

# Housing & Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee

<b>Date of meeting:</b>	September 30 <sup>th</sup> 2024
<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Vulnerability and Domestic Abuse work within Housing Services
<b>Report of:</b>	Sarah Warman Strategic Director of Housing & Commercial Partnerships
<b>Cabinet Member Portfolio</b>	Cabinet Member for Housing Services
<b>Wards Involved:</b>	All
<b>Policy Context:</b>	Fairer Westminster
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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Housing Services have an absolute commitment to ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of all residents. We know that residents who have vulnerabilities may experience more difficulty in accessing and receiving services.
- 1.2. The work on vulnerability across the service is a priority. We understand the importance of recognising a broad range of vulnerabilities and accurately recording vulnerabilities and reasonable adjustments to ensure we not only offer support to vulnerable residents but to also recognise when our services should be tailored to meet their specific needs.
- 1.3. This report outlines how resident feedback, learning from complaints, particularly from those who have care and support needs, alongside information about sector wide learning from Housing Ombudsman casework, new statutory duties and relevant law and legislation has shaped and driven key improvements in our work to support vulnerable residents. In particular this includes:
  - updating our policies and procedures
  - improving how we identify vulnerable residents by way of recording and flagging household vulnerability and reasonable adjustments

- strengthening our workforce culture, training and development programme so that the service has the right support, tools and knowledge to achieve the best outcomes for our communities.
  - improving how we respond to and support our vulnerable residents.
- 1.4. The report also provides a summary of support interventions across housing and joint working with our partners, as well as an overview of the Housing Service's response to Domestic Abuse.

## **2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration**

- 2.1. Members are invited to have oversight of the contents of this work and provide comments and steer as required.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1 Housing Services have an absolute commitment to ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of all residents. We acknowledge that for our communities, and especially the most vulnerable residents, we must offer a consistent, fair and equitable service. This is achieved through tailoring our services and close collaboration with other Westminster City Council services and our commissioned partners who can offer the appropriate support to vulnerable residents.
- 3.2 We know that residents who have vulnerabilities may experience more difficulty in accessing and receiving services. This can affect people with ill health, disability, mental health difficulty and neurodiversity, as well as those who may have experienced a life event which impacts them for a short or longer period of time. The impact of these vulnerabilities will differ for each individual and as such we know that our response must also be tailored to provide a unique level of care and compassion to help residents to live a full and high-quality life.
- 3.3 In October 2022, the Housing Ombudsman Service issued a determination, making a finding of severe maladministration in relation to the Council's handling of damp and mould which dated back to 2021. The resident was vulnerable and there was no evidence that additional support had been provided or that consideration had been given to changing the delivery of services to recognise how the problem impacted the resident.
- 3.4 Although recognising and supporting residents' individual needs has always been a core part of Housing service delivery, the learning from this case showed a need to strengthen our approach in this area, to achieve more consistency in how we recognise and record the needs of vulnerable people, as well as how we show care and compassion to our tenants and their households.
- 3.5 Following this determination, exploratory work started to look at learning from other complaints, review resident feedback and understand the lived experience of residents. This showed that information about vulnerable people

was held locally in the different teams, and the information on the adjustments needed was inconsistent.

- 3.6 After improvement work in this area started, we received five more determinations which found further cases of severe maladministration in relation to the handling of cases dating back to 2021/22. Although these were historic cases, they continued to inform our thinking and approach by highlighting the different care and support needs of both individuals and households. This subsequently reinforced how the impact of the issues being reported is unique to the resident's individual circumstances. Whilst this was more significant in the context of unresolved repairs, some cases also highlighted how issues of noise, nuisance and or anti-social behaviour can more seriously affect the day to day lives of people with vulnerabilities.

