
Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of Domestic Abuse: the City Council's Role

Report of the Domestic Abuse Review Group
Commissioned by Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

March 2021

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Foreword by the Chair



The news over the last year has rightly been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic in which to date two and half million people have died worldwide, and many more people's lives have changed forever.

For too long, however, there has been what the UN refers to of the global shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls and a parallel pandemic of domestic abuse, a crime primarily perpetrated against women.

In the UK, two women are dying every week due to violence carried out by an intimate partner or a former partner. At the same time, the criminal justice system is seeing a backlog of cases with victims and survivors of sexual assault having to wait longer than ever to access justice and support. For many the barriers and challenges to justice are insurmountable and unaffordable.

Former secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan is correct in saying that 'Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation and it is perhaps the most pervasive.'

Kofi Anna's comment is true in that neither class, education, religion nor ethnicity are an insulation from domestic abuse; it pervades all sections of society. What makes it particularly shameful is that its severity is compounded by the systemic inequalities that exist in society. Women are more likely to face domestic abuse, but they are also less likely to be working and earning, and therefore less able to escape their abusive environment. Members of the BAME community, particularly non-English speakers, face far more barriers in accessing and maximising the benefit of the support that is available. These challenges are far more extreme for those with no recourse to public funds who, at a national policy level, are barred from receiving support from the state that would enable them to find safety, other than for a few exceptional cases.

The specific shame of domestic abuse is that it makes the most vulnerable carry the heaviest burden.

Sitting at a cross-roads between public health, gender and racial inequality, the way domestic abuse is approached and victims supported is a microcosm of a statutory body's wider attitudes, and an effective litmus test for those with progressive ambitions to protect the vulnerable. At a point of acute vulnerability and utter exhaustion it is imperative that the statutory services which exist to support victims of domestic abuse are sufficiently flexible and sympathetic to do so. Through insensitivity or inflexibility they must not erect barriers or create additional harm to the trauma already experienced. It is against this mirror that the Council wishes to assess its own performance through this Review Group, as well as giving

consideration to the ways in which it can lessen the impact on those minority groups who are hardest hit by domestic abuse, and reducing its incidence in the first place.

This review is particularly timely. Not only has Covid-19 increased rates of domestic abuse nationally, raising its profile, but central government is also in the process of passing the Domestic Abuse Bill, which at present excludes those with no recourse to public funds. The Domestic Abuse Bill does, however, further increase exposure of the issue and create important opportunities for change.

The Review Group is proud of the work that the Council has undertaken to date for survivors of domestic abuse, particularly its Sanctuary Scheme, which has been described by witnesses to this Review as 'the best'. It hopes through this Review Group it can maintain Oxford's place in the vanguard of support for domestic abuse survivors and make improvements for the most vulnerable women and people impacted by domestic abuse. On behalf of the Review Group I would like to thank all those who participated and contributed to the Review Group's vital work and those who shared their personal experiences of abuse.

Special thanks go to our external guests for their willingness to offer encouragement and challenge to the Council, the Council officers who shared their knowledge of the Council's own workings, and to the members of the Review who dedicated much of their time to overcoming the challenges of exploring such a complex, distressing and challenging issue remotely, due to Covid restrictions.

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Chair of the Domestic Abuse Review Group

List of Acronyms

For brevity, this report uses the following acronyms. To avoid confusion, their intended usage is clarified here:

AFiUK	Africans in the UK (charitable group)
BAME	Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic
BAMER	Black, Asian Minority Ethnic and Refugee
BAED	Black, Asian, Ethnically Diverse
DAHA	Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance
DASH/ DASH RIC	Domestic Abuse Stalking and Honour Based Violence Risk Indicator Checklist
ECP	Exceptional Circumstances Panel
ESOL	English as a Second or Other Language
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
IDVA	Independent Domestic Violence Advisory Service
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
MHCLG	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
NRPF	No Recourse to Public Funds
ONS	Office for National Statistics
ODAS	Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. There has been an appetite within the Council to devote the resources of a Review Group to considering domestic abuse within the City for some time. Although already agreed by the advent of Covid, the pandemic has nonetheless increased the importance owing to the increase in domestic abuse. In its work, this Review Group has gathered a wide range of evidence and engaged with numerous stakeholders to explore ideas on key issues concerning how contribute towards reducing the impact of domestic abuse when it occurs, but also taking steps to prevent it from happening in the first place.
2. This report is intended to provide a considered and independent opinion on what the Council and its partners can do to improve its prevention and mitigation of domestic abuse in the City. The report sets out the work undertaken by the Review Group, together with their conclusions and recommendations to the Council's main decision-making body, the Cabinet. Each recommendation is supported by a narrative based on the discussions of the Review Group at each of its meetings.
3. The Domestic Abuse Review Group has a cross-party membership comprising the following City Councillors:
 - Councillor Shaista Aziz (Chair)
 - Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan
 - Councillor Mark Lygo
 - Councillor Craig Simmons
 - Councillor Sian Taylor
 - Councillor Liz Wade

In addition, Councillor Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, the Council's Migrant Champion, participated in the meeting scheduled to consider issues around BAME communities.

4. This report will be presented to the Council's Scrutiny Committee for endorsement on 02 March, and subsequently to the Cabinet. Due to the breadth and importance of the issues touched on by the review it is not anticipated that there will be an immediate response from Cabinet in March. With whole-Council elections taking place in May 2021, and the purdah period running from late March, no Cabinet response is anticipated until after the elections are completed.
5. The Review Group would like to place on record its thanks to all of the people who contributed to the review, which has enabled the recommendations in the report to be made. The City is fortunate to have such passionate, capable and committed people within the Council and without seeking to prevent domestic abuse from occurring and supporting those who experience it. There are also truly inspirational individuals working at a national level. The Review Group wishes to give warm thanks to all those who

contributed their time and knowledge to the Review Group, and to give particular thanks to Liz Jones, OCC Domestic Abuse lead, not only for doing so much work on behalf of the Review Group, but in achieving the huge strides already made in regards to this agenda beforehand.

Chapter 2: Methodology

6. The Review Group's work involved a total of 8 meetings which were held between November 2020 and February 2021.
7. With national and local lockdowns in operation during the period in which the Review was being undertaken the Review was the first to be held entirely virtually, with meetings taking place over Zoom. Even with the issues of confidentiality surrounding domestic abuse refuges, this topic would have provided multiple opportunities for meaningful site visits, such as to community groups or to see homes 'target-hardened' by the Council's Sanctuary Scheme. Unfortunately, owing to lockdown no such visits were able to take place.
8. The effect of the pandemic, particularly the additional time pressures of childcare and illness did mean a number of scheduled guests were unable to attend, meaning the Review Group was unable to explore some issues as fully as desired. In particular, it is a matter of regret that it involved professionals as expert witnesses and no individuals with lived experience of domestic abuse. The Review Group recognises this as a weakness in its report, and hopes that the Council can be more effective at hearing the voices of victims and survivors than this Review Group.
9. Whilst the topic of interest to the Review Group was 'domestic abuse' the Review Group recognised that the topic spreads across the responsibility of multiple agencies and sectors, and that the most meaningful interventions would be those over which the Council has a high degree of control. Consequently, it has focused its investigations on the intersection between domestic abuse and i) housing, for which the Council has a statutory responsibility, ii) BAME issues, in which the Council is invested on a large number of levels, iii) the way it uses its money for grants and in its procurement, and iv) the Council's own staff.
10. Key themes and questions the Review Group sought to explore included:
 - What support is available for those suffering domestic abuse?
 - What can we learn from other local authorities?
 - What issues arise for those fleeing domestic abuse in regards to housing; how does the Council address those needs and does it do so successfully?
 - What are the specific challenges faced by members of BAME communities when facing domestic abuse?
 - How can the Council leverage the money it spends on voluntary sector grants and its overall procurement to contribute towards addressing domestic abuse?
 - What changes internally can the Council make to ensure that it is a supportive working environment for those experiencing domestic abuse?

11. The Review Group's findings and recommendations have been informed by evidence provided by 15 external guests and Council officers, as well as a number of written internal and external reports and presentations. Contributors to the review included:

- Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement
- Liz Jones, Domestic Abuse Lead
- Fatheya Latif, Options Manager
- Lydia Ng, Interim Grants Officer
- Ann Phillips, Tenancy Management Manager
- Tom Porter, Allocations Manager
- Becci Seaborne, Domestic Abuse Specialist

- Amna Abdullatif, Children and Young People's Lead (Women's Aid), Councillor at Manchester City Council
- Sobia Afridi, Trustee (Oxford Against Cutting)
- Kate Agha, Director (Oxford Against Cutting)
- Laura Clements, Head of Service: Family Solutions (Oxfordshire County Council)
- Jonathan Cruz, Team Leader (Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service)
- Huda Jawad, Faith and Communities Programme Manager (Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse)
- Jameelah Shodunke, Community Engagement Officer (AFiUK)
- Trish Walsh, Manager (Reducing the Risk)

Chapter 3: Background

What is 'domestic abuse'?

12. In common parlance, 'domestic violence' is a term more commonly used and understood than 'domestic abuse'. Although there are overlaps, the two are not synonyms.
13. This topic of this report is the lesser understood term, domestic abuse. Consequently, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term. At present, the Government's Domestic Abuse Bill is progressing towards royal assent in parliament. The definition it provides is wordy but comprehensive, and the most relevant part of the definition is provided below:
- (2) Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse" if—
- (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and (b) the behaviour is abusive.
- (3) Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following— (a) physical or sexual abuse; (b) violent or threatening behaviour; (c) controlling or coercive behaviour; (d) economic abuse (see subsection (4)); (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse; and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.
- (4) "Economic abuse" means any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B's ability to— (a) acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or (b) obtain goods or services.¹
14. Given the legal language it is written in, getting an understanding of what exactly domestic abuse is can be difficult, but the key takeaway, as emphasised by the MP for Safeguarding, Victoria Atkins, is that domestic abuse refers "not just physical or sexual violence, but can also be emotional, coercive or controlling, and economic abuse." Violence is not the only means by which relationships can be abusive. The fact that abusive behaviour sprawls far beyond physical violence is key in responding to the regular challenge 'why don't they just leave?'. This report hopes to explore and elucidate the barriers that are encountered, and to identify what the Council can do to support victims extricate themselves from their abusive environments.
15. The majority of the recommendations of this report will be made later on, in the Findings and Recommendations section. However, the Review Group does wish to make one which is relevant here. Having a clear definition of domestic abuse is

¹ Draft Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 Part 1. S.1

an important prerequisite in the Council's wish to reduce its incidence and be more supportive of those who suffer it. This is particularly important given that common understanding does tend to focus on the violent subset of overall abuse and may not recognise those suffering other forms of abuse as being in need of support. The Review Group, therefore, hopes that when the Domestic Abuse Bill is passed, the Council formally adopts its definition of domestic abuse and reviews its policies and other literature to ensure that references to domestic violence are accurately used.

Recommendation 1: That the Council formally adopts the definition of 'domestic abuse' included within the Domestic Abuse Bill, and reviews its usage of the phrase 'domestic violence' in its policies and literature to ensure correct usage.

16. Two further clarifications of use of nomenclature are necessary. Firstly, the Domestic Abuse Bill recognises that children who are related to the perpetrator or victim and who see, hear or feel the effects of abuse are victims of abuse also. This report follows the same convention, in that references to victims in the report can, where relevant, include children.
17. Finally, an explanation of the phrases used to describe those who suffer domestic abuse: typically, this report uses the phrase 'individual', 'victim' or survivor. These are all non-gendered words. It is, however, also true that overwhelmingly victims of domestic abuse are female, and that the most acute experience of abuse is experienced much more commonly by women than men.² The use of non-gendered words is not intended to create a false equivalence between the experience of men and women, or to airbrush the fact that domestic abuse is overwhelmingly an issue the costs of which are borne by women.³ Rather, non-gendered words are employed so as not to make the opposite mistake, of giving the impression - that domestic abuse can *only* be experienced by women and invalidating the experience of those men who do suffer domestic abuse.

² In Oxfordshire in the last year, no men accessed the services reserved for high risk victims of domestic abuse, and only 7% of victims accessing medium-risk services were men

³ A recent newspaper article suggested that 24% of reports of domestic abuse in the Thames Valley were made by men (included as Appendix 1). Having queried this with a number of the Review Group's external guests there are various reasons to believe that this statistic gives an over-estimate. The reasons include perpetrators reporting themselves as being victims as a way of muddying the waters with agencies over their own abuse, the fact that the ONS only records the number of first calls made by a victim for help with domestic abuse (male victims tend to be more mobile and able to extricate themselves more easily, whereas women will tend to suffer longer), and higher incidences of very specific irregular forms of domestic abuse. These include abuse from a partner with dementia or other cognitive impairment, and abuse from a child.

Domestic Abuse: The National Context

18. Accurate estimates of the prevalence of domestic abuse in the UK are difficult. Victims primarily experience their abuse behind closed doors at home. The most comprehensive attempt at estimating its prevalence is the ONS Crime Survey for England and Wales which found that for the 12-month period to year ending March 2020 2.3 million adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse in the last year (1.6 million women and 757,000 men).
19. Although the most comprehensive, the ONS figures are not without difficulty. Women often don't report or disclose domestic abuse to the police. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales data for the year ending March 2018, only 18% of women who had experienced partner abuse in the previous 12 months reported the abuse to the police, yet even so on average the police in England and Wales receive over 100 calls relating to domestic abuse every hour, or in numerical terms 758,941 domestic abuse-related crimes in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester Police)¹.
20. Although the ONS figures indicate that men are approximately half as likely to suffer from domestic abuse as women the implication of this figure, that women suffer roughly twice as badly as men from domestic abuse, is misleading.⁴ The gendered experiences of domestic abuse are extremely different, with women suffering more acute abuse, suffering longer and perpetrating abuse less often.
- The overwhelming majority of female domestic homicide victims are killed by men; of the 270 female victims of domestic homicide for the year ending March 2016 to the year ending March 2018, the suspect was male in 260 cases.⁵
 - In 218 of the 270 female domestic homicide cases between the year ending March 2016 and the year ending March 2018, the suspect was a partner or ex-partner. 43 male victims were killed by a partner or ex-partner in the same time period.⁶
 - For the year ending March 2016 to the year ending March 2018, 74% of victims of domestic homicide (homicide by an ex/partner or family

⁴ An interesting note is that one cause of this is the way the ONS statistics are recorded. The ONS only records first reports of domestic abuse and not subsequent reports. Given that victims of domestic abuse will often wait long periods before approaching professionals, and then need to do so an average of five times to receive effective help in stopping the abuse, the ONS figures are an unrepresentative snapshot of domestic abuse experiences, and a snapshot which overestimates the experiences of those who suffer domestic abuse on rare occasions, rather than facing prolonged abuse.

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenlandandwalesoverview/november2019>

⁶ *ibid*

member) were female. This contrasts with non-domestic homicides where the majority of victims were male (87%).⁷

- Women experience domestic violence with much more intensity – 89% of people who experience four or more incidents of domestic violence are women.⁸
- One study of 96 cases of domestic abuse recorded by the police found that men are significantly more likely to be repeat perpetrators and significantly more likely than women to use physical violence, threats, and harassment. In a six year tracking period the majority of recorded male perpetrators (83%) had at least two incidents of recorded abuse, with many having a lot more than two and one man having 52 repeat incidents; whereas in cases where women were recorded as the perpetrator the majority (62%) had only one incident of abuse recorded and the highest number of repeat incidents for any female perpetrator was eight.⁹
- In the year ending March 2019, the majority of defendants in domestic abuse-related prosecutions were men (92%), and the majority of victims were female (75%).¹⁰

21. In addition to violence suffered, for victims of abuse leaving their abuser often involves leaving their home. Yet there is insufficient capacity for the number of women who need refuge. Women's Aid's Annual Audit (2019) found a shortfall of refuge bed spaces of 1,715 in England, and that over 30% of service providers had had to cut staffing due to reduced funding. Amidst a capacity shortage of refuge spaces, therefore, fleeing domestic abuse can mean homelessness for victims of abuse. In 2000, a Shelter report found that 40% of homeless women stated that domestic abuse had played a part in their becoming homeless.¹¹

22. In March 2020 the UK went into lockdown, with the requirement that people stay at home except in a number of limited circumstances to reduce the spread of Covid-19. With the combination of increased stress from isolation, health worries and finances, increased alcohol intake and the absence of the pressure valve of time apart, demand for domestic abuse advice services increased markedly. The charity Refuge, for example, reported in May a 957% increase in visits to its website.¹² This figure, however, was not matched with as extreme an increase by

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ <https://womensaidorkney.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Home-office-research.pdf>

⁹ Hester, M. (2013) 'Who Does What to Whom? Gender and Domestic Violence Perpetrators in English Police Records', *European Journal of Criminology*, 10: 623- 637

¹⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseine nglandandwalesoverview/november2019>

¹¹ Shelter (2000), Homelessness: what's gender got to do with it?

