- Ensure that all people managers are trained to support staff who manage disclosures of domestic abuse.
- Ensure that training is trauma informed.
- Work with our contractors and sub-contractors to ensure that any concerns or incidents that are reported are investigated and followed up promptly.
- Ensure that victims and survivors of domestic abuse are tagged and flagged appropriately on our housing management database. This includes all high-risk cases and referrals to the Westminster Multi agency risk assessment case conference (MARAC).

We will also recruit domestic abuse awareness champions across the business who can offer support and advice to staff managing disclosures of DA.

6. Managing disclosures of domestic abuse

We recognise that people experiencing domestic abuse will often live with this for some time before seeking help. On average victims and survivors at high risk of abuse live with domestic abuse for 2.3 years and those at medium risk for three years before getting help.[2]

Accordingly, we understand the critical importance of ensuring that we get our response right first time. We will create a safe environment where victims and survivors of domestic abuse can talk to us in confidence and feel listened to.

We will ensure our staff:

- Are committed to provide a person-centred, prompt and supportive response to ensure that anyone disclosing domestic abuse can access appropriate services as early as possible and are given advice to make choices about what action they wish to take.
- Tailor their response according to the needs and preferences of the victim. This could be by phone, or in person, or by e-mail.

[2] (SafeLives (2015), Insights Idva National Dataset 2013-14. Bristol)

- Offer a fast track service over the telephone or in person in a confidential setting
- Offer any interview / contacts with an officer of their preferred gender
- Allow victims and survivors to explain what they are experiencing in their own words
- Start from a position of believing victims and children, even if no evidence can be provided.
- Treat all disclosures of domestic abuse seriously, in a non-judgmental manner and with empathy.
- Include children's voices in all of our assessments.
- Maintain confidentiality at all times, unless we have a duty to disclose information in order to protect the victim, prevent harm to someone else, or to prevent or detect a crime. This can include making safeguarding or MARAC referrals.
- Ensure our services are inclusive and accessible to all, including consideration of provision of independent interpreters, advocacy support, and easy read documentation where required. If using an interpreter we will try and ensure that any interpreter speaks the victim's dialect.
- Support and signpost the resident to appropriate specialist domestic abuse services that can help them to take appropriate steps to ensure their safety. This will include signposting anyone with intersectional needs to the right service. It also includes the in-house service attached to the homeless service.
- Recognise the needs of victim/survivors and their individual protected characteristics, such as sex, gender, age, race, sexual preference, disabilities. This list is not exhaustive and will be continually reviewed.
- Understand options for victims and survivors which are available under the Family Law Act. This will include non-molestation orders and occupation orders and other civil orders.
- Understand options for victims and survivors and their children, if they are threatened with homelessness.
- Understand those situations (including the point of separation or pregnancy) where a victim may be most at risk.
- Make appropriate referrals to the Westminster Sanctuary Scheme.
- Make appropriate safeguarding referrals if we believe that a child or an adult with care and support needs is at risk due to an abusive relationship.
- Support victims and survivors to make decisions around their housing needs, whether they decide to stay in their home, or move to a new home or a temporary refuge space.
- Support victims and survivors to access independent legal advice, whether through the Citizens Advice Bureau, other local services or via specialist domestic abuse services.
- Keep accurate records so that victims and survivors do not have to repeat the same information each time they contact us.

7. Assessing risk

We will risk assess all disclosures of domestic abuse as a priority.

We will ensure our staff are trained:

- to complete the SafeLives Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based violence (DASH) Risk Assessment.
- to make appropriate referrals to MARAC
- to complete appropriate safeguarding referrals
- to support all victims and survivors to access support and information to meet their intersecting needs, including equalities and diversity needs.
- To add flags where appropriate to our systems.

We will ensure that staff attending MARAC receive appropriate training.

If the victim/survivor is deemed to be at immediate risk, we will give advice on:

- Contacting the police
- Securing emergency rehousing
- Accessing specialist advice and support, at both the national and local level
- Safety planning

We will make appropriate safeguarding referrals – with consent wherever possible - for adults with care and support needs who may be at risk of or experiencing domestic abuse, and unable to protect themselves from that risk. Where necessary we will make referrals without consent if we believe this to be in the vital interests of the victim/survivor.

We will refer appropriate cases to the domestic abuse MARAC.

The MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference) is a monthly meeting chaired by the police where information is shared on the highest risk domestic abuse cases between representatives of various agencies including local police, adult social care, children's services, health and housing.

The voice of the victim/survivor is heard through an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) who attempts contact with them once the case is referred. The victim/survivor does not attend.

The focus of the meeting is to discuss options for increasing the safety of the victim/survivor and turn these into a co-ordinated action plan. The main focus of the MARAC is on managing the risk to the adult victim/survivor but in doing this it will also consider other family members including any children involved and managing the behaviour of the perpetrator.

Where we make a MARAC referral we will attend the meeting and present the risk in hand and the options/actions we are seeking from the multi-agency partners. We will continue to

case work around the victim/survivor in the meantime.

8. Safety planning

Our staff may also advise on safety planning in the event that the resident needs to leave the home in an emergency. This will include advice on:

- keeping a list of emergency numbers
- packing a set of clothes and leaving the bag in a safe place either in the home or with a trusted friend of family member
- keeping key documents such as passports in the safe place ready to take
- keeping an extra set of keys packed in the safe place ready to take
- keeping a small amount of money / cards in the safe place to pay for travel

Our staff will also advise on action to take if there is more time to plan, including advice on how to care for any pets.