### **The Housing Ombudsman Spotlight Report**

- 3.7 The Housing sector has faced unprecedented challenges in terms of the cumulative impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the cost of living and housing crisis. Some of the effects of this and the feedback from residents in response to a Call for Evidence in the Summer of 2023 is set out in the Housing Ombudsman's report on Attitudes, Respect and Rights – Relationship of Equals which was published in January 2024. The report specifically sets out what it means to be vulnerable in social housing and improvements needed within the housing sector to better support vulnerable residents.
- 3.8 The report resulted in much needed attention and discussion across the housing sector, highlighting widespread issues in how landlords recognise, record, and respond to vulnerable residents. It recommended actions for social landlords to adopt human-centric policies and implement systems to record vulnerabilities and embed their vulnerability policies in day-to-day practices. <sup>1</sup>
- 3.9 It should also be noted that in April 2024, the Housing Ombudsman Service's Complaint Handling Code was put onto a statutory footing. The Code also reflects on the importance of identifying vulnerabilities as part of the complaints process and the requirement for landlords to make reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act 2010.

### **Consumer Standards**

- 3.10 In April 2024 the new Regulator of Social Housing Consumer Standards came into effect, reinforcing the responsibility of landlords to focus on the needs of vulnerable residents with a greater requirement to understand the diverse needs of tenants, including those arising from protected characteristics, language barriers, and additional support needs including Domestic Abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> [housing-ombudsman spotlight report on attitudes respect and rights relationship-of-equals](#)

The council is committed to working to ensure compliance with the consumer standards.

#### **4. Housing Vulnerability Project**

- 4.1 In light of the resident feedback, learning from Housing Ombudsman casework and meeting our refreshed statutory responsibilities, we have reviewed and enhanced our approach and support to vulnerable residents.
- 4.2 The Housing Service always monitored baseline information regarding the specialist needs of residents and their families, with information recorded regarding physical adaptations required or the need for translation services, and a Supporting Vulnerable Tenants Procedure was in place. However, it was recognised that more could be done to ensure that all tenants were benefitting from a service tailored to their specific need, supported by an overarching policy that explicitly outlines how we recognise, record and respond to vulnerability and acknowledges the requirement for reasonable adjustments.
- 4.3 This led to the launch of a programme of work, supported by a cross council dedicated project team, collectively known as the Housing Vulnerability Project. The programme offered an opportunity to work in partnership with stakeholders across different Council services to develop joint working protocols across Housing and Adult Social Care as well as Housing and Children's Services. The Vulnerability project was initially led by the Director of Family Services who was seconded to housing for 9 months to provide expertise and assurance in this area.
- 4.4 The project identified the following key objectives:
  - Updating our Policies and Procedures relating to how we understand and respond to tenants identified needs.
  - Improving the systems and processes in place within the Housing Service to better record and flag vulnerabilities and reasonable adjustments, enhancing the quality of information that we hold.
  - Increasing the development and training offer to staff in relation to understanding and responding to vulnerable residents and embedding a culture of putting the tenants needs at the centre of our approach.
  - Improving how we respond to and support our vulnerable residents' needs.

Details of the Housing Service's delivery against these objectives are set out below

#### **Policy and Procedures relating to vulnerable residents**

- 4.5 Building on the Supporting Vulnerable Tenants Procedure that was previously in place, the service has developed a new Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment policy (Appendix A) to reflect the changes to the new working practices and to provide assurance that Officers are working in line with the requirements set out in Section 3. This policy has been designed for

internal use to provide the framework for staff to enable a consistent approach to recognising, recording and responding to vulnerable resident's needs. The policy provides the Housing service with a new definition of vulnerability which aligns with the Housing Ombudsman definition of what it means to be vulnerable in social housing.

**Westminster Housing Service definition of vulnerability:**

*Residents who due to their personal circumstances or characteristics are susceptible to unfair treatment and poor outcomes. Vulnerability may be exacerbated further if the service does not act with appropriate levels of care to better respond to their needs and support the vulnerable resident.*

- 4.6 The policy has been benchmarked across other local authorities Housing Vulnerability and Reasonable Adjustment policies and incorporates the good practice recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman as well as other leading sectors prioritising the fair and equitable treatment of vulnerable customers.
- 4.7 An internal launch of the Housing Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment policy launched earlier in the year with operational training delivered to staff on vulnerability flags and the wider roll out of training detailed further in section 4, Workforce Culture, Training and Development.
- 4.8 In addition, Connect & Learn sessions are being delivered throughout September for all staff, TMOs, Community Supportive Housing Scheme Managers and our Repairs Contractors providing ongoing opportunities to embed the improvements we have made and support the policy's framework of recognising, recording and responding to vulnerable residents.
- 4.9 Furthermore, a briefing to our Housing Resident Panel was also delivered earlier in the year outlining the developments and improvements to our approach to vulnerable residents. Feedback from the panel recommended the service capture the vulnerabilities and support needs of all household occupants so that the service can also consider what additional support, consideration or adjustment in the service maybe be required for household members, and not just the lead tenant.
- 4.10 This feedback of ensuring consideration of all household members vulnerabilities has been adopted within the internal policy and our procedures by way of Household Support Reviews and the additional use of vulnerability flags for household members if required. See section 4.15.