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52755109>

the Police or specialist domestic abuse services across the country. The ONS commentary on the period notes that

- there was a 7% increase in police recorded offences flagged as domestic abuse-related between March and June 2020, compared with the same period in the previous year;
- there was generally an increase in demand for domestic abuse victim support services, including a 65% increase in calls and contacts logged by the National Domestic Abuse Helpline between April and June 2020, compared with the first three months of the year;
- increases in demand for domestic abuse support were particularly noticeable following the easing of lockdown measures in mid-May, such as a 12% increase in the number of domestic abuse cases handled by Victim Support in the week lockdown restrictions were eased, compared to the previous week; this reflects the difficulties victims faced in safely seeking support during the lockdown

23. The official ONS commentary is, however, circumspect in its conclusions, suggesting that ‘increases in demand for domestic abuse victim services do not necessarily indicate an increase in the number of victims, but perhaps an increase in the severity of abuse being experienced, and a lack of available coping mechanisms such as the ability to leave the home to escape the abuse, or attend counselling.’

24. The Review Group disagrees with this view; it is most unlikely that the growth in demand for domestic abuse victim services can be attributed solely to new victims, nor can it be attributed exclusively to an increase in severity. A highly pressurised environment such as lockdown is likely to have created new abusive relationships but also exacerbated the strains on existing ones. Practically speaking, however, the point of where demand for domestic abuse services comes from is moot when considered against the simple fact of increasing demand in the first place. Whether lockdown has caused new relationships to become abusive, or simply made existing abusive relationships worse matters much less than recognising the public health and wellbeing implications that the growth in demand presages.

Domestic Abuse: The Local Context

25. The following information was provided by Reducing the Risk, the local charity who are responsible for providing advocates (IDVAs) to those who have been risk assessed as being at the highest risk of harm from domestic abuse. Victims at high risk account for approximately 10% of all cases, meaning the data set is a sample, but it is sufficiently large to be representative. Approximately 2000 calls are made to the Police relating to domestic abuse each year in Oxford.

26. Regarding age and gender, no men were referred to the IDVA service in 2020, and the overwhelming majority have been women. Between 80-90% of clients in each year are women between the ages of 25 and 55. Information provided by the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service, who provide similar support for those at medium risk, found that the number of men engaging with their service was growing, but from a very low level. In 2019, males represented 3.5% of all referrals, which doubled to 7% in 2020.
27. The populations of the different OX postcodes covering Oxford City do vary significantly, so the table below presents the number of IDVA clients per 1000 of population as a more accurate indicator.

Table 1: IDVA referrals per 1000 of population by postcode in 2020			
OX1	OX2	OX3	OX4
0.16	0.18	0.37	0.6

28. There are two key takeaways from the figures above. Firstly, to recognise that domestic abuse occurs throughout the City. Secondly, however, that the numbers of IDVA referrals are approximately four times lower in the more affluent OX1 and OX2 postcodes than in the more deprived OX4 postcode. However, caution should be exercised in concluding that domestic abuse is necessarily four times more prevalent in the poorer areas of the City. This is an area where the data set may provide a skewed impression. More affluent victims are liable to have more social capital, which may mean they are able to effect a change in their situation sooner and therefore not be referred to the IDVA service, available to victims at high risk. A safer conclusion is that individuals in less affluent areas more commonly encounter the most extreme forms of domestic abuse.
29. Table 2 below gives a breakdown of the main ethnic groupings accepting the support of an IDVA in Oxford City:

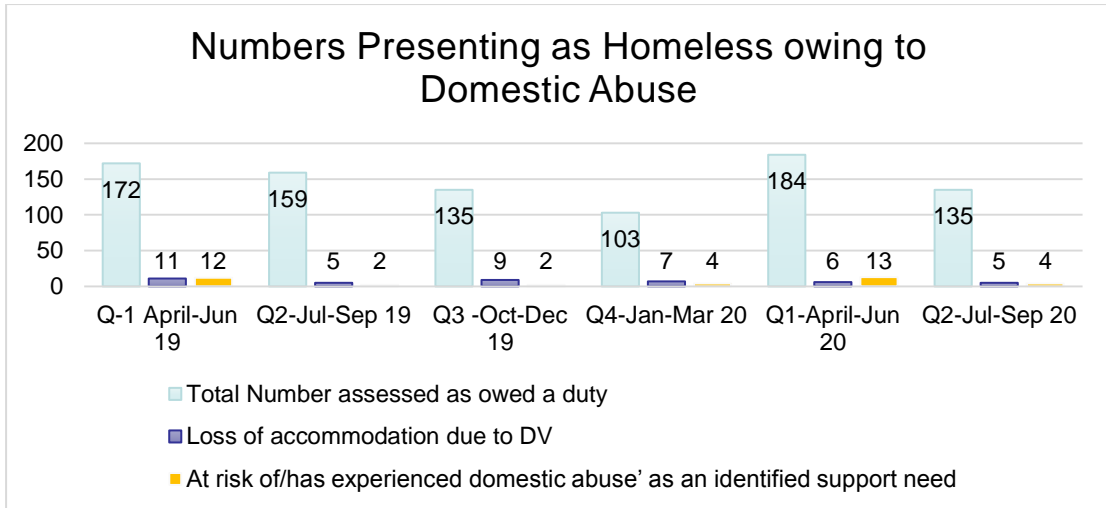
Table 2: IDVA referrals by ethnicity (%age)	
White British	45
Asian	23
White Other	16
Unknown/withheld	12.5

30. It is difficult to draw conclusions as to how representative this is, given that the most up-to-date census data (2011) is almost exactly as out of date as it can be.
31. The most striking issue is the near-absence of African representation, with only two clients of African ethnicity being supported (3%). With a relatively high number of unknown and withheld clients this statistic may indeed be unreflective of experience on the ground, but it is illustrative of an issue highlighted by a report discussed within this report, the 'Thames Valley BAMER Project' report,

which identified poor and inconsistent data collection around ethnicity as a barrier to understanding which minorities do struggle to access domestic abuse services.

Domestic Abuse in Oxford and the Pandemic

32. As referenced above, the stresses put on relationships by the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a spike in the incidence of domestic abuse nationwide. The picture in Oxford is less clear, suggesting a rise but perhaps not as substantial as elsewhere in the country.
33. Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service, which runs the domestic abuse helpline in Oxfordshire actually saw a dramatic fall-off in call volumes in March 2020. In the subsequent quarters, however, numbers not only rebounded but increased to approximately 25% above the levels of the relevant quarters in the previous year, where they have remained. Other services saw a different profile, with a similar fall in March, but with only a gradual increase over the summer and a surge in the autumn.
34. An alternative measure of the increase in domestic abuse can be seen by the number of people approaching the Council for housing. Nationally, the percentage of people presenting as homeless due to domestic abuse has more than quadrupled, from 2.3% to 11.3%. As can be seen in the chart below, relative to the previous year, numbers in Oxford have been relatively stable, with moderate increases in what is a small sample size. Whilst this may seem to indicate that incidences of domestic abuse have been static, a complicating factor is the lag in time between incidences of domestic abuse and a victim seeking to leave. The fact that data is only available up to September may hide a later surge in numbers. Nevertheless, this issue is also true nationwide, where growth has been far steeper. Consequently, the conclusion of the Review Group is that domestic abuse is likely to have increased with the Covid pandemic, but not as sharply as elsewhere in the country. However, as with Covid itself, a more acute second wave could be possible in the future if it is not already underway.

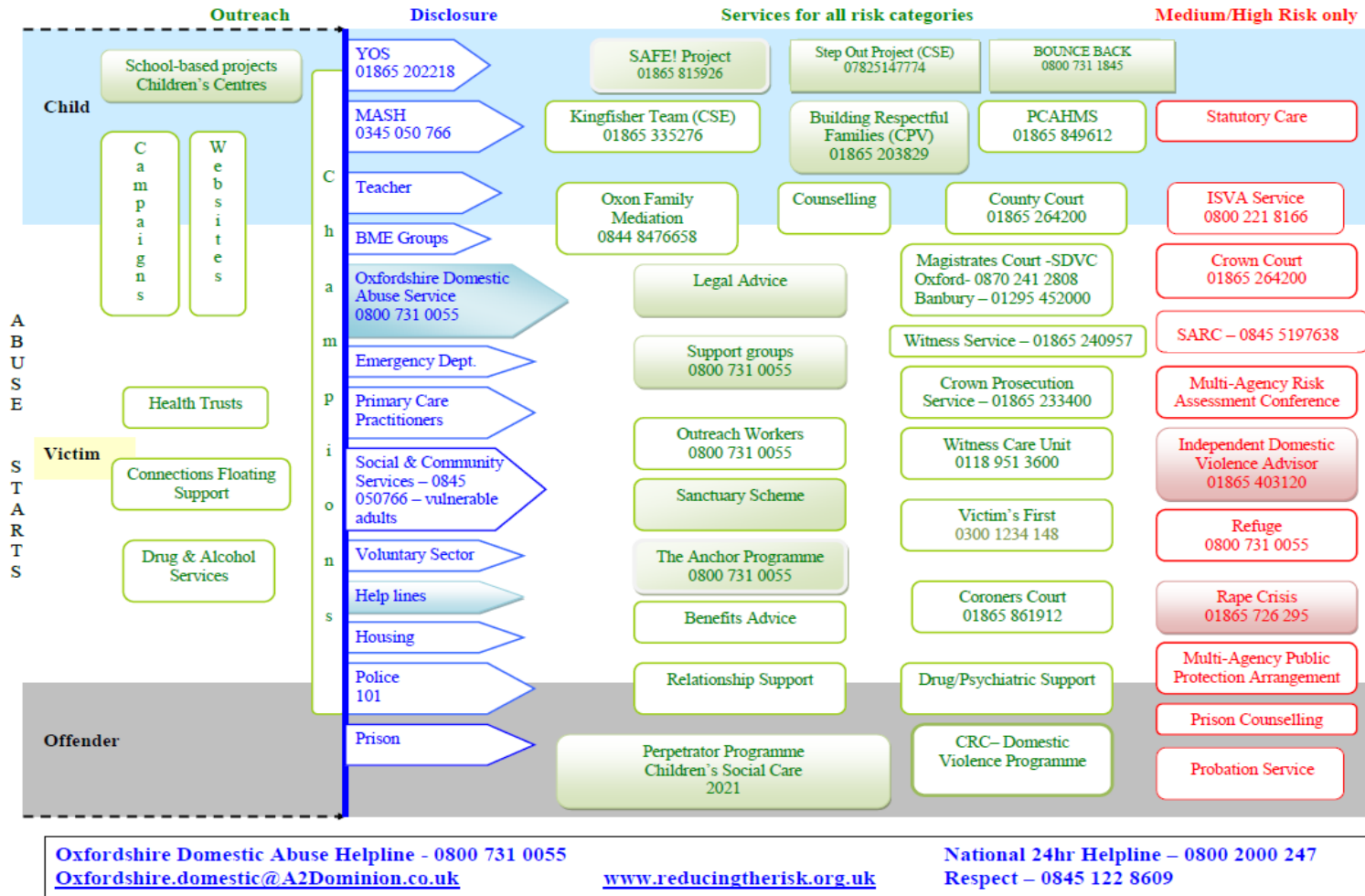


Understanding the City Council’s Role

35. As evidenced by the map of the model of support in Oxford overleaf, the tackling of domestic abuse is extremely complex and dispersed across multiple agencies. A detailed explanation of the workings of the system would be inordinately long. Within this system, however, the Council has three main roles:

- i) To recognise domestic abuse or handle disclosures when they arise in the Council’s regular operations, ensuring that a DASH risk assessment is undertaken and high risk individuals join (or are represented at) the multi-agency risk assessment conference (the MARAC), which coordinates the necessary response
- ii) Participation in strategic regional coordination fora, including the co-commissioning of domestic abuse services
- iii) Provision of services, most pertinently housing and target hardening of properties, but also ancillary support for items such as benefits.

Diagram: Map of Domestic Abuse Services in Oxfordshire



Chapter 4: Findings and Recommendations

Part 1: External Witnesses

36. To provide external expertise, perspective and challenge, the Review Group sought the advice and experience of a number of witnesses from outside the Council. The details of their feedback is detailed below.

Specialist Local Domestic Abuse Services

IDVAs and Reducing the Risk

37. Trish Walsh, Manager for the Independent Domestic Violence Advisory (IDVA) Service at Reducing the Risk presents to the Review Group on the work of her organisation and the major issues encountered by its clients.

38. The IDVA service in Oxfordshire is delivered by the charity Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse. Its work is reserved for those victims of domestic abuse who are risk-assessed as being at high risk of substantial harm. Risk is assessed via the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment Risk Indicator Checklist (DASH RIC) which can be completed by trained professionals from any statutory or third-sector agency. Any agency, using their professional judgement alongside the 'score' from the DASH is able to refer a victim to a Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), the conference of relevant agencies where actions needed to protect the victims are agreed.

39. The IDVA attends the MARAC to represent the views and wishes of the victim so they are not subsumed by the concerns of the various agencies responsible for their protection. MARACs are held monthly to discuss the best way to minimise risk and keep the victims and their children safe.

40. Beyond the MARAC, the IDVA's role is broadly threefold: 1) advocating for the victim through any formal processes (e.g. family or criminal court), 2) ongoing, dynamic risk assessment and safety planning, plus 3) other practical and emotional support relating to the domestic abuse, including support to plan a safe exit if desired by the victim.

41. The IDVA's role as an independent advocate is key in ensuring the wishes of the victim are not subsumed by the concerns of the various agencies responsible for their protection. Support is provided by the IDVAs for as long as is required to ensure the requisite safety measures are put in place.

42. Oxford City is covered by one IDVA. The post is not commissioned.

43. When asked to identify the key areas of difficulty clients of the IDVA service experienced, two were identified: housing, and translation.
44. Whilst it was reported that the local IDVA has a really strong relationship with one of the Tenancy Sustainment Officers at the Council, housing remains the biggest single challenge for IDVAs in supporting their clients.
45. The problems with housing are twofold. Firstly, whilst the Council has in its tenancy agreements terms which preclude anti-social behaviour and violence, it is the experience of the IDVAs that too rarely does the Council seek possession of the property on these grounds. It is important to stress that those who are referred to the IDVA service are victims who are deemed at high risk of significant harm to their health or welfare; failure to seek possession of the property and re-let it to the victim alone is a decision not to address perhaps the biggest single risk factor to the victim.¹³ Owing to this risk, where the victim is in support of such action, the IDVA service will resort to court to seek an occupation order for the property, which would remove the perpetrator. Largely, however, the courts are unwilling to act when the Council has not, and will not make a perpetrator homeless. As such, it is the experience of the IDVA services that victims are often not safe in their own homes.
46. The other major issue lies directly downstream from this problem. Where a victim does decide they wish not to stay with their abuser (many stay, sometimes with tragic results), a big problem is, because of the risk to the victim in remaining in Oxford, there is a tendency for the Council to be willing only to offer to facilitate an out of area move, or a move to refuge. Too regularly it is not in the best interests of victims to move away from their support networks, particularly to a refuge (described as the option that should be used 'when you are running away in the middle of the night, fearful for your life'). It was reported that having offered those options, if the victim refused what was available, the Council claimed it had discharged its housing duty towards the victim. Trish Walsh shared that she, even as a non-victim, had been reduced to tears by the hostility and lack of sympathy from officers (though it is not clear whether this was specifically in relation to experiences of Oxford City Council, or more generally).
47. To challenge being faced with the choice of moving to inappropriate housing, or losing housing entitlements altogether, it is necessary to take an appeal to the Council's Exceptional Circumstances Panel (ECP). This is not only resource-intensive, but a cause of delay in a context in which speed of decision-making greatly affects the victim's welfare. During discussion on this topic it was noted by Ann Phillips, Tenancy Management Manager, that if such issues were arising, they were doing so outside the

¹³ It should be noted, however, that this is a complex area. The victim can often not support such action (whether this is free choice or a result of coercion is a judgement call needing to be made by a professional). In some instances it may be that formal intervention could be seen by the perpetrator to supersede the victim's wishes and place them out of scope for retribution or punishment by the perpetrator, but this may not always be the case.

Council's standard operating procedure. This experience was, however, also confirmed by Jonathan Cruz of the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service. A discussion was organised outside the meeting to explore the issue.