9. Holding perpetrators to account

We will work with perpetrators in safe and effective ways, holding them to account for their behaviour but also offer support where appropriate. We recognise that a range of interventions are needed to meet the different needs of perpetrators. When making decisions on enforcement action we will always take into consideration the wishes of the victim/survivor and their future housing needs.

We will ensure our staff:

- Signpost perpetrators to agencies who can offer them support where that person is open to change in order to prevent the abuse continuing.
- Use our legal powers, where safe to do so, to take appropriate enforcement action to address the behaviour of perpetrators. This will include options to serve Notices of Seeking Possession, to take possession proceedings, and to seek injunctions. Where appropriate any injunctions will include clauses with positive requirements.
- Work with our partners in the Police and the council to use additional powers, where safe to do so, such as closure orders to protect survivors.
- Are fully aware of the three new perpetrator programmes/services available in Westminster. These include the DRIVE service, the Culturally Integrated Family Approach (CIFA) service for perpetrators from a racialised and minoritised community and the Restart service that has a referral pathway to housing.
- Understand the referral pathways to the child centred Safe and Together model.

10. Working with our partners and commissioned services

We recognise that we cannot work in isolation to protect victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

The Care Act 2014, Children Act 1989, and Children Act 2004 make it clear that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. We therefore recognize that we must work in partnership when carrying out our duties under this legislation.

We will work within and promote a co-ordinated community response (CCR) together with our partners. We understand that an effective response to domestic abuse can only be achieved when all the relevant agencies work together.

These include:

- Teams within housing services, including housing needs and the housing solutions service
- Adult Social Care
- Children's Services
- Legal services
- Police
- Commissioned domestic abuse services
- Health colleagues, such as GPs, community nursing etc
- Voluntary and Community Sector organisations
- Our "out of hours" service, managed by our Contact Centre Teams within the Council.

11. Housing and homelessness

Sometimes it may be necessary for you to move from your home, either temporarily or permanently, due to the risks. The Domestic Abuse Act gives those who are homeless as a result of domestic abuse, a priority need for accommodation secured by the local authority. You do not need to have already left your accommodation to be considered homeless this is to ensure victims/survivors do not remain with their abuser for fear of not having options.

- Where a service user is considered homeless due to domestic abuse we will work with them to:
- offer appropriate advice and assistance.
- support them to make a homeless application where appropriate, either to Westminster or another borough.
- provide interim accommodation if that is needed
- support anyone with an existing Council tenancy to apply for a transfer under the Council's allocations scheme.

12. Joint tenancies

We recognise that victims and survivors at risk in a joint tenancy may need support and advice around their tenancy rights. While the housing service cannot interfere in a joint tenancy our staff will ensure that victims and survivors are signposted to independent advice on their options.

13. Support for staff

We recognise that staff may have their own experience of domestic abuse, and that this may impact their own well being when providing support to victims and survivors.

We will:

- ensure managers are trained to supervise staff in these situations
- ensure staff are aware of the corporate domestic abuse policy.

14. Case management

We will ensure that all cases are logged in our case management system, and that information will be accurate and held securely.

Staff will all receive support and training in relation to recording all disclosures by all victims and survivors. All notes will be read back and agreed by them as accurate and a true reflection of what was disclosed.

All interviews will be conducted in a confidential space with no other persons present.

15. Equality, diversity and inclusion

Specialist domestic abuse services in Westminster have been commissioned to meet the intersecting needs of victims and survivors.

As a housing service we will ensure that our staff recognise the need to tailor our responses to service users who may have intersecting needs.

This is in line with our statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010, and Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011.

16. Communication

We will provide information on this policy using various methods such as setting out a summary on our website and via our residents' newsletter.

17. Consultation

Throughout the development of this policy we consulted:

- Advance
- Al-Hasaniya
- Experts by experience
- Housing Panel
- DAHA
- Adult Social Care
- Children's Services
- Domestic abuse awareness champions

18. Data Protection

Where information needs to be shared with our staff and partners to deliver our this service, this will be in line with data protection requirements ensuring:

- data is processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner
- data is collected for a specific and legitimate purpose and not used for anything other than its stated purpose
- data is relevant and limited to whatever the requirements are for which the data is processed.

Further information on the council's responsibilities for data protection can be found here: **www.westminster.gov.uk/data-protection**.

19. Monitoring and learning

Westminster Housing tenants and leaseholders who wish to make a complaint about the service they have received can contact the housing contact centre on **0800 358 3783** or visit one of our housing service centres to make a complaint in person.

We will use the learning from feedback on our domestic abuse response and from complaints to seek information about service failures to ensure we continuously improve our service to residents. As part of this policy, we are keen to understand any inequalities linked to access, experience and/or support and we will introduce processes to identify such issues.

We will also use learning from wider pieces of work as appropriate, including Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews, to ensure that our response remains professional and up to date.

In addition, an annual review of this policy will be undertaken by the Housing Service to incorporate legislative and regulatory requirements and best practice development.

20. Linked policies

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following published policies:

Supply and Allocations scheme:

housing-allocation-scheme-social-housing-policy (11).pdf

Repairs:

housing-repairs-policy.pdf

Anti-social behaviour:

Report anti-social behaviour | Westminster City Council