**Associated procedures and policies**

- 4.11 In addition to the new Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment policy, the Housing Service has introduced a range of associated policies, procedures and protocols to underpin good practice and outline what residents with vulnerabilities and support needs can expect from us. These include:
  - Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment procedure

- Housing and Children's Services Joint Working Protocol
- Housing and Adults Services Joint Working Protocol
- Housing and Public Protection Joint Working Protocol
- Updated Domestic Abuse Policy (currently under review by residents with lived experience of Domestic Abuse)
- Damp and Mould Policy
- Repairs Policy
- Window Restrictors Policy

### **Recording Vulnerability and Household Support Reviews**

- 4.12 The Housing Ombudsman has emphasised the importance of recognising a broad range of vulnerabilities and accurately recording vulnerabilities and reasonable adjustments to ensure landlords not only offer support to vulnerable residents but to also recognise when its services should be tailored to meet their specific needs.
- 4.13 In readiness of sector wide improvements, the Housing Service introduced new vulnerable resident and reasonable adjustment flags as part of the housing CRM digital developments across the service, which started in April 2024. Housing Management staff and Housing Contact Centre Advisors are now able to flag a resident's record for an increased range of reasons, including where a vulnerability, support need and reasonable adjustment should be taken into consideration when delivering the service.
- 4.14 When a resident is identified as vulnerable, and a reasonable adjustment is required this information is also shared with our contractors. An example of a reasonable adjustment shared with our contractor would be to allow more time for a resident to answer their door if they have limited mobility.
- 4.15 A new digitised vulnerability assessment form has also been developed, known as a Household Support Review, this enables Housing Officers to complete a fuller assessment of any support needs so that residents can be properly supported. Automated referrals to housing teams such as income, repairs, fire safety and anti-social behaviour have been integrated into the Household Support Review, enabling teams to respond quickly to the needs of our vulnerable residents once an assessment has been completed.
- 4.16 Vulnerability flags and Household Support Reviews are now the central recording and assessment solutions used within our housing management service to flag and capture a resident's full support needs.
- 4.17 Furthermore, our Housing Contact Centre Advisors now also ask additional empathetic questions that encourage the disclosure of a tenant's vulnerability or support needs so that we can flag and share reasonable adjustment information with our contractors at the point of a repair being raised. These repairs are then monitored separately to ensure timely completion.

## **The Housing Care and Support Team and Getting To Know You Tenant Census**

- 4.18 In April a Tenant Census was launched known as the “Getting To Know You” (GTKY) campaign. Whilst the Housing Service routinely collects tenant profile data the aim of this campaign was to ensure we have good quality and up to date information on our tenants. In particular the campaign has focused on ensuring we have a good understanding of the needs and circumstances of our most vulnerable tenants as well as capturing additional diversity information for our tenants.
- 4.19 To process and update tenant information, we introduced a new team in the Housing Contact Centre called the Housing Care and Support Team (CAST team). The team have been essential in accelerating our efforts to progress the campaign and have carried out Household Support Reviews to update tenant information and ensure that our tenant’s vulnerabilities and reasonable adjustments can be properly responded to in our Housing Service delivery.
- 4.20 The campaign has been a targeted programme of work which prioritised the updating of our records of known and suspected vulnerable tenants by way of completing Household Support Reviews via the telephone. Alternatively, tenants have also been given the option to complete a Household Support Review online or paper form. Tenants have been prioritised and contacted in the following cohorts:

**Cohort 1:** Tenants who we have previously disclosed vulnerabilities and support needs.

**Cohort 2:** Tenants where we hold suspected vulnerability data recorded within our systems.

**Cohort 3:** All tenants within Community Sheltered Housing Schemes.

**Cohort 4:** All tenants in high rise blocks.

In addition, all other tenants have been written to and given the opportunity to complete the Getting To Know Tenant Census by visiting the WCC “Getting To Know You” landing page and completing an online Household Support Review form. The Housing Care and support team are proactively contacting all by phone.