48. Another issue raised was the regularity with which the offer of a refuge place or a move out of the City would be deemed a discharge of housing duty, even if not necessarily appropriate for the victim. To challenge being faced with the choice of moving to inappropriate housing, or losing housing entitlements altogether, it is necessary to take an appeal to the Council's Exceptional Circumstances Panel (ECP). This is not only resource-intensive, but a cause of delay in a context in which speed of decision-making matters hugely to the victim's welfare. During discussion on this topic it was noted by Ann Phillips, Tenancy Management Manager, that if such issues were arising, they were doing so outside the Council's standard operating procedure.
49. The other major barrier faced by the IDVAs is the difficulty of communication with their non-English speaking clients. Of the three IDVAs in Oxfordshire, only one is commissioned, and that role is not responsible for Oxford City. Cost management is an important feature of running the service. Language Line, the translation service, costs £3 per minute and the service has an annual budget for translation of only £800, allowing less than four and a half hours per year of translation for the entirety of Oxfordshire. Given the number of victims in Oxford who are from immigrant communities (as in the Background chapter, precise ethnicity data is lacking), supply is far outweighed by demand. The fact that this barrier to support is being experienced by those at high risk is reiterated.

Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service

50. Jonathan Cruz, a Team Leader at Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service, introduced the service to the Review Group and presented the key challenges the service faced in helping create better outcomes for local victims of domestic abuse.
51. The Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service (ODAS) is part of the A2Dominion housing group, who hold the contract for commissioned domestic abuse services in Oxfordshire. The service is accessed through a helpline, which acts as the gateway to all the other services available. These services include outreach worker support, which is almost identical to the work of IDVAs apart from the fact that their clientele are adjudged to be at medium risk, rather than high risk. Other services provided include the county's refuge provision, which has been subject to reductions in funding over time. At present, there is funding for 16 refuge places, whereas under the previous contract there was provision for 29. Other key areas of support are around courses to help support survivors process their experiences.

52. As with Reducing the Risk above, the two main areas of challenge for the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service concerned housing and issues relating to culturally-specific needs arising from within ethnically diverse communities.
53. With regard to housing, the difficulties experienced by Reducing the Risk were corroborated by the experience of outreach workers for Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service, with housing being described as ‘a challenge’. However, in addition to these, a further issue was raised. Although it was recognised that there are reasons for this being the case, finding permanent move-on accommodation for those in refuges was extraordinarily difficult, leaving victims in exceedingly difficult conditions for long periods unless they were willing to seek accommodation away from the city.
54. The issues identified around ethnically diverse communities with ODAS were not the same as for Reducing the Risk. ODAS, as part of A2Dominion, does have access to Language Line. This, however, is no panacea, for their experience shows that clients from diverse and immigrant communities are reluctant to make use of phone-only services, even when interpretation is available. During the two year ‘Thames Valley BAMER Project’ (detailed later in this report) the service hosted two dedicated BAMER support workers who ran assertive community engagement and specialist culturally-sensitive domestic abuse outreach work, including one-to-one casework and drop-in surgeries. Access to ODAS from ethnically diverse communities dropped off when the funding for this service ran out. ODAS has recruited a worker to run similar sessions, but budgetary pressures mean only part of the spectrum of available services can be made accessible in this way.
55. A further issue raised in relation to individuals from ethnically diverse communities was the huge difficulty in accessing support for those with no recourse to public funds. In very tightly-defined circumstances, such as if a person meets all the criteria for a Destitution Domestic Violence concession, or if they have a child also under threat and therefore subject to social service intervention is it possible to get housing support for a person with no recourse to public funds. It was reported that for single women with no children, it is impossible, a source of frustration and regret when confronted by a victim at risk and in need of help.¹⁴

Other Guests

Huda Jawad – Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse

56. Huda Jawad, Faith and Communities Programme Manager, former Domestic Abuse Housing Coordinator at Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse and Co-founder of

¹⁴ Since this meeting a domestic abuse pathway has been established for women on spousal visas who have no recourse to public funds. For those needing to flee but unable to access refuge accommodation, Sanctuary Hosting will accommodate them whilst they are given support to seek indefinite leave to remain, which would allow them access to refuge accommodation.

the Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls coalition shared her experience and the learning of the national charity, Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, on the issues experienced by those seeking to flee domestic abuse in regard to housing, and the particular challenges of people from ethnically diverse communities.

57. Safe and stable housing is probably the most difficult need to meet for domestic abuse victims. Oftentimes victims are expected to relocate at short notice, without consideration of the practical or financial difficulties house moves bring, a problem especially acute for those who have been subject to financial abuse. For example, although train companies have announced that domestic abuse victims can get free train tickets, this alone does not meet the challenge of moving belongings, particularly if a move also involves young children. Whilst individuals can flee to safety, this is not the same as finding stable housing.
58. The problem of moving is not the only issue, however. Simply finding suitable housing is difficult, especially for those with children, who have mobility needs or have cognitive or developmental difficulties. Even when properties are secured, few are without issues, some serious, and which require financial input – for example having to secure a cooker or beds. In cases where refuge provision is sought, refuges can be reluctant to house women with male children over the age of 12 (although some, including those run by ODAS, accept male children up to 16). It has been recognised by Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse that many perpetrators are fully aware of these barriers and seek to make them as insurmountable as possible in order to entrap their victims.
59. A deeply unsettling observation was made, that in the experience of Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, survivors of domestic abuse most commonly report their engagement with the local authority in relation to housing to be the single most difficult experience they face in escaping and rebuilding their lives. For the second time, the Review Group heard the word ‘hostile’ used to describe homelessness services by an expert witness, which was then further compounded by the unfavourable comparison with the UK’s immigration services. Regularly, the attitude of the local authority is one of disbelief, and there is an automatic assumption that the victim is seeking to trick the authority into providing housing, making additional requests for information such as police reference numbers.¹⁵ Fear of being deemed intentionally homeless and therefore no longer eligible for housing is the primary reason, particularly for those with children, why victims remain with their abuser and do not ‘just leave’.
60. People from ethnically diverse communities face an even sterner challenge regarding housing. As minority ethnic individuals, they are less likely to conform to the decision-maker’s perception of what a victim ‘should’ look like. Simultaneously, however, they will tend to be less, owing to language and unfamiliarity with a new system, to be as forceful self-advocates as non-minority ethnic individuals. Facing hostility and disbelief in a state

¹⁵ For clarity, these comments were made from the perspective a national practitioner, reporting on experiences of survivors of domestic abuse with local authorities generally, and not Oxford specifically.

of utterly exhausted emotional distress, those from ethnically diverse communities are even less likely to be able to press their case and are liable to encounter worse outcomes as a consequence. In Oxford, Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service does have a specific worker for supporting ethnically diverse individuals, but the challenge for the Council is to recognise the needs of those who are not supported.

61. In addition, irregular immigration status is a risk factor experienced by people from immigrant communities more regularly than others. Commonly, this vulnerability will be weaponised by perpetrators, who will regularly ensure that victims default on their immigration status, drastically reducing the support available to them to escape their situation at best, or face being moved to a detention centre as an illegal migrant at worst. Confronted with the risk of homelessness or detention and deportation, many (almost all) women will take the risk of staying with their abuser.
62. In addition to introducing the Review Group to the challenges faced by individuals fleeing domestic abuse, two reports were circulated for additional review: reports from Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse. The first on the Whole Housing Approach, which seeks to i) improve access to stable housing across all housing tenure types (social, private rented and private ownership; this also considers the need for move-on options from refuges, supported accommodation and any other type of temporary accommodation), and ii) ensure access to a range of tailored housing options and initiatives to give people experiencing domestic abuse the choice to either relocate or remain in their existing accommodation. The full suite of housing options enables agencies and organisations to work together more collaboratively. Effective coordination efforts consider the long-term safety of the victim/survivor, as well as managing crisis situations and removing the perpetrator. It seeks to do this by providing a framework through which domestic abuse and housing sectors can work more effectively together.
63. The report is lengthy, so it is appended at the end of this document as Appendix 2.¹⁶ However, a number of key issues and ideas the Review Group considers important are detailed below.
64. Move-on from refuge accommodation is a major step in allowing survivors of domestic abuse to rebuild their lives. However, it is noted that the supply of move-on accommodation is constrained “There is an urgent need to increase supply of genuinely affordable accommodation and consider move-on options from refuge services and other types of unstable accommodation. Move-on was a significant challenge for refuge services before COVID 19 and has become an increasing problem during the pandemic. Women’s Aid England reports that refuge services in England are posting fewer vacancies since the start of the pandemic, with the average number of available bed spaces falling by half in comparison to the same time last year. As a result of this, a call

¹⁶ It is also available for download at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee0be2588f1e349401c832c/t/5fa2ac5610356f02dc759054/1604496477948/Whole+Housing+Approach+Y1+Report.pdf>

for action was made by DAHA, Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), National Housing Federation and Women's Aid England asking housing providers to prioritise move-on from refuge as we came out of lockdown. There is further work to be done here including the opportunity of asking and legislating for housing providers to allocate a proportion of any new-builds and their existing stock to respond to domestic abuse, whether this is rehousing the family or perpetrator." (p. 28).

65. The report makes two practical suggestions to help domestic abuse victims secure move-on accommodation. The first is to increase priority, and the second to increase supply available.

66. The second issue of interest is that of the existence of an accreditation scheme for housing providers run by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA).¹⁷ This gives housing providers, including local authorities, the opportunity to benchmark their own provision against best practice for domestic abuse victims in the areas of

- Policies & Procedures
- Case Management
- Risk Management
- Inclusivity & Accessibility
- Perpetrator Management
- Partnership Working
- Training

The cost of accreditation is a minimum of £3000 plus VAT and usually takes a year to become ready for assessment. Once granted, accreditation lasts for 3 years.

67. Finally, of interest to the Review Group is the concept of Flexible Funding.¹⁸ The full introduction to this concept is included as Appendix 3 to this report. Briefly, however, flexible funding is made available to victims of domestic abuse, usually by payments to service providers rather than to the individuals themselves, to overcome the financial barriers to extricating themselves from their abusers. It is accessed via domestic abuse services, but not dependent on engagement with other parts of the service. What makes it unusual and particularly suited to the needs of domestic abuse victims is its speed, the absence of a need to provide documentary proof of abuse or their financial situation, and is available to those who have no recourse to public funds. Indirect costs, such as car repair, can be funded as well as direct costs, such as a bus ticket, so long as it serves the purpose of helping victims to access safe and stable accommodation.

¹⁷ More information can be found at <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/what-we-do/accreditation-for-housing-providers/>

¹⁸ It is available online at https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/media/10657/11_-wha-flexible-funding.pdf

68. The Review Group's recommendations in response to these are included within the Housing chapter of this report.
69. The second item introduced to the Review Group was the 'Keeping the Faith' report, a report from survivors who are members of faith communities on what they wish both faith leaders and statutory agencies to know. The report is included as Appendix 4 to this report.¹⁹
70. On review, the most relevant issue raised is the role of 'by and for' organisations in preventing domestic abuse by removing many of the barriers faced by members of faith communities. 'By and for' groups are those which are run by the same demographic as those they seek to support, for example, a Muslim women's group would be run by and on behalf of Muslim women. There can be a reluctance on equality grounds to fund such groups, but the report recognises how instrumental such groups can be in creating access to services from otherwise disadvantaged demographic groups. The Review Group's report around this is included in the discussion of grant funding.

Kate Agha and Sobia Afridi - Oxford Against Cutting

71. Kate Agha (Director) and Sobia Afridi (Trustee) from Oxford Against Cutting presented to the Review Group on the work of their organisation, and the particular issues they identified for ethnically diverse communities regarding domestic abuse and violence against women and girls.
72. The main aim of the organisation is education on harmful practices, which is primarily delivered through training by individuals from affected communities on Female Genital Mutilation and Forced Marriages. In 2018 training was delivered to over 1000 individuals, and in 2019 to 2000. Given the restrictions caused by the pandemic, that training has not taken place in the same way in 2020 but the group has run web cafes with guest speakers invited to share their experience and knowledge on relevant topics as well as anti-FGM and anti-forced marriage safeguarding training for teachers and professionals.
73. Another aspect of the organisation's work is the BAED (Black Asian and Ethnically Diverse) WORLDS group. The group is a multi-agency group set up to explore recovery support for women from BAED communities suffering abuse during the Covid-19 outbreak in Oxfordshire. The new group is part of a wider recovery group, Mapping of Domestic Abuse Recovery Services in Oxfordshire, hosted by Oxfordshire County Council and has special focus on the specific challenges faced by BAED women, informed by the 'Thames Valley BAMER' project (see Part 5 for further details). Other participant organisations to the group include Asylum Welcome, Refugee Resource, Oxfordshire Mind, Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Services and Elmore Community

¹⁹ It is available for download at:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee0be2588f1e349401c832c/t/5fe1d167fdf2bb19a0be17e5/1608634729601/Keeping+the+Faith+FINAL.pdf>

Services. In December 2020 the group published best practice guides for running groups to support women from BAED communities who have suffered domestic abuse.

74. The organisation has a diverse workforce and board members, with 75% of the former group, and 40% of the latter identifying as from BAME communities.
75. Oxford Against Cutting are in support of the learning and conclusions of the BAMER report, and drew particular attention to the need to address both internal factors – thinking patterns, concern over community reactions or failure to recognise abuse as abuse – as well as external factors such as the availability and accessibility of services.
76. Key barriers on the internal side include concern over community reactions to raising the issue of harmful practices, or the inability to recognise them, marital rape especially. Suspicion of services, particularly over whether the involvement of children’s social care would involve the removal of children from the victim is also common. Concern amongst victims with no recourse to public funds around information sharing by services with immigration officials is an important barrier in seeking statutory support.
77. External barriers, those issues that make it difficult for services to reach communities effectively, include inconsistency of data collection around ethnicity, which creates difficulty for decision-makers in knowing which groups are and are not accessing services. The organisation also felt it important that victims are offered a choice of advocate or support worker, as some people are more comfortable with workers from the same cultural group and others with workers from different cultural groups.
78. The issues that would improve the situation would be:
 - Increased funding of direct, front-line ethnically-specific roles in community settings, such as in domestic abuse services as occurred within the ‘Thames Valley BAMER Project.’
 - Funding of projects which indirectly tackle domestic abuse through reducing the vulnerability and building the resilience of potential victims, such as English language classes or support to enter and maintain employment.
 - Increased funding of interpretation services. Without them, abuse victims struggle to access those services which would provide an avenue of support. If services rely on interpretation by family or friends, there is a risk that information will get back to the perpetrator.
 - Sharing resources to raise community awareness of the services that are available locally. Each year, Oxford Against Cutting develops a poster campaign with the input of the groups to highlight how to access specialist helplines on a victim’s first call, a key factor when time away from a perpetrator can be extremely limited.
 - Training. Harmful practices such as FGM and honour-based abuse should be of concern to everybody. The Council is encouraged to access the expert training on the issue provided by Oxford Against Cutting.

79. The Review Group asked the view of Oxford Against Cutting on the value of preventative activity. Intervention through education of children and adults is absolutely fundamental, but the sensitivity of its delivery is key to its efficacy. It is vital to focus challenge not on specific cultural values, such as honour and shame, or the importance of pre-marital virginity, but on the harm that can arise from those values, which can manifest themselves in honour-based abuse and FGM. It is extremely helpful in this regard to have training delivered by those who have come from cultures in which these values have led to their lived experience of harmful practices. The Review Group discussed, however, that it was also vital for non-ethnic minority community members to be equipped with the language to challenge harm, not culture, to ensure that fears over addressing these issues in another culture would not cause them to go unchallenged.
80. Within training, an under-served area is the training of boys and men, over girls and women, and Oxford Against Cutting hope to explore how peer education in this regard might be implemented.

Jameelah Shodunke – AfiUK

81. Jameelah Shodunke, Community Engagement Officer at African Families in UK (AFiUK) was invited to the Review Group to share her experiences of supporting BAME community members facing situations of domestic abuse.
82. The charity, AfiUK exists to equip African and other ethnic minority families in the UK to take their rightful place as fruitful members of our society, and to make the most of the available opportunities in their adopted country without adversely affecting the strong family and community networks that Africans are known for.
83. The primary areas of difficulty were identified to be housing, and the support for those with no recourse to public funds. Although there are areas for improvement, the feedback was prefaced with an overall sense of happiness and gratitude for the statutory services provided.
84. Housing problems experienced by clients tended to fall into two common themes. Firstly, the regularity with which housing tended to be offered outside Oxford, with refuge placements as far away as Scotland being offered. An example was given of a victim who did not wish to move to refuge in the middle of her child's GCSE exams. Similar to the feedback of Reducing the Risk and ODAS, finding local housing once a refuge placement had been refused, was problematic. The victim had to wait 56 days to be entered on the Housing Register.
85. The second housing-related issue concerned the suitability of placements for people from ethnically diverse communities. Many reported an absence of suitable cultural support and facilities, for example, shops catering to religious dietary requirements or others of the same ethnicity. The absence of others from the same or similar ethnic backgrounds also was a cause of difficulty, in that a number of these people faced hostile and racist treatment, and were left feeling particularly unsupported owing to their being in

the significant minority. For those without access to cars, this situation can be particularly acute.

86. Lack of support is a theme which extends beyond housing, however. The experience of those with no recourse to public funds was often that they felt that support services were withdrawn too quickly. Whilst national policy does make it particularly difficult to support these individuals to find better outcomes, at the same time, by virtue of their immigration status they have very few other sources of support. The withdrawal of support is therefore of greater negative impact, and can have the consequence of leaving individuals feeling abandoned or having no option but to remain with their abusers.

Part 2: Partner Agencies

Oxfordshire County Council

87. As referenced in the Background, responsibility for managing and reducing domestic abuse is multi-agency in nature with the health service, the Police and the County Council all playing key roles from the statutory sector, as well as formal services and informal support provided by the voluntary and community sector. Whilst the Council does provide a number of unique services, such as housing and the sanctuary scheme, a lot of its work is strategic, being involved in a coordinated community response to domestic abuse with the specific aims to prevent domestic abuse, provide high quality support services, hold perpetrators to account and to work in partnership.

88. The Council works out these aims primarily through the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategic Board, on which the Council's Domestic Abuse Lead sits. The Board is Chaired and managed by the County Council with representatives from Thames Valley Police, District Councils, Children & Adult Social Care, Oxford University NHS Foundation Trust, Public Health, Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner and the Clinical Commissioning Group. The Domestic Abuse Strategic Board is responsible for developing the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategy and for its delivery through the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Operational Board by overseeing the different strands of work to tackle domestic abuse in Oxfordshire. The Strategy Board also reviews and oversees the commissioning of local domestic abuse services.

89. In addition, the Domestic Abuse Lead represents Oxford City Council on the BAED Partnership Board which is Chaired and managed by the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner. The purpose of the Board is to ensure the recommendations from the BAMER Report (2020) are taken forward across the Thames Valley, the domestic-abuse relevant issues of which have been detailed elsewhere in this report.

90. Regrettably, illness and unavailability meant the Review Group did not hear from County Council representatives on two relevant topics – translation and domestic abuse – meaning it has not covered these issues with the thoroughness it would have wished.

However, an area of enquiry throughout the Review Group process was on preventative activity, its availability and its efficacy. Laura Clements, Head of Oxfordshire County Council's Family Solutions Service, provided an update to the Review Group on the status of such perpetrator work in the county.

91. The Family Solutions Plus service's primary responsibility for the protection of children, either through statutory interventions where a child is at risk of serious harm, or consent-based support where a risk to the child is present but does not meet the threshold for statutory intervention. What makes the Family Solutions Plus service novel is the linkage between meeting the needs of parents and protection of the child. Oftentimes, harm or neglect of a child arises out of inadequate support for a parental problem, most often mental health, substance or alcohol misuse, or domestic abuse in the home. Instead of focusing on 'fixing' the child's immediate problems whilst not addressing the causes, the service's approach seeks to prevent harm to the child by supporting parents and has dedicated adult-facing practitioners. Family Solutions Plus has 10 dedicated frontline domestic abuse workers provided by Elmore, five of which work with the non-abusive parents providing them with support and identifying additional needs. The other five work with the abusive parents to motivate and support them to change their abusive behaviour.
92. Perpetrators undertake eight two-week modules including gender roles and responsibilities, reducing threatening and violent behaviour, conflict resolution and sexual respect.
93. The first cohort of perpetrators have commenced their course in February 2021, meaning that as-yet there is no feedback on the efficacy of the intervention. Indeed, a full picture of its efficacy can be measured only over periods beyond the course: whether participants avoided returning to their abusive behaviours three, six, twelve or more months after completing the intervention. The Review Group is keen that Scrutiny and the wider Council should be provided with the early monitoring data, and suggests that it be included as part of this report's six month review in order to bring to the Council's attention any issues and ideas it considers important that the Council should consider.

Recommendation 2: That the Council requests from the County Council early monitoring data from the Family Solutions Plus domestic abuse perpetrator monitoring programme and includes that information within its six month review of progress made on agreed recommendations from this report.

94. The Review Group is of the view that whilst its efficacy is yet to be shown, prima facie the perpetrator programme addresses a lot of crucial issues, issues which are of relevance beyond the set of people who have recently perpetrated domestic abuse and who have children, which is the remit of the Family Solutions Plus service. In discussion, it was asked what similar courses were currently more universally available. A women-only course for victims of domestic abuse is also available from the Family Solutions Plus service as part of its non-mandatory offer the Early Help Service and its 'Own My Life'

course. This is for victims of domestic abuse rather than perpetrators, and also specifically for women with children. The course contextualises domestic abuse within wider issues around institutional sexism, messaging about the roles of women in society and relationships, and challenges the normalisation of dysfunctional relationships. For perpetrators, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner is currently consulting with professionals on a new perpetrator programme, including the Council's Domestic Abuse Lead.

95. The likelihood is that more funding will become available for other perpetrator programmes in the future; the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, though not yet passed, includes encouragement for the funding of perpetrator programmes, a departure from previous policy. This is a welcome change in approach; the Review Group considers that for too long the easier path of getting victims to modify their behaviour has been taken, effectively a policy-level form of victim-blaming. The Review Group is keen that the Council continues to engage in and support the development of a universal perpetrator programme in a way appropriate to its position as a junior partner.

Recommendation 3: That the Council engages with Thames Valley Police and provides appropriate support for the development of a universal domestic abuse perpetrator programme.

96. The above recommendation notwithstanding, the Review Group does note that there is an ongoing unmet need for groupwork programmes to support victims and survivors in Oxford and the wider county also. What provision there is does not sit within an overarching framework of support. The Review Group would welcome the development of more of these programmes within the wider domestic abuse framework of services.

Recommendation 4: That the Council works with partners for the development of additional groupwork programmes for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, and that these programmes be embedded within the broader multi-agency framework for managing domestic abuse.

Part 3: Learning from Other Authorities: Barking and Dagenham Domestic Abuse Commission

97. Looking beyond local partnership working, the Review Group has sought to learn from the experience of leading Councils elsewhere, specifically from Barking and Dagenham's Domestic Abuse Commission.

98. Barking and Dagenham established a Domestic Abuse Commission in early 2020, following recognition of the particular severity of the problem in the area. In 2017/18 Barking and Dagenham had the highest number of reported domestic abuse incidents of anywhere in London, at 12.8 cases per 1000 people (more than twice the rate of Oxford's

highest postcode, OX4). Equally alarmingly, however, an attitude survey of 2500 secondary school children in the area showed clearly a deeply unhealthy attitude towards relationships being passed down to the younger generation, with 26% believing it was acceptable to hit one's partner.

99. The Barking and Dagenham Domestic Abuse Commission drew in a panel of 12 national experts, not all with a direct focus on domestic abuse, to work with local communities and survivors of domestic abuse in order to consider how the local area, led by the council, could improve its response to domestic abuse, and importantly the role of addressing culture and the normalisation of abuse within that. The outcomes of the Commission were to:

- a) understand the attitudes relating to domestic abuse in the community;
- b) look at the services of council's and partner agencies;
- c) create a blueprint for other local areas to follow.

100. Contributors to the panel included Polly Neate, Chief Executive of Shelter, and Jess Phillips, Chair of the All Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Abuse. The Review Group were very fortunate to be briefed on the Commission by Amna Abdullatif, national lead on Children and Young People for Women's Aid, a councillor at Manchester City Council, and a member of the Panel.

101. Originally, the outcomes of the Commission were anticipated to be published in late autumn 2020. The disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the full report was delayed, with its launch date now scheduled for 10 March 2021. This does mean that that the finer details of the report have not been seen by the Review Group and are not considered by this report. However, one of the stated intentions of the Barking and Dagenham Commission is to provide a blueprint for other areas to learn from, and whilst it is not possible that this learning should be included here, the Review Group is strongly of the view that the Council should avail itself of this opportunity, particularly as Barking and Dagenham have been kind enough to offer to discuss issues arising on a one-to-one basis if desired.

Recommendation 5: That the Council reviews the recommendations and outcomes of the Barking and Dagenham Domestic Abuse Commission, and as part of the Review Group's six-month progress update reports on the steps it has taken to adopt and implement learning and actions from the Commission into the Council's own activity.

102. Though the Review Group has been unable to consider the specific recommendations and conclusions of the Commission, it fully endorses the approach taken and details this approach and the learning of how to implement it because it considers it to be a foundation of good practice for any future work which would be relevant even in a demographically different context such as Oxford.

103. One of the issues that makes domestic abuse such a difficult issue for its victims is not simply the trauma of the abuse itself, but the challenge of getting help from a system whose perceptions and attitudes towards victims often misunderstand their situations, but which can also at times be actively discriminatory. The Commission was undertaken on the basis of the following principles. That it would:

- a) Believe survivors. It is worse than pointless to listen to survivors only to deem what can often be an emotionally-costly testimony invalid.
- b) Be led by survivors. It is necessary to recognise that the people who have lived through domestic abuse and come out the other side are the people best placed to explain what is helpful and what is not.
- c) Change attitudes by changing behaviour. If the same patterns of behaviour are repeated over and over there is little to no stimulus to change thought patterns. Changing behaviour which embodies abusive attitudes allows for new, non-destructive thought patterns to emerge.
- d) Avoid creating additional harm. Being well-intentioned is not sufficient defence for an individual seeking to escape domestic abuse. It may not be robust enough to foil a perpetrator intent on causing harm. Equally, simply by being inflexible to the specific challenges faced by a victim of domestic abuse the bureaucratic process can cause unintended negative results. It is necessary, therefore, to take proactive steps to avoid harm, not simply not intend to cause it.
- e) Be anti-racist and pro-feminist. With the existence of entrenched societal inequalities around race and gender, ethnic minorities and women facing domestic abuse do so with fewer reserves of social capital to support them. Addressing domestic abuse for these individuals cannot be properly done without addressing and challenging the underlying inequalities that make them particularly vulnerable.²⁰
- f) Be trauma informed. This means understanding and interpreting an individual's circumstances in the context of the trauma they have experienced. This is well illustrated by the use of the question 'what has happened to you?' as opposed to asking 'what is wrong with you?'

104. Practically, the Review Group were informed of some key learnings from the approach taken, which it agrees with.

105. Firstly, a key factor must be a focus on what works, rather than what is novel or innovative. Domestic abuse is both a widespread and a longstanding problem with which society has had to contend. This means that there are examples of successful

²⁰ A good illustration of this is the difference between the experience of men facing domestic abuse, and women. Men do face domestic abuse (though less commonly than women). When they do, however, they are less likely to have children, and if they do have children, they are less likely to have childcare commitments. This fact means that many more men facing domestic abuse do so whilst in employment, and therefore with an income. Whilst men still face the trauma of domestic abuse, less often do they face the entrapping factors of not wanting to abandon children, having no financial resources on which to rely whilst extricating themselves and having to choose between remaining with an abuser and possibly being homeless.

programmes which can be replicated. Investing time to know what is already working is a much better use of resources than coming up with novel solutions.

106. Secondly, knowing the local community, its diversity, its assets, its strengths and weaknesses is vital. A crucial foundation for this is a strong and interconnected voluntary and community sector, which can help communities scale up from identifying a need to owning its solution. The Review Group considers that this is an area in which Oxford does well and which the Council is facilitating through its grants programme.

107. Thirdly, all Council officers with a responsibility for an area relevant to domestic abuse were engaged in the process. Clearly, for a London Borough it is easier to deliver a comprehensive review than in a two-tier local authority structure such as Oxfordshire. Nevertheless, domestic abuse is a broad spectrum issue which requires holistic responses to bring about effective change, meaning there must be corporate ownership of the issue to see victim-friendly policies and practices implemented throughout all the Council's relevant functions.

108. Fourthly, perhaps less of a relevant point for the Council unless it too decided to bring in national experts, is a consistent need to invert any sense of hierarchy which puts experts and professionals at the top, and survivors at the bottom. Throughout its duration, the Commission ran meetings every two weeks for survivors to share their views and experiences. At present, this work is undertaken at the County level, given its wider remit for issues relating to domestic abuse. This fact, however, only became apparent to the Review Group very late on in the process, indicating that whilst such work is taking place, it is not necessarily well-publicised. The Review Group suggests that there is potential for the voices of these groups to be reviewed or strengthened to ensure that they are connected with Council services appropriately.²¹

Recommendation 6: That the Council works with strategic partners to review and, if necessary, strengthen the connection between existing lived-experience groups and the Council's services.

109. Finally, the importance of engaging with the local community. The Commission recognises that the Council has its responsibilities around domestic abuse, but it has neither the capacity, the resources, nor the reach to bring about lasting change on its own. That change relies on ownership by local communities, and for that sometimes significant effort must be made to involve them meaningfully in the conversation. For an illustration of the investment made in community consultation, the Commission undertook over 55 focus groups with over 500 residents, plus interviews, as well as a resident survey. Again, the Review Group recognises that the Commission is a particularly well-

²¹ For readers who have lived experience and would like to contribute towards shaping Council and wider domestic-abuse work please contact Liz Jones, Domestic Abuse Coordinator at ljones3@oxford.gov.uk

resourced case, but the overall point that working with communities to bring about change remains valid, even when the problem of domestic abuse appears not to be as acute.

110. An aspect of community engagement that was brought to the Review Group's attention was the importance of being sensitive to the way in which engagement is done and information is shared. In discussion, the Review Group talked about the positive feedback experienced by residents from the hubs, which the Council set up following the pandemic, and the increased willingness of some members of the community to access information through this route. If the hubs are being more effective at reaching certain sections of the community, the Review Group suggests that it would be appropriate to undertake a project specifically to consider how that increased accessibility can be leveraged to support victims and reduce incidences of domestic abuse.
111. One issue to note in this, however, is that sensitive handling of domestic abuse issues is a skill which requires training; workers operating beyond their capability and experience increase risk both for themselves, for the organisation and the victim. As such, the strongest use of the hubs would be for low-risk work, recognising the signs of domestic abuse and what to do if they arise, knowing who to contact if a disclosure is made, and being aware of the existing domestic abuse services and pathways in order to signpost or help residents access them.

Recommendation 7: That the Council trains the staff at its hubs to recognise domestic abuse and know how to respond, to know who to speak to in the event of a disclosure, and to be able to signpost appropriately to support services.

112. Related to this, Councillors are often involved in similarly 'front-line' engagement with their ward members and other residents. As such, in the course of their responsibilities they too are in a position where they may suspect, witness or have domestic abuse disclosed to them. The Review Group suggests, therefore, that Councillors are given the same opportunities to be trained around domestic abuse awareness, signposting options, and where to find suitable professional support to manage suspected, witnesses or disclosed domestic abuse sensitively and in a risk-managed way.

Recommendation 8: That the Council makes available training and resources to Councillors to enable them to recognise domestic abuse and know how to respond, to know who to speak to in the event of a disclosure, and to be able to signpost appropriately to support services.

113. As a final point to note, although the detail of the outcomes of the Commission are not yet known, the issues that they cluster around are. The Review Group is pleased to note that they mirror closely its own lines of enquiry, and are a confirmation of its approach. For reference, the areas on which the Commission intends to report are on

- Professionals and services
- Healthy relationships
- Children and young people
- Trauma-informed support
- Community awareness
- Perpetrator intervention and challenging abusive behaviour
- Empowering community groups

Part 4: Housing

114. As referenced in the Background, the Council's responsibilities around housing form its most direct intervention into issues of domestic abuse. These responsibilities primarily break down into two: supporting those who are or are at risk of homelessness when domestic abuse is a factor, and managing the housing issues which arise when domestic abuse is perpetrated.
115. The Review Group sought to understand the outworkings of these responsibilities, and to identify particular weaknesses.

Victims at Risk of Homelessness

Housing Options

116. Under the Housing Act 1996 part 7 as amended, the Council has a duty to provide housing advice and assistance to customers who are homeless or may be threatened with homelessness. Fatheya Latif, Housing Options Manager, presented to the Review Group on how the Council fulfils this duty in regard to those who face homelessness due to domestic abuse, and the impact of Covid on the number of people presenting as homeless or at risk of homeless owing to domestic abuse. The second of these issues has been included within the Local Context section of this report.
117. An individual who contacts the Council's Housing Options team as homeless or at risk of homelessness is given an appointment at which the available options are discussed. Meetings can be arranged on the same day if necessary. This is the same for those facing domestic abuse as for other causes of homelessness. As part of this appointment, information regarding proof of identity, income and the details of any children are requested, but this documentary proof can be provided at a later date.
118. For those facing domestic abuse, the main options are as follows. If an individual is facing imminent danger, refuge is an option. There are, however, drawbacks to refuge, which may not make it suitable to all. It is and should be a last resort for those who need to flee from their current home to a location unknown (outside of Oxfordshire) and

unknowable to the perpetrator. For many survivors it is neither required nor desired. When it is needed, there are still issues to overcome, such as rules on the age of male children who can be housed, as well as the prohibition on housing those whose immigration status gives them no recourse to public funds. If those obstacles are overcome, fleeing to refuge comes with significant costs including the removal of family and other support networks, taking children out of school, moving away from formal support networks and known services.

119. An alternative option is temporary accommodation. This is not as secure as refuge accommodation, in that the location of the Council's temporary accommodation is not confidential. This is particularly the case at present under the 'Everyone In' policy, where the Council is relying on a small number of providers who can offer the requisite individual bedrooms and washing facilities to prevent the spread of Covid. Further, this accommodation is not suitable for families. However, the County Council is in the process of developing three additional 'places of safety' to the two that currently exist, individual properties to act as temporary accommodation which are capable of housing families and not just individuals. At present, those with no recourse to public funds are being temporarily accommodated through the Everyone In policy, but this situation is likely, when the pandemic situation eases, to reverse.
120. On the subject of 'places of safety' the Review Group makes a recommendation. Places of safety are preferable to refuges in a number of ways. Firstly, they are a much more stable environment for families to move to; those fleeing domestic abuse to a refuge are expected to share space with other families who have also undergone significant trauma. Sharing living space is challenging at the best of times, and the situations leading to refuge accommodation could not be described as that. A place of safety is particularly valuable for those with religious or cultural needs, such as Sabbath rituals and strictures, or prohibitions on the consumption of alcohol. In addition, places of safety can accommodate males, whereas some refuges will not cater for male children over 12 and typically do not accept adult men. Finally, although seemingly small, for some, the welfare of pets can actually be sufficient to make victims stay with a perpetrator.
121. For the reasons above, the Review Group is strongly in support of additional development of places of safety and welcomes the news that ODAS are in the process of working with the County Council to identify three additional homes, which would take the number to 5 in total. As one of the major house-builders and house owners in the City, the Review Group is keen that the Council work with ODAS and the County Council to explore whether any of its own current or future stock would be suitable to be made into a 'place of safety'.

Recommendation 9: That the Council continues to work with ODAS and the County Council to explore the suitability of its own current or future housing stock being recommissioned as a 'place of safety'

122. In discussion of 'places of safety' a concern was raised in relation to a County-Council run housing project for young mothers on Bullingdon Road. Once it had become known that vulnerable women were living there, the site attracted a lot of men seeking to prey on the residents. The Review Group both recommends that this is brought up with the County Council, but also that steps are taken with 'places of safety' to ensure that they do not become well-known as a site for housing vulnerable women.

Recommendation 10: That the Council contacts the County Council with its concerns over the safety of vulnerable women from predatory behaviour by men at the Bullingdon Road Young Mothers project.

Recommendation 11: That the Council seeks that steps are taken to ensure that houses designated as 'places of safety' do not become well-known as such and a target for predatory behaviour.

123. Returning to the ways the Council can help individuals through the Housing Options team, those who are happy to move to a property in the private rented sector may be given support to do so, with the Council providing support to find suitable properties, and also providing financial assistance with the deposit or advance rent.

124. For those who wish to stay in their property, a referral to the Sanctuary Scheme can be made to 'target harden' the property (more info below).

125. Individuals presenting with a risk of homelessness, so long as they meet the eligibility criteria, will be offered support with being registered on the Housing Register, or if they are already on it, support with moving. The way that this relates to those fleeing domestic abuse is detailed in the section below.

126. One issue questioned by the Review Group was the cause of people applying for a Housing Options assessment, but then not proceeding to a homelessness application, and whether that was suggestive of an issue causing unnecessary vulnerability to those facing domestic abuse. It was suggested to the Review Group that this was unlikely to be the case. Reasons for not progressing are multiple. Some simply want to know their options, others will prefer to apply for housing elsewhere, referrals to the Sanctuary Scheme would not be counted as proceeding but would still be a positive outcome.

Allocations

127. The Council's Allocations Scheme is used to assess housing need and to prioritise between the needs of different households for the limited pool of social housing as it

becomes available. Tom Porter, Allocations Manager, spoke to the Review Group on how the Council's scheme works in relation to housing domestic abuse victims.²²

128. The Oxford Register for Affordable Housing covers, with some very minor exceptions related to older-people's housing, access to all social housing in Oxford – Council properties and those provided by Registered Social Landlords. The Housing Register is managed by Oxford City Council, which applies the Allocations Scheme to determine priority for housing.
129. Within the Housing Register there exist three different housing lists: the homeless list, for those the Council has a statutory duty to house and are waiting in temporary accommodation, the transfers list, for those within the City wishing to move house, and the general list, for those who are not included in the other two. It is possible for individuals in refuges, if they are not deemed homeless (for example, if they are fleeing domestic abuse but are a home owner), to be placed on the general list.
130. As with others seeking to be put on the Housing Register, those fleeing domestic abuse must meet the eligibility criteria. Eligibility is based on immigration status; those with no recourse to public funds are unable to be put on the Housing Register. In addition to eligibility criteria, qualifying criteria are usually imposed, such as having a local connection, having less than £16k in savings, and not being responsible for anti-social behaviour or arrears.²³ However, in the case of domestic abuse these can be waived.²⁴ This means, for example, that a victim of domestic abuse is not prevented from finding accommodation elsewhere because the abuser has developed debts on their behalf. The Council tends to be more accommodating and applies exceptions more readily than some of the other Registered Social Landlords locally, particularly around rent.
131. As part of an individual's application to go onto the Housing Register, the urgency of their housing need is assessed. The basis for this assessment is laid down in legislation which identifies 'reasonable preference groups' who hold particular needs for housing. Individuals facing domestic abuse tend to fall into two of these groups, either being homeless or facing homelessness, or needing to move due to health or social and welfare grounds.
132. As the means of prioritisation, those applying to go onto the Housing Register will have their housing need banded, with the majority falling into Band 5 (low or no priority need) and very few being placed in Band 1 (exceptional need). Domestic abuse does not automatically correspond to a specific band, but instead the level of risk is assessed on the facts of the case. Generally speaking, those who are moved into temporary

²² Though by law the Council must have an Allocation Scheme, councils have some flexibility over how it operates, meaning that there are similar but not identical approaches between Councils.

²³ Having a local connection is also the way that a person fleeing domestic abuse to Oxford can move to the City, and is dealt with the same way through the Allocations Scheme.

²⁴ Indeed, for reasons of risk the local connection criterion cannot be applied in domestic abuse cases.

accommodation are placed in Band 3. The Council does have, for those who are in higher priority bands, the ability to make a direct match, which enables it to avoid the delay of the Choice Based Letting system. This can be particularly useful for high-risk individuals with uncommon housing requirements, such as five bedroom houses.

133. Although a general recommendation has been made about the Council adopting the definition of domestic abuse as contained within the Domestic Abuse Bill, the Review Group is keen to point out a good example of the changes that need to be made. The current Allocations Policy makes reference to domestic violence, but domestic abuse is far broader than just violence. The Review Group considers this to be an important omission; non-violent forms of abuse can have a compounding effect on risk levels. An individual with no access to their money is more vulnerable than one with money, such that they are more likely to stay with someone even if they do become violent. Embedding the broader definition of domestic abuse is key to ensuring that the systems that are in place to support vulnerable people do not accidentally exclude them through poor definitions.

Recommendation 12: That the Council refreshes its allocations scheme to change references from 'domestic violence' to 'domestic abuse', and that when it is adopted as law, the definition of domestic abuse as included within the Domestic Abuse Bill be included as an 'exceptional circumstance' in relation to housing prioritisation.

134. A further issue relating to the Council's allocations scheme arises from the report referenced in Part 1 on the Whole Housing Approach. The report cites the fact that a dearth of move-on accommodation is a contributor to the halving of available places for women in refuges. Though refuges meet the basic threshold of being a place of safety, they are not an environment from which women (and children) can begin to rebuild. Thus, insufficient move-on accommodation is negative in two ways, preventing those who need a place of safety from accessing it, and trapping those who have stabilised sufficiently to move on. The Review Group considers, therefore, that whilst demand for refuges remain high, the Council should increase the priority for move-on from refuge accommodation of women (and in this case it will be only women) who have been facing domestic abuse.

Recommendation 13: That the Council increases the priority for move-on accommodation of women who have been facing domestic abuse for as long as the availability of refuge provision remains historically further beyond supply.

135. One issue discussed at length by the Review Group was the process of those wishing to move away from Oxford, and switch to a different area. In a direct swap scenario, where tenants from different areas simply switch houses, this presents a high risk that a perpetrator will be able to find out where their victim has moved to by exerting pressure on the new tenants. In order to obviate this risk, a chain of swaps is required whereby

person A moves into person B's house, person B into person C's, and person C into person A's. The Review Group was assured that this is routinely offered, though it can take longer to organise.

Domestic Abuse within Council Properties

136. Ann Phillips, Tenancy Management Manager, briefed the Review Group on how the Council manages the housing issues arising from a report of domestic abuse. When domestic abuse is reported to the Council a DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence) assessment is likely (though not always) undertaken in order to determine the level of risk the individual faces, and to ensure that all relevant other bodies are involved in the case.
137. Reports of domestic abuse by Council tenants are passed to the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour team, who are responsible for investigating reports of domestic abuse and taking enforcement action against a perpetrator in the non-criminal sphere. Where necessary, a perpetrator can be evicted on the basis of the Council's standard tenancy agreement terms, which allows the Council to seek possession of the property on the basis of a breach, including the clause 'You must not assault, threaten or harass any person living with you or sexually harass or emotionally abuse them or cause psychological harm, such that the person can no longer live peacefully in the Property.' This however, is rare in that it requires the consent of the other party who, despite the abuse, may not be ready to make that step. The threshold for the court to grant the Council possession is also high.
138. The role of the Tenancy Management team is to assist the tenant to find alternative accommodation (if that is their wish) or emergency temporary accommodation if this is recommended by the Police. They will arrange removals and any other practical help, with furnishings or assistance with utilities that they may require.
139. The suite of options the Council can provide to someone after facing domestic abuse regarding their housing situation is dependent on whether the individual has a tenancy for the property in which they are living and, if so, whether they occupy the property as a sole tenant or a joint tenant.
140. For those living in a property with no tenancy, the Council's options are fairly limited. Refuge options will be explored, though these are not always the best option. Aside from this, the Council will look at whether family or friends are able to accommodate the individual, or whether a homelessness application should be made, in area or elsewhere.
141. The task is simplest for those who hold sole tenancies to the properties which they occupy. The Council is able to offer to facilitate a move to an alternative property (again, either in or out of area), or is otherwise able to secure the property through the Sanctuary Scheme (more details below).

142. For those victims who held a joint tenancy with the perpetrator, it is possible for the victim to remain in the property. The Council can rely on the McGrady principle²⁵ to ask the court to amend the tenancy from a joint tenancy into a sole tenancy. However, practically, it is often easier to encourage the tenant to give notice to end their tenancy, and then reallocate the same property to them under a new tenancy.
143. On the basis of this, the Review Group's primary focus in discussion was over how the decision of whether to provide a property on a sole tenancy basis or a joint tenancy basis was made. Victims of domestic abuse face greater difficulty in extricating themselves from abusive situations if they have nowhere else to go and have no way to force their abuser out of the property in which they are living, suggesting that ensuring joint tenancies were the norm would reduce risk. The reality, in fact, is not so simple. The gender breakdown of sole tenants weighs heavily towards women, largely a function of the priority given to single mothers for housing. For these women, having sole tenancies rather than joint tenancies affords an additional level of protection in that they can secure their own home with greater ease if an abusive situation arises. Whilst joint tenancies do bring greater resilience to those with none, they do also dilute the protections of those who give up their sole tenancy. The challenge, therefore, is to identify those who are vulnerable and would benefit from the increased protection of a joint tenancy rather than to pursue a general drive towards expanding joint tenancies.
144. In general, it is rare, if two people plan to live in a home together, that the Council will grant a sole tenancy to one individual or the other. The key exception is when one person, more often a female, has no recourse to public funds and is therefore not eligible to be a tenant on a publicly-funded property. It is possible to change a tenancy agreement with the agreement of the tenant to reflect new circumstances, such as the resolution of a person's immigration status. However, proactively identifying these changes in circumstance is a challenge for the Council. Tenancy update visits do occur, but the size of the Council's housing stock relative to the resource available to make such visits makes this inefficient to rely on. A further factor which makes this difficult is GDPR, and restrictions on internal information sharing. A tenant whose status has changed may well contact the Council and inform them, for example, that their immigration status (and therefore benefit status) has changed. Their assumption is that the Council is able to share this information freely internally, and that they have informed the Council.
145. Related to information sharing was a concern over how precautions over vulnerability could be communicated between departments. The example explored being the situation in which a joint tenancy in which there had been domestic abuse and the victim had moved away, whether the Council would be in danger of inadvertently sharing the victim's new address with their abuser via the rent statement. The risk of such

²⁵ Arising from the case McGrady vs London Borough of Greenwich 1982

inadvertent sharing is magnified by the adoption the QL system, which integrates the work of more teams. At present, teams are notified by the Tenancy Management team not to share address details, but without being given the reason why. The new QL system will also allow a person to be flagged as vulnerable, without giving the exact reason why. The particular risk of inadvertent sharing of addresses through rent statements is also managed at source, by changing the address on the file to St Aldate's Chambers; rent statements are automatically generated and sent out by an external company and posting them to St Aldate's Chambers means they get into the hands of people who know how to process the information without breaching confidentiality.

146. There exists, therefore, a tension. On the one hand, in order to be able to support vulnerable people to become more secure by proactively presenting the option of joint tenancies, there needs to be a free flow of information between departments. On the other hand, greater flows of information within an automated system carry risks of inadvertent oversharing. This is a complex topic, which is beyond the Review Group's capacity to solve. However, the Review Group is pleased to hear that discussions are already taking place on how to manage this tension.

Other Housing Related Recommendations

147. Below are a number of other recommendations pertinent to the housing of victims of domestic abuse which arose of out of the Review Group's discussions with local providers of services, rather than the Council's officers.

148. Firstly, in light of the feedback from both Reducing the Risk and Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service, who offer support to those at high and medium risk from domestic abuse, both highlighted that housing was the single biggest area of difficulty for them in supporting their clients to better outcomes. The Review Group recognises that the problem cited around move-on housing does exist, but also notes that the Council has agreed to a programme in which its housing stock will expand by 15% over the next decade but makes some recommendations in the interim. Its greater concerns are over reports of the regularity with which perpetrators remain in the property, and the apparent disconnection whereby the Council is reported not to offer domestic abuse victims alternative accommodation in the City.

149. Regarding the first of these issues, the Review Group notes that this is a common problem. As stated in the Whole Housing Approach report 'Housing providers play a key role in holding perpetrators to account. To date, our work has focused on social housing and the positive engagement and enforcement activities available to them. Research by Henderson showed that a high proportion of housing providers include perpetration of domestic abuse as a tenancy breach (72.6%)... Despite the high percentage of housing providers including perpetration of domestic abuse as a tenancy breach, just over half (53.8%) of respondents' organisations had taken any action against perpetrators of abuse, highlighting a gap between policy and action.' (p.28).

150. Having reviewed the tenancy agreements made by the Council, the Review Group is of the view that they are already sufficiently robust to allow the Council to seek possession on the grounds of domestic abuse. The issue is that the Council does not use its power regularly, rather than the powers being insufficient. The rarity of this happening may largely be not the responsibility of the Council; such an action will only be taken with the support of the victim, and this can often be withheld. Nevertheless, the fact that this is an issue recognised by the local specialist support providers indicates some degree of residual mismatch between what is wanted and what is delivered. One alternative to eviction is to seek an injunction against the perpetrator coming to the house. This has the benefit of action being brought on behalf of individuals outside the domestically abusive household (neighbours, for example). For those victims who are not ready to seek the eviction of their abuser, in all likelihood ending their relationship, an injunction makes the home a safe space but allows the relationship to continue.

151. The Review Group considers that the default position should be that any victim adjudged to be at high risk needs protection, and a safe home environment. It feels that the Council should, in these situations, use its powers to create this safe environment unless there are overriding reasons not to.

Recommendation 14: That in the absence of other mitigating factors, the Council will pursue a policy of seeking to remove a perpetrator from the home in situations where a perpetrator is adjudged to be a high risk to the victim.

152. This being said, the Review Group recognises that it has not had legal opinion on the robustness of the tenancy agreement for putting it to the Review Group's suggested purpose, and would therefore welcome that it be reviewed. It would recommend that any strengthened text is made available to local housing associations and letting agents, to allow free adoption of these powers by non-Council landlords.

Recommendation 15: That the Council reviews the strength of the clause(s) regarding anti-social behaviour and domestic abuse in Council tenancies and provides a model paragraph for inclusion in tenancies let via housing associations/private landlords with the aim to make it easier to evict tenants who perpetrate domestic abuse.

153. One means by which the Council could achieve the above (and a lot more besides) is through seeking accreditation from the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, as referenced in Part 1. The Henderson report referred to in para 149 states that 'housing providers have found that they are in a better position to challenge and support perpetrators through receiving training and DAHA accreditation'.

154. The Review Group is fully supportive of the Council seeking accreditation, and indeed would do so on this ground alone. However, the feedback of the Review Group's external witnesses has been unanimous in highlighting the multiple ways in which housing can fail

to meet the needs of domestic abuse victims at best, and be actively hostile and inflict great trauma to those already vulnerable, at worst. This Review Group has had some opportunity to look into issues, but it recognises its own limitations of knowledge and resource. It would welcome a far more comprehensive look at the issue by professionals in the area, the achievement of which would put the Council as one of fewer than ten DAHA accredited Councils in the country.

Recommendation 16: That the Council seeks DAHA accreditation for its housing services.

155. If the Council were to proceed with DAHA accreditation the recommendations below may be rendered unnecessary. Alternatively, they may form part of the way the Council is awarded accreditation. Regardless of which obtains, the Review Group's observations and recommendations are included for completeness.
156. The other area brought up by the Review Group's local external witnesses is the regularity with which the wishes of the victims of domestic abuse are overridden by concerns over safety. As previously mentioned, the Review Group was assured that this issue was not Council policy, which the Review Group welcomes. Nevertheless, it is a problem reported by both of the main support agencies for domestic abuse locally. Having good policy counts for very little if it is not delivered on the front line.
157. The Review Group does note that during the meeting at which Reducing the Risk and Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service attended it was agreed to set up a meeting to discuss these issues. The Review Group welcomes this openness to discussion. This meeting has not, however, taken place. In actual fact, this is beneficial. The Review Group would welcome broader discussion and coordination between the Council and specialist domestic abuse agencies to improve services than to focus simply on this issue. The Council has recently appointed a Domestic Abuse Specialist worker, part of whose role is to explore and map in detail the pathways and issues experienced by those victims of domestic abuse who engage with the Council. This work would create a more thorough and comprehensive framework for closer working than addressing one specific issue. It is likely also that if the Council does seek DAHA accreditation, partnership working and coordination would be an issue which it would have to consider, which also suggests that there is benefit to taking the slower but more comprehensive approach.

Recommendation 17: That the Council, once the work of its Domestic Abuse Specialist in mapping pathways and experiences of victims who engage with the Council's work is complete, engages closely with specialist domestic abuse support providers to improve the outcomes and experience of victims in their interaction with the Council.

158. A further issue to flag, which is liable to be raised by DAHA accreditation, is whether the particular stresses and challenges domestic abuse puts on its victims means that the

standard processes for managing housing issues are unlikely ever to be sufficiently flexible. In that case, it may be that in the same way that the Council has a dedicated pathway for the management of people reporting as homeless, it should have a set of processes which are designed solely to manage sensitively and effectively the challenges that domestic abuse creates. Whilst further discussion with other key stakeholders as detailed above will inform that judgement, the Review Group's view is that such an approach is warranted, though as stated, it may be subsumed into the wider work necessary for DAHA accreditation.

Recommendation 18: That the Council develops a clear domestic abuse pathway for managing housing of domestic abuse victims

159. A final point made to the Review Group by one of its other external witnesses, AFiUK, is one upon which the Review Group wishes to see action. As mentioned previously, ethnically diverse victims of domestic abuse can end up relocating to places which have few cultural support networks. Whilst they are safe from danger, through no fault of their own many find themselves in a situation in which they need to recover from a traumatic experience without culturally-relevant support. Processing one's experience with others is, for example, much more difficult in a foreign language than in one's own. The Review Group considers that it would not be a significant amount of work to take steps to ensure that the suggested move location is one with culturally appropriate support.

Recommendation 19: That the Council takes proactive steps to ensure appropriate cultural support is available to individuals moving out of Oxford.

Sanctuary Scheme

160. As mentioned above, the Council runs Sanctuary Scheme. Relative to Councils elsewhere it is given a higher degree of prominence in that it has a dedicated officer to manage it. This results of this investment are evident in the feedback received by the Review Group's external witnesses, with Reducing the Risk viewing it as 'gold standard' and 'the best' and ODAS concurring.
161. The scheme offers a free 'target hardening' service for anybody who has been subject to domestic abuse once the perpetrator has moved out, as well as to those who have suffered child sexual exploitation or other sexual abuse or been stalked. Target hardening identifies measures that can be undertaken to the property to ensure that they are secure, and that threatened individuals can be safe from the perpetrator in their own homes. This work can vary from simply changing locks to more significant works to install CCTV, secure doors and windows to adding anti-climb fencing or putting in fire-proof letterboxes.
162. The scheme accepts referrals from the police, social care or other domestic abuse services, as well as self-referrals. In the last year 121 referrals have been received with approximately 60% of referees holding Council tenancies, 30% living in properties owned

by other registered social landlords, 9% in private rented accommodation and 1% homeowners. The main demographic group using the service are women between the ages of 25 and 55, with 57% being white and 47% from BAME communities. This indicates that the scheme's reach into BAME communities is good; proportionally more are accessing the service than are present in the general population.

163. The work undertaken can vary based on the homeowner. The Council, for example, has an agreement with ODS to undertake the works, but private landlords may be unwilling to pay for increased safety measures. In these cases, work may be limited to those things which are low cost.

164. For this reason or other, practical, reasons the Sanctuary Scheme can run an assessment and conclude that, even with an intervention, the level of threat to the person living at the property remains too high. In that instance, instead of undertaking work to the property the scheme will work with colleagues to rehouse the threatened individual(s). The passing of the Domestic Abuse Bill will make this a more regular proposition. At the moment, those who hold a secure tenancy to a property forfeit that secure tenancy if they move into another property, or even into a refuge. This can have the effect of encouraging individuals to stay in higher risk situations because they do not wish to lose their valuable secure tenancy. In the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill, secure tenancies will become transferable when moving owing to domestic abuse, reducing the barriers to moving away from danger.

165. A real-life case study of the work undertaken by the scheme is below.

“The Sanctuary Scheme received a referral from the National Crime Agency based on a credible death threat against a mother and her parents. The perpetrator of the threat was already in prison for attempted murder, but the Police believed a second attempt was being planned by an associate in the community. Despite lockdown, Council departments worked hard together to get the mother and child moved, along with her parents, into two properties within 48 hours. Security assessments for the new properties were undertaken over video, and ODS staff agreed to undertake works to make them secure despite the lockdown.”

166. The Review Group welcomes the work of the Sanctuary Scheme as a life-saving service provided by the Council and only has one recommendation to make. This is simply that as vital as it is, the service is currently only funded year on year. The Review Group is mindful that the window for influencing the 2021/22 budget has passed, and that an election is scheduled before the next budget. Nevertheless, it wishes to make a clear recommendation that it considers this work to be absolutely vital, and that the Council should commit to funding the scheme for the duration of the next Medium Term Financial Strategy period of four years.

Recommendation 20: That the Council includes within its budget provision for the cost of the Sanctuary Scheme for the duration of the next Medium Term Financial Plan, rather than reconfirming its funding year on year.

Part 5: Specific Issues for Ethnic Minority Victims

167. Gaining a granular understanding of the issues faced by members of the BAME community would have taken more time than was available to the Review Group. In March 2020, however, the Thames Valley BAMER (Black, Asian, Minority-Ethnic and Refugee) Project concluded. The two-year project was funded by the Home Office and worked across nine local authorities (including Oxford City Council) as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner in the Thames Valley. The project sought to identify the barriers experienced by women from ethnic minority communities who are subjected to abuse or violence (including domestic abuse) when needing to access support, and to identify lessons for improving service responses. In October 2020 the findings of the project were published in a report. This report, in addition to the learning provided by the Group's external expert witnesses, has been used as the basic framework for guiding the Review Group's exploration around the specific challenges faced by ethnically diverse communities regarding domestic abuse.

168. The executive summary of this report is available as Appendix 5A to this report, and the full report as Appendix 5B.

Thames Valley BAMER Project Report Summary

169. An excerpted list of the issues identified in the report's executive summary is detailed below as context for the Review Group's own discussion.

Universal credit

The single payment policy of universal credit is disempowering to women whose spouses are already financially controlling and prevents any opportunity to develop the financial independence required to escape abuse.

Communication

Availability and capacity of BAMER Support Workers, and of professionals in other agencies can lead to delays and mis-timings in communication. This is especially true when women experiencing abuse through controlling behaviour often have very narrow windows of opportunity to be in contact with professionals.

Emergency accommodation

The availability and timeliness of access to emergency accommodation is limited and this presents significant barriers and risks to women who may choose to remain in an abusive situation because accommodation is not accessible. When available, accommodation may not be culturally appropriate, creating the same dilemma for women from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Understanding and assessing risk for women from ethnically diverse backgrounds

BAMER Support Workers found that agencies undertaking DASH RIC assessments with women from ethnically diverse backgrounds would often miss or misunderstand information which was relevant to risk for the individual concerned due to a lack of cultural awareness. Pre-existing risks had gone unseen by agencies involved; this may be due to women not feeling safe to disclose to professionals they did not trust, or they disclosed in a way that is not interpreted in the way they intend by professionals from white Western culture. This could result in missed opportunities to intervene and provide appropriate safety planning at the earliest stage, requiring remedial work from BAMER Support Workers.

Interpreting services

The use of non-independent (family or local community member) interpreters is common amongst some agencies and is problematic for the disclosure of abuse or discussion of any sensitive topics. When professional interpreters are used nuances of a narrative can still be missed, either due the service being accessed over the phone instead of face-to-face, or because of colloquial differences in language. Cost is often a factor in agency decisions about use of interpreters.

Working with clients without recourse to public funds

Support services and other resources (e.g. housing) are severely limited for women with no recourse to public funds, which creates significant vulnerabilities for women experiencing violence or abuse whilst in this situation. Where resources are available, access to them is often complex and or time-consuming, each compounding the vulnerability and risk faced by women in these scenarios.

Scarcity of services and community groups

The mapping exercise found there are few services in the Thames Valley specialising in issues experienced by women from ethnic minority communities. Those addressing violence and abuse do not have specialist BAMER Workers (except for within this project), although they do offer support around honour-based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. There are skilled specialised organisations operating at a national level, but there remains a significant gap for women needing to access local specialist services.

The mapping of community groups proved challenging, as they often exist as informal groups with no 'formal' footprint, e.g. offices, website, public accounts etc. Some groups that were identified did not wish to engage with the project, and more are believed to exist than those identified.

Funding issues

Funding in the VAWG sector is scarce, and for minority groups within that, even scarcer. Where funding is available, capacity and sustainability are often significant issues, and resources such as interpreter services or translated written materials are often not acknowledged/permitted in grants and commissioned services. Additionally, community groups also face funding issues with uncertain futures.

170. Whilst clearly all the topics identified are important, the combination of the Council's responsibilities, the time constraints faced and focus of feedback from external witnesses mean that the primary direction of the Review Group's work in this area has been around ESOL and those with no recourse to public funds. The Review Group does address funding issues also, but as part of its consideration of grant funding.

English as a Second or Other Language

171. With its responsibility for adult learning and its role as the lead commissioner for domestic abuse services, the primary responsibility for translation and interpretation services in relation to domestic abuse victims falls with the County Council. The City Council, for its own services is well equipped, using the same company as the BBC. This being the case, the Review Group is of the view that there is little that the City Council should be doing in direct response to interpretation and translation issues, but that it can and should contribute indirectly by mitigating and reducing the barriers experienced by those who do not speak English, or do so as a second language.
172. Two key recommendation suggested by Oxford Against Cutting to the Review Group concerned the importance of running initiatives which empower potential victims and promoting access amongst BAME communities to specialist services and raising awareness of what is on offer. Both are issues which have language as a core component.
173. To an extent, the Council does already run programmes which empower potential victims through its grants programme. The Youth Ambition Programme is an example of this. Likewise, it is pursuing an action plan to increase the diversity of its workforce, which is under-represented by women at the higher grades, and ethnically diverse communities throughout. As referenced above, the funding (such as it is) for English language classes is available to the County Council, meaning that it is not the suggestion of the Review Group that further classes be run by the City Council. Where the Council is well situated to help is in publication and its links with community groups through its grant funding programme and its community centre provision. At such time as lockdown measures are eased sufficiently to allow the return to community centres, the Review Group would wish to see a mapping and communication exercise to be undertaken to present appropriately the opportunities for ESOL learning in the City at the Council's community centres, and for the same information to be sent to community groups with which the Council has direct contact.

Recommendation 21: That the Council runs a mapping and awareness-raising exercise of the opportunities in Oxford for ESOL classes, aimed particularly at its community centres users and grant recipients.

174. Along a similar line, the Review Group wishes to highlight the good working relationship the Council has with supporting Oxford Against Cutting to promote its information campaigns. Strong cross-working is reported, not only by those directly engaged with domestic abuse-related issues, but even extends to the post room, where the Council supports their work through providing competitive posting rates.
175. Given the importance of language as a barrier for non-native English speakers in accessing services, it is perhaps unsurprising that the BAED Worlds Group, which looks specifically at barriers for ethnic minorities in accessing domestic abuse services, is devoting a significant amount of its attention to the issue of interpretation and translation.

176. Although it is important that professional translators and interpreters be available in the appropriate situations, community translation services are still of value. The Review Group believes that the County Council previously paid to train 14 community interpreters covering 14 languages, but that this resource is not currently being used. The Review Group would like to see whether this source of translation and interpretation services, which has already been paid for, might be brought back into use.

Recommendation 22: That the Council raises with the BAED Worlds Group, including the County Council representative, the existence of 14 previously trained community interpreters, with a view to investigating whether and how their services may be used to improve access for non-native English speakers to domestic-abuse related support.

177. Although publicising existing language classes and maximising uptake by those who would benefit is clearly a good thing, what it does not confront is the paucity of classes that are available in the first place. In the decade from 2008 to 2018, government spending on providing ESOL courses fell by over 60%.²⁶ Whilst such classes are desirable on wider integration grounds, as the external witnesses to the Review Group shared, the inability to speak English erects huge barriers to victims in escaping their abusers. The Review Group is of the view that this is a fundamental error of policy by the government, one which costs lives. It asks, therefore, that the Leader write to the Minister for Communities, Housing and Local Government to lobby for an increase in ESOL funding.

Recommendation 23: That the Leader writes to the minister at MCHLG to highlight the impact that the huge cuts to English languages classes have on domestic abuse victims.

No Recourse to Public Funds

178. One particular issue of concern to the Review Group was over whether victims of domestic abuse were having their data shared by the Police with immigration officials when seeking help, and the barriers that would be creating for those with insecure immigration status in seeking help.

179. One particular concern of the Review Group derived from a super-complaint lodged against the Police for sharing immigration status information captured from individuals when seeking safety from domestic abuse by Liberty and the Southall Black Sisters. The effect of this activity was creating a significant barrier to those with insecure immigration status from seeking help. In December 2020 the Police Inspectorate upheld the complaint, recognising that ‘the UK aspires to be a humane, liberal democracy where the criminal justice system does not punish people for being victims but recognises and

²⁶ <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/new-research-shows-refugees-suffering-from-lack-of-english-classes-despite-strong-public-support-for-action-by-government/>

protects them. Government policy is clear that victims of crime should be treated without discrimination. We agree with Liberty and Southall Black Sisters that harm is currently being caused to the public interest and that this needs to be addressed.’ A review has been recommended to bring clarity on how best to achieve this.

180. Within the super-complaint it was recognised that across different police forces approaches varied, and it was unclear where the lines were. The Review Group has contacted Thames Valley Police, and the Domestic Abuse Investigation Unit in Oxford has confirmed that Thames Valley Police ‘does not routinely ask victims. It is a long-standing concern and we are not aware of any routine sharing of victim details with the Home Office’. Thames Valley Police also recognised the dissuasive effect sharing would have on those with no recourse to public funds if information-sharing on immigration status were to be routinely passed on.
181. The Review Group welcomes the fact that Thames Valley Police are not erecting immigration-related barriers to those with no recourse to public funds from seeking help when facing domestic abuse. However, it is concerned that public perception, particularly amongst those who have no recourse to public funds, is likely to have been impacted by such stories, with a possible spill-over into wider distrust of public bodies generally, including the Council. The Review Group is keen, therefore, that in a similar way to what it has done with people seeking temporary accommodation from rough sleeping during the ‘Everyone In’ policy, the Council makes an unambiguous statement that seeking support relating to domestic abuse will not mean the sharing of immigration status details with the Home Office and publicises that statement to relevant community groups locally.

Recommendation 24: That the Council makes a public statement confirming that it will not share immigration status information with the Home Office when individuals come forward for support with domestic abuse, and that it takes steps to publicise this amongst relevant community groups locally.

182. The two refuges in Oxfordshire do not accept people with no recourse to public funds. At present, the Council is in receipt of unclear advice from MHCLG over providing temporary accommodation to those with no recourse to public funds through the ‘Everyone In’ policy. It is doing so, but as the pandemic eases it likely that the status quo ante will resume and it will cease to be able to do so. When that happens, the Council will cease to be allowed to provide basic housing support for those with no recourse to public funds, including those made homeless owing to domestic abuse.
183. Being aware of the approaching situation in which the Council will be unable to support with housing those rough sleepers who have no recourse to public funds, the Council has been working to develop alternative solutions. Although not agreed, the Council has been working with a group of charities, faith groups and benefactors to seek to develop a system of support outside of the Council to ensure a safety-net exists for those to whom the Council is unable to provide support. The Review Group is in complete agreement with this approach but recognises that those made homeless fleeing

domestic abuse are a subset of homeless people, and have a set of particular needs that would not be met by a generic service. It seeks, therefore, that as this work around wider support for those with no recourse to public funds is developed, that the Council seek that within the broader provision, the specific needs of those fleeing from domestic abuse are incorporated.

Recommendation 25: That the Council, in the development of networks to support homeless people with no recourse to public funds, ensures that the remit is extended to ensure the specific needs of those made homeless from fleeing domestic abuse are incorporated.

184. One issue that was raised to the Review Group by Manchester City Council Councillor Amna Abdullatif was that, perhaps uniquely, Manchester City Council has a fund available to support those with no recourse to public funds. The terms of the fund are highly restrictive, with support only available to the destitute. Nevertheless, the fund enables support for legal advice surrounding immigration issues, which can be a stepping-stone for access to other forms of support. The Review Group is mindful of the Council's financial situation following Covid, but with the need for the support available to be very restrictive, the cost may not be high. Consequently, it seeks that the Council find out more, with a view to making a future decision on whether to follow Manchester City Council's lead when an informed decision can be made.

Recommendation 26: That the Council contacts Manchester City Council to understand the overall cost of providing support for those with no recourse to public funds who are in destitution.

185. Another local authority area identified as providing a fuller support service for those with no recourse to public funds is Slough, where the MP's office and the Council's work are closely integrated to provide a broader spectrum of support. The Review Group would encourage that the Council investigates this further.

Recommendation 27: That the Council investigates how Slough Borough Council offer support to those with no recourse to public funds.

186. Though the Review Group makes a number of recommendations on how to mitigate the particular challenges faced by those individuals with no recourse to public funds when they are facing domestic abuse, the biggest problem lies in the policy itself, a policy which is set by national government. This policy creates huge and unnecessary barriers to individuals who are experiencing domestic abuse from leaving their situation, some of whom do not survive. For individuals in this situation, changing this policy is literally a matter of life and death. The Review Group notes that the Council has already committed to being an anti-racist City through a motion passed on 22 July 2019, and that it has previously taken steps to protect the welfare of those with no recourse to public funds, such as making clear that information given during homelessness support will not be shared with immigration officers. The resounding feedback of those external witnesses

has been of the immense suffering this policy brings, and the Review Group encourages the Council to work with participants of this Review Group and any other relevant local and national agencies to lobby government for an exemption from the no recourse to public funds rules for those experiencing domestic abuse.

Recommendation 28: That the Council works with relevant local and national organisations to lobby government for an exemption to allow those experiencing domestic abuse with no recourse to public funds to access public support.

187. With national policy being deeply antagonistic to the needs of those with no recourse to public funds, options for supporting this group of people are limited, despite a clear need. Victims of domestic abuse with no recourse to public funds face no less severe abuse than others, yet they must do so without the safety-net of access to alternative housing, benefits, and often fears relating to immigration-related detainment or deportation and or language difficulties. The Review Group's recommendations above reflect the limited space for manoeuvre dictated by national policy. One suggestion, however, which the Review Group supports, is the concept of flexible payments, as referred to in Part 1. The Review Group does not know why such payments can legally be made to support those with no recourse to public funds whilst others cannot. However, prima facie, this option affords the Council a flexible means to make direct interventions to support those with no recourse to public funds. With the average payout made under such schemes being between £600 and £800, the cost need not be unduly burdensome. In light of the paucity of other forms of support for those with no recourse to public funds, the Review Group strongly recommends further investigation to understand the legality and costs surrounding such a scheme, with a strong recommendation that one be established if possible.

Recommendation 29: That the Council investigates the legalities and cost of implementing a Flexible Funding scheme, with a view to one being established if practicable and legal.

Part 6: Leveraging Council Spending on Grants and Procurement

188. Following a decade in which local government has been subject to major funding reforms and spending power has reduced substantially, the Council is unusual in the quantity of grant provision it makes locally to the third sector. This provision, however, is dwarfed by the Council's spending procurement. With its grants and procurement spending, the Council has a degree of influence, an influence which it can use to further its priorities. On the basis of this, the Review Group explored how the Council might leverage its spending to reduce domestic abuse.

Grant Funding

189. Oxford City Council Grants Officer, Lydia Ng, made a presentation to the Review Group on the contribution of the Council's grants programme towards preventing domestic abuse or supporting its survivors.
190. The City Council commits over £1.5M in community grants every year. A significant portion of this amount is committed through the commissioning streams, and the non-commissioned open-bidding programme. The activities that the Council is willing to fund through these programmes is set out in the prospectus, the most recent of which is for 2016-20 – this ties the grant funding priorities to those of the wider Council Strategy. The prospectus then forms the criteria for the different programmes.

Specific Funding

191. Under the Council Strategy's Strong and Active Communities priority, the Oxford Community Safety Plan is referenced as a key area to be supported through the funding streams. This plan includes protection from "interpersonal abuse and exploitation, including sexual and domestic abuse, human trafficking, sex working and child sexual exploitation" and the prospectus dictates that the Council is willing to fund organisations that "respond to local concerns and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour through projects providing help and assistance to victims and survivors of sexual and domestic violence, sex working and child sexual exploitation". Grant assessment panels, therefore, usually include a representative from the Community Safety Team and the Council's Domestic Abuse Lead, Liz Jones, will have sight of the lists of applicants.
192. In addition to funding via this stream, the Council also has a £61k pot available within the Community Safety commissioning stream. Of this, £35k – over half - is pooled with funding from other Oxfordshire District Councils, the County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the funding of domestic abuse services across Oxfordshire. For this relatively small sum, the Council derives a lot of value. A2Dominion is the primary organisation contracted in Oxfordshire to deliver domestic abuse services. As part of this service they provide
- A countywide helpline (accessible by phone and email) for members of the public and professionals, which acts as a single point of access for all domestic abuse specialist services in Oxfordshire, including referral into MARAC where necessary;
 - Domestic abuse outreach service for the county for medium risk victims;
 - Refuges: there are 16 refuge places across two properties in the county for victims fleeing from out of Oxfordshire;
 - Places of safety: there are currently two properties offering a 'dispersed refuge' model for victims needing to flee/relocate within Oxfordshire with visiting support via dedicated outreach officers;
 - The Anchor Programme: a groupwork programme for victims and survivors of DA with complex needs;

- A BAME support worker who is furthering the awareness raising and engagement work with BAME communities and taking forward work linked to the recommendations from the BAMER project;
- The IDVA service in South & Vale, delivered via sub-contracting with Reducing the Risk who deliver the IDVA service across the rest of Oxfordshire via independent grant funding.

193. In addition to the Council's direct funding for domestic abuse prevention and mitigation services, a number of the organisations that the Council funds provide services which include some domestic abuse related support, though not necessarily the main focus of their work. A total of £34k per year is made available to Sanctuary Hosting, AFiUK, Asylum Welcome, Oxford Against Cutting, and Homestart.

194. The Council's involvement with such organisations does not simply begin and end with the provision of funding, but there is positive ongoing partnership working, with the Council's Domestic Abuse Lead being regularly involved in the work of these organisations. For example, Sanctuary Hosting were keen to share that Liz Jones helped them to establish a robust system and referral pathway for victims with no recourse to public funds, which has enabled them to offer more support in this area.

195. Overall, in the last financial year the Council has committed close to £90k (£89,607) in funding towards groups that work to address domestic abuse issues.

Indirect Impacts

196. The Council's influence on domestic abuse through its grants programme is not limited, however, to those organisations which confront it as an issue directly. Almost any activity which promotes individual resilience or social capital is likely to reduce susceptibility to coercive control, support individuals or communities to recognise and respond to domestic abuse more proactively and at earlier opportunities, or help victims process their trauma. Thus, for example, the Council-funded Iraqi Women Art and War programme seeks to address and process the experience of its (mainly refugee community) members, including their experience of domestic abuse. Though funded primarily for its cultural input, the group nevertheless provides a community in which issues of domestic abuse are neither hidden nor shameful, and a platform through which past experiences can be worked through.

197. In a similar vein, a lot of programmes challenge the negative societal perceptions which carry an increased risk of domestic abuse being perpetrated. For example, the Council-funded Youth Ambition programme have organised as part of their programme activities to challenge negative social norms, including around the perception of women in society, gender inequality, and traditional family roles. The Council's grant funding programme therefore has an effect on domestic abuse beyond its direct funding, even though that effect is difficult to quantify.

Leveraging Grant Funding

198. In terms of challenging domestic abuse, one of the biggest indirect benefits that the Council's grant funding programme has is the relationship it cultivates with BAME community groups. Given the specific challenges and barriers faced by such groups, working in partnership with these communities to acknowledge, identify and challenge abusive behaviour is vital. Over the past three years the Council has funded 30 BAME community organisations, which will make the work of the Council's newly engaged independent domestic abuse specialist, Becci Seaborne, far easier. The aim of this new worker includes supporting organisations to bring in additional external funding to these groups, but also to broker relationships and support frontline workers engaged with BAME communities to build capital and capability to break down barriers and between these communities and the statutory bodies with responsibility for domestic abuse.
199. The Review Group notes that in light of the Council's financial situation, the overall quantum of grant provision is due to be reduced as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (though it does seek to provide additional support to bring out greater overall value). In this context, it is reluctant, therefore, to call for additional funding for domestic abuse services over other Council priorities, which would see reduced funding. However, the shared testimony of the Review Group's external witnesses all pointed to a situation of cutbacks and underfunding for domestic abuse services. The organisation tasked with supporting high risk victims is not commissioned, but must consistently seek funding to continue its offer, for example. The Review Group's biggest concern, however, is that in an overall environment of funding pressures, BAME-specific needs are squeezed. This leads to a situation in which high risk clients are unlikely to be able to access an interpreter when speaking to an IDVA, and access to Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Services remains heavily tilted towards phone access, a medium which has been shown to be a barrier to BAME access of services. BAME access to domestic abuse services is broader than simply a community safety issue; failure to enable such access bleeds out into other Council priorities, such as those around housing and being able to retain a job that pays to live in the City. As such, the Review Group recommends that in the review of the grants pot that is due to take place next financial year, domestic abuse-related funding is increased, and particularly the area of BAME access to support.

Recommendation 30: That the Council, as part of its upcoming grant funding review, increases the funding available to domestic abuse services, particularly around BAME access to support.

200. Whilst the Review Group wishes to see increases resourcing for services relating to domestic abuse, to think that all such resources should come from the Council shows a lack of ambition. Securing additional external funding must also be an important component of increasing the resources available; less so for the established organisations doing specialist work on a big scale, but this is a challenge for some. This may be because bid writing is a skill. It does not necessarily follow that in a small organisation which is expert at delivering its aims there is somebody who will have that

skill. The challenge of applying for funding in potentially a foreign language is an additional barrier to some organisations.

201. As referenced above, although the overall quantum of financial support is being reduced in the forthcoming Medium Term Financial Plan, the Council is looking to provide support of equal or greater value than the reductions. The Review Group would welcome the prospect of the Council proactively identifying organisations – particularly those in the BAME community working on domestic-abuse related activities – and helping them identify and successfully apply for external grant funding.

Recommendation 31: That the Council is proactive in providing support to those organisations which provide domestic-abuse related activities but struggle to attract external funding to identify and successfully apply for external grant funding.

202. One issue raised to the Review Group has been that of the importance of ‘by and for’ groups in tackling domestic abuse. Unfortunately, by dint of the order in which meetings occurred, a discussion with the Grants Officer was unable to take place. The Review Group is aware that, as per the ‘Keeping the Faith’ report, the Council is supportive in its grants of ‘by and for’ organisations. When dealing with victims of domestic abuse it is particularly important that the vulnerability of the individual is recognised and understood. The key differentiator of ‘by and for’ services is that they understand the additional challenges faced by individuals in that community in providing support. However, to do so they must have the basic understanding of the need to protect the vulnerable person seeking support and the group’s specific place within the wider framework of support for that individual.

Recommendation 32: That the Council continues to support grant funding to ‘by and for’ organisations, but that for domestic abuse-related applications it is mindful of the need to situate ‘by and for’ support within the wider overall framework for supporting domestic abuse victims.

203. Irrespective of whether its recommendation around additional funding is agreed, the Review Group is keen to see an increase in the volume and effectiveness of indirect challenge to domestic abuse provided by the grant programme generally.

204. The Review Group’s own suggestion as to how to achieve this is light touch. It does not wish to overburden with extra responsibilities those organisations which do valuable work which does not touch on domestic abuse issues, but as shown above, it recognises that unexpected links can arise also. In the current applications for funding, applicants are asked to share how their proposed project will contribute towards environmental sustainability. The Review Group considers that asking a similar question around developing positive relationships would nudge all applicants to consider this as an issue, and encourage those who are amenable to find creative ways in which to address it.

Recommendation 33: That the Council includes within its grant funding application forms a question along the lines of “Does this funding intend to support positive family relationships? If so, how?”

205. Another way to make organisations be aware and mindful of domestic abuse issues is to require as part of the grant-giving process evidence that domestic abuse awareness and management is part of the grant-seekers’ delivery model. This could be, for example, through having trained staff or volunteers, a domestic abuse lead, or even a specific domestic abuse policy. Seeking this would clearly be a bureaucratic burden, and the Review Group does not wish to deny access to smaller, less resourced organisations through being overzealous in this regard. Likewise, the benefit of having such resources would differ, depending on the type of project. Nevertheless, for those do have sufficient resources to embed meaningfully the prevention of domestic abuse and support of victims into their activity the Council should not be shy in requiring them to do so. The Review Group recommends that the Council reviews its requirements for grant recipients and identifies reasonable thresholds and types of grant funded projects where evidence of domestic abuse awareness and management could be expected without impacting unduly on access to grants.

Recommendation 34: That the Council identifies and requires levels of organisational awareness and capacity around domestic abuse prevention and support which is reasonable relative to the size of organisation, size of grant sought and the purpose of the grant.

206. In addition to prompting organisations to consider taking steps to make their beneficiaries more resilient against the underlying causes of domestic abuse, the Review Group notes that many organisations may require support in practically how they might do so, once they have decided they are willing to. In its evidence gathering, the Review Group was signposted towards the Women’s Aid Expect Respect toolkit,²⁷ a source of age-appropriate activities for children to learn about healthy relationships. Likewise, Oxford Against Cutting have free resources available on their website.²⁸ The Review Group recognises that these are far from the only resources available, but what it does is showcase the quality of resources available. As part of the Council’s guidance for grant applicants, the Review Group would like to see signposting to these and similar resources to give them ideas on how they might meaningfully contribute towards developing positive family relationships.

Recommendation 35: That the Council includes in its guidance for grant applicants links to appropriate resources through which organisations may support positive family relationships.

²⁷ Freely available for download at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/education-and-public-awareness/expect-respect/>

²⁸ <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/resources/>

Procurement

207. Although social outcomes only feature as far smaller considerations in the Council's procurement than in its voluntary sector grant-giving programme, they are nevertheless present. As part of its procurement process the Council gives a weighting to the wider social impacts that a potential contractor will have by the way they do their business. For example, do they hire apprentices, thereby developing the supply of labour in their industry for the future whilst giving opportunities to local young people to learn? Although these outcomes are smaller, the overall size of the Council's procurement spending far outweighs its voluntary sector grants, and engages a greater number of organisations. The Review Group is keen, therefore, that the Council should seek to use its influence as a procurer to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse. Its suggestion is that supporting positive family relationships is identified as being a qualifying social value within the Council's consideration of social value in procurement.

Recommendation 36: That the Council extends its definition of social value in procurement to include opportunities for companies to support positive family relationships.

Part 7: Internal Actions: Supporting the Council's Workforce

208. Employment (and the income it brings) is an important bulwark against coercively controlling behaviour. As such, the undermining of a victim's employment situation by an abuser is not uncommon. However, even in situations where a victim's employment is not targeted, the effect of domestic abuse can nevertheless have hugely deleterious effects on an individual's performance at work, with lateness, sickness and unauthorised absences being more prevalent. If not managed sensitively, this can lead to an already-vulnerable person facing the erosion or, ultimately, loss of one of their key sources of autonomy and self-determination.²⁹ Even those victims who do maintain their roles may suffer long-term impacts through being overlooked for promotion. With a staff numbering approximately 720, of which 59% are women, the City Council acknowledges that a number of its staff will be facing domestic abuse at any given time. Additionally, given the prevalence of domestic abuse (five in one hundred adults experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2020), and that 4% of adults experience abuse from a partner, the Council also recognises that a number of its own staff will be perpetrators of domestic

²⁹ It is estimated that 2% of women will lose a job owing to the effect of domestic abuse: *Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate*, March 2004; and from Walby, S & Allen, J. also cited by the TUC in the more up to date 'Support in the Workplace for Victims of Domestic Violence' (Oct 2020).

abuse.³⁰ The way that the Council manages this situation, therefore, forms an important part of its own response to domestic abuse.

Domestic Abuse Policy

209. Partially in light of the issues raised above, at its meeting of 30 November 2020 the Council passed a motion stating ‘This Council resolves to ask the Head of Business Improvement to submit a report to Cabinet setting out proposals to Develop a Domestic Abuse in the Workplace Policy for Oxford City Council and encourage Oxford’s workplaces to do the same... This council encourages all workplaces to prioritise domestic abuse as a workplace and community safety issue.’

210. In its consideration of the ways in which it can be a supportive employer to those facing domestic abuse, the Review Group considered a policy which has been drafted but not adopted by the Council. It covers disclosure and manager responsibilities, performance or attendance management issues, managing a perpetrator, how to manage if a victim and perpetrator are both working for the Council, and supporting appendices for the key elements. The draft policy is included as Appendix 6 to this report.

211. Having reviewed the policy, the Review Group recognises that, as a document five years old in parts, the policy is in need of updating in its details. Nevertheless, its overall structure remains valid. Although the Review Group makes a number of suggestions in relation to the policy, it considers the available draft to be a strong starting point as a means to action the Council’s decision to implement a policy.

Recommendation 37: That the Council uses the existing draft domestic abuse policy as its template, to be updated, for its to-be-developed Domestic Abuse in the Workplace Policy.

212. A minor issue, but the Review Group does wish to raise a point of nomenclature. Whilst the Council passed a motion to develop a ‘Domestic Abuse in the Workplace Policy’, domestic abuse will actually be taking place elsewhere. A clearer title would be ‘Domestic Abuse Workplace Policy’.

Recommendation 38: That the Council gives its to-be-adopted policy on domestic abuse a clearer title, such as ‘Domestic Abuse Workplace Policy’

213. The Review Group makes a number of suggested additions to the policy, which it suggests might also strengthen the future policy.

214. One particular issue highlighted is that the current draft policy contains advice and support for managers in dealing with issues of domestic abuse, but not to general

³⁰ Stats from ONS, Domestic Abuse Prevalence and Trends, England & Wales: year ending March 2020

workers. The Review Group notes that non-manager colleagues are almost as well placed as managers to pick up unusual behaviour, reduced performance or physical signs. Further, individuals facing domestic abuse may find it easier to confide in someone who happens not to be their manager. Colleagues may also know or suspect that an individual is a perpetrator. The Review Group recommends that a process to guide staff members who know or suspect a colleague is experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse be incorporated into the policy when it is adopted. However, it notes that it is crucial that this policy is thought through and implemented sensitively; intervention carries the potential of elevated risk and the Council must be mindful of not increasing harm, even if inadvertently.

Recommendation 39: That the Council includes a section within its domestic abuse policy to provide guidance to staff if, in the course of their job, they suspect or know that someone is a victim or perpetrator of domestic abuse

215. A further issue identified with the draft policy is that it focuses on staff and overlooks the fact that there are multiple types of contributors to the Council – staff, but also volunteers and elected members.
216. The Review Group recognises that the status of staff, volunteers and elected members is not the same and that no effort should be made to blur that distinction. However, the Review Group does consider it worthwhile asking the same questions of elected members as it does of staff, even if the responses are different. As in the point above, volunteers or elected members may also have concerns that a member of staff is experiencing domestic abuse. If so, they too need to know how the Council wishes them to treat that concern. Likewise, pre-consideration should be given to how the Council will manage a situation if domestic abuse impinges on the contribution of a volunteer of a Councillor. In particular, how would the Council interpret its rules, for example, around Councillor attendance?
217. One serious consideration arising from this is the issue of Councillor conduct. Again, here, the rules and mechanisms of enforcement relating to conduct are very different between staff and elected members, the latter being determined by the Code of Conduct. The Review Group recognises that it is practically difficult to change the Code of Conduct, as it is a document which has been agreed and is applied by all the Councils in the county. Furthermore, the focus of the Code of Conduct is primarily on how a Councillor acts in his/her role as a Councillor, not at home. Nevertheless, the Review Group considers it important that the Council be seen to uphold the same expectations of behaviour corporately - from staff to elected members - in relation to domestic abuse and would like this issue to be explored.

Recommendation 40: That the Council at its next review of its constitution gives consideration to the practicability of including an explicit expectation that Councillors will not perpetrate domestic abuse.

218. One issue referenced in the motion passed by Council is the desire to see other employers implement Domestic Abuse Policies in their own workplaces. The Review Group is mindful that the Council is the sole shareholder to a number of companies, including Oxford Direct Services which employs over 250 people. In addition to the benefit of having such a policy and the example it sets, the Review Group notes that with a very different demographic profile (primarily white male), undertaking this exercise may be helpful in understanding the specific challenges and foci needed in organisations very different from the Council, an important part of the Council being able to convince other workplaces of the benefits of adopting a policy around domestic abuse.

Recommendation 41: That the Council as shareholder of its wholly-owned companies implements domestic abuse policies in those companies

Wider Strategy and Implementation

219. The development of a Domestic Policy should not form the complete response to domestic abuse. The policy must be worked out through the Council's structures, and thought on how best to do this is necessary. Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement, provided to the Review Group an introduction to the Council's broad approach to supporting its staff, the support currently available for those facing domestic abuse, and a gap analysis.

220. The announcement of the first national lockdown in March 2020 put into fast-forward the Council's existing explorations of remote working. As a consequence, all but a very slim minority of workers were set up to work from home. This situation has continued throughout the pandemic, with St Aldate's Chambers reopening for essential visits but home working being overwhelmingly the norm. Looking ahead to after the pandemic, remote working is set to remain an ongoing feature of staff working environments. The Council proposes to let out two floors of St Aldate's Chambers and offer a blended approach of home-and office-based working for most staff, which correlates to the feedback received from staff when asked their preference.

221. Amidst a radically shifted working environment, the Council's approach to supporting staff must also adapt. That new approach is set out in the Council's People Strategy. The two most relevant elements of this strategy are increased investment in the Council's digital support for its staff, to allow staff to access information themselves, and additional training for managers on how to support whilst working in a remote environment.

222. The Review Group understands the rationale for this change and is supportive of it, but it recognises that remote working does increase the risk profile for those facing domestic abuse. As such, the Review Group considers it necessary that specific attention be given to how this elevated risk can be mitigated within the Council's current

and future remote working environment.³¹ To ensure the most effective system is put in place, the Review Group suggests that the Council work with specialists in this area, including other local authorities, domestic abuse charities and trade unions to find ways of driving this risk down as far as possible.

Recommendation 42: That the Council, as part of its People Strategy, initiates a project to provide enhanced awareness, resources, and capability to recognise and support victims of domestic abuse, and engages with safeguarding and domestic abuse specialists to identify good practice and best resources.

223. The recommendation above relates to the need to address domestic abuse as a specific risk to staff in the new working environment. The following are issues put forward as lacunae identified in the gap analysis presented to the Review Group and which the Review Group recommends it would be well to rectify.

224. At present, if a staff member types 'domestic abuse' into the intranet search function two results come up. One of these relates to the work of the Community Safety Team. The other is the Council's safeguarding policy. The safeguarding policy does address domestic abuse, briefly. A screenshot of the information is below:

6. Domestic Abuse

One in 10 lives are being affected by domestic abuse, if that includes you or someone you know, get help and support by visiting reducingtherisk.org.uk for a list of organisations and contact that may be able to help.

Young people

All professionals who become aware of a young person experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse within a relationship have a responsibility to follow the Pathways for Young People, It concerns children and young people up to 18, or 25 for some care leavers.

-  [Domestic Abuse Pathway for Young People \(PDF\)](#)

More information

- Please contact  [Liz Jones](#)

³¹ It has been reported that there have been no requests for help with situations of domestic abuse since the start of the first national lockdown in March 2020. Whilst this is ostensibly good news, a lack of reporting of domestic abuse is not the same as its absence. Nor does it mean that the increased risk will not manifest itself in the future.

225. The information available is scant. The Review Group recognises that in signposting to Liz Jones, the Council's Domestic Abuse Lead, individuals (including managers) are able to get support internally. However, this does mean speaking to someone, which is a stage that not all people experiencing domestic abuse may wish to embrace. The Review Group is concerned that the page comes across as lacking ownership by the Council of its duties to its staff at a time of difficulty.
226. The other logical place a staff member may look for resources around domestic abuse on the staff intranet is the Thriving at Work and Wellbeing section, which is the locus of resources to support staff wellbeing in all its forms. At present, it carries no information on the support available for people facing domestic abuse. The availability of this support is actually widespread – 18 domestic abuse champions, two of whom also act as safeguarding champions, and an employee assistance programme run externally to the Council which provides advice on things including domestic abuse.
227. If it is the Council's aim to provide workers with the resources to access help themselves, the Review Group does not consider the current information sufficient. Its criticism is not one of provision, but of communication and awareness-raising. In line with the Council's wider People Strategy, the Review Group seeks better publicity of its help to enable staff to access the correct support for their needs.

Recommendation 43: That the Council improves the detail of the support it provides staff facing domestic abuse on the staff intranet.

Training

228. An important recognition in the gap analysis presented to the Review Group concerned training. All staff undertake safeguarding training and others, primarily front-line staff, are also given specific training on domestic abuse. However, this offer does leave gaps in the recognition of domestic abuse and the specific issues it raises around management. The Review Group recommends that those gaps be closed as a priority, but makes its own suggestions on how the training offer might be improved.

Recommendation 44: That the Council reviews the adequacy of the internal training it provides for all staff, line managers and elected members on domestic abuse

229. As referenced earlier, domestic abuse can often spill over into reduced performance at work, higher sickness and unexplained absence. The management of this is, in the first instance, the responsibility of line managers. To repeat the point made earlier, understanding and sensitivity to the issues around domestic abuse must have a bearing on how the Council's performance management processes are applied, or else they become a further means by which victims of domestic abuse have their autonomy and stability undermined. Consequently, it is vital that all line managers are given such

training to aid them in recognising someone who may be suffering domestic abuse, but also in ensuring that the way the workplace consequences of that abuse are managed in a supportive way, and not which compounds a victim's existing challenges. Equally vital is that the HR processes which those managers implement are designed to be supportive in a domestic abuse situation. The Review Group is keen, for example, that return to work and performance management guidance is reviewed to ensure that sensitive questions are included to detect and manage domestic abuse. Likewise, the Council has a duty towards its staff, even if they are perpetrating domestic abuse. Pre-planning around how time off in the event of an arrest or reprimand should be managed is necessary in providing a supportive environment to encourage a change in behaviour.

230. As mentioned, the Review Group considers training of all staff specifically on domestic abuse to be the gold standard. However, this is a significant time investment and would be of variable value dependent on where in the organisation an individual worked. The Review Group suggests that as an alternative to having a set policy, manager training should include consideration of which roles within their team should have mandatory domestic abuse training (and at what level), and which need only participate in the standard safeguarding training.

Recommendation 45: That the Council makes domestic abuse awareness and management training mandatory for all those in the Council with line-management responsibility.

Recommendation 46: That the Council reviews its HR processes around sickness, lateness, time off and performance management to ensure they are capable of supporting staff involved in either side of domestic abuse.

Recommendation 47: That the Council includes within domestic abuse awareness and management training for managers training on identifying the appropriate level of training required for the staff in their team regarding domestic abuse.

231. One issue which relates practically to how the Council supports victims (and indeed, differently, perpetrators) of domestic abuse are the HR processes that managers implement.

232. This report raises a number of the specific vulnerabilities faced by people from minority communities. Given the diversity of Oxford, and the Council's ambition to have a workforce more representative of the city it serves, awareness of specific issues and practices which tend to be associated with particular cultures – concepts of honour and shame, forced marriage and female genital mutilation, for example - is particularly important, as they are more likely to present in Oxford than a less diverse area.

Recommendation 48: That Council training provided to staff and elected members on domestic abuse considers, at a level relevant to type of training,

training which is sensitive to specific cultural contexts and working with a diverse range of communities, and culturally-specific issues which can increase vulnerability amongst specific minority community members.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

233. From its outset the Review Group's primary focus has been to examine in detail the areas of domestic abuse prevention and mitigation that are most within the Council's own responsibility. In doing so it has found that there is much in this regard the Council can be proud of, in particular the work of Liz Jones, the Domestic Abuse lead, and her team who consistently go above and beyond what might be expected to raise standards for victims of abuse. It is also welcome to be recognised by external organisations as leaders in certain areas, with the Council's Sanctuary Scheme being described as 'the best'.
234. This being said, the Council's provision is not perfect. It is a good sign that Council officers have often themselves recognised the issues identified by the Review Group as being problematic, and mainly have been taking steps to improve them. This report hopefully provides a degree of background understanding on why certain issues do exist. Its recommendations are largely expected to fall within the Council's existing plans to improve the experience of those coming forward for support, and to build trust or enable access to those who are not. A good example of this being the recommendations made to support staff who are facing domestic abuse, which build both on a Council motion and on a previously-drafted policy. It is hoped that this report can act as a framework for tackling these issues with renewed coordination and vigour.
235. As evidenced in the report, the biggest contributor of the Council to the experience of victims of domestic abuse is in regards to housing. Providing a safe space for a victim is a foundational part of being able to rebuild their lives, and the degree to which the Council meets their needs in this area has huge effects on their future safety and wellbeing. Failure to do so is reported to be the greatest source of trauma by any agency for domestic abuse victims. So critical is this work that even small improvements can have an outsized effect on victims, but the Review Group hopes that the combination the recommendations around housing will go further than this and act as a roadmap for creating a new benchmark for the experience of the Council by those facing domestic abuse. It is important to stress, however, that housing is not a service offered in a vacuum, and the challenges and barriers faced by victims of domestic abuse cut across the Council's work. Consequently, real organisational energy is needed to ensure that the systems and flexibility developed in housing is not undermined by another part and that ensuring victims experience better outcomes is embedded corporately.
236. Beyond the Council's own area of primary responsibility this report confirms the challenges faced by ethnically diverse communities, particularly in regards to translation services and those with no recourse to public funds. These are, ultimately, issues for which central government is responsible, having cut funding for ESOL as well as general local authority budgets, and who set the policy around recourse to public funds that the Council must follow. This report makes a number of recommendations in these areas

where there is a clear and important need. However, in the absence of central government action it is unrealistic for the Council to substitute. The recommendations made in this regard seek to mitigate the worst of the consequences of these policies within the Council's ability, but a step change can only occur with a change in central government policy.

237. The final point to raise in this report is that although men and women, rich and poor, and people of different ethnicities experience different challenges in the journey to survivorship of domestic abuse, there is no membership of a demographic grouping that acts as a protection against domestic abuse. It can be experienced by everyone. And because it can be experienced by everyone, it is everybody's business to reduce it. The Review Group encourages the Council to take a lead in doing so.