It is anticipated that we will have completed the Household Support Reviews for all tenants by the end of this financial year, with a campaign of door knocking co-ordinated across Housing Management and the Housing Care and Support Team to engage with those who have yet to complete the HSR over the phone, online or by paper return.

- 4.21 The campaign has also been supported by a comprehensive communications plan to help us extend our reach with activities such as daily social media posts, posters/leaflets within area offices, estate notice boards, articles in WCC Housing fortnightly e-newsletters, social media videos of Housing Care and Support team and a “Getting to Know You” landing page within the WCC

housing webpages. The landing page includes FAQ and tenants can complete and submit a Household Support Review online form.<sup>2</sup>

- 4.22 Furthermore, Housing Officers throughout the months of July and August assisted tenants in Community Sheltered Housing Schemes to complete online/ paper Household Support Review forms.
- 4.23 Team performance has been strong and consistent since launching in April. The CAST team have updated 1,676 tenant records by completing Household Support Reviews in Q1 and as of year to date a total of 4088 Household Support Reviews have been completed. The method and response rate to updating tenants' records via Household Support Reviews is currently broken down as follows:
- 2822 Household Support Reviews directly completed with a tenant by the CAST team or Housing Management Officer (69%)
  - 710 Household Support Reviews completed and returned by paper form (17.4%)
  - 556 Household Support Reviews completed via an online form via the Getting To Know You Westminster landing page. (13.6%)
- 4.24 Whilst we have contacted all tenants, not all tenants have yet to responded to the campaign by completing an online or paper Household Support Review form. The Getting To Know You Tenant Census is therefore ongoing and the Housing Care and Support team are now prioritising making direct calls and visits to tenants to maximise our response rates from tenants who have still yet to engage and we are continuing to promote. To date the total response rate to completing the Getting To Know Tenant Census from our tenant population stands at 33.7% since the launch of this campaign in April.
- 4.25 As a result of the campaign, the service is gathering enhanced insights across our tenants key demographic areas which provides a more informed holistic picture of who are tenants are, this includes gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, cultural, social, and religious needs, economic status, ethnicity, nationality, spoken language, written language, large print requirements, and internet access.
- 4.26 Our current tenant breakdown of Household Support Reviews completed from the Getting To Know You tenant census in Q1 indicates a diverse community with a slightly higher response rate from our global majority groups 13.8% Asian, 20.4% Black, Caribbean, or African and the remaining 33.2% of respondents being from a White background.
- 4.27 Additionally, information captured to date from the Household Support Reviews shows us that 54.1% of our tenants mainly speak English, but we support a range of other languages, including Arabic (12%) Bengali (4%), Kurdish (1.5%) Portuguese (1.70%) Spanish (0.91%) and French (0.62%)

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<sup>2</sup> [Westminster getting-to-know-you landing page](#)



Understanding these demographics allows us to provide more effective and inclusive services tailored to the needs of our tenants and we will continue to monitor this information and the data quality as more Household Support Reviews are completed.

- 4.28 The data shows that many of our tenants who have responded to date are female, and a significant proportion are retired or unable to work due to long-term sickness or disability. For instance, 37.4% of tenants who responded have advised of a long-term illness, highlighting the need for tailored support and referrals to both internal and third-sector organisations.
- 4.29 From the improved data, we have identified key areas of vulnerability and the required reasonable adjustments needed. In Q1 the most common vulnerability flags were long-term illness (1,402 flags), physical disability (690 flags), and mental health needs (512 flags).
- 4.30 In response, key reasonable adjustments raised in Q1 include phoning ahead of appointments (1,310 adjustments) and allowing additional time for tenants to answer the door or provide information (1,268 adjustments).
- 4.31 In Q1 the Housing Care and Support team made 410 referrals to the income team for additional support, on average the team resolved these cases in 11.2 days. Year to date the income team received a total of 535 referrals and on average completed these in 11 days.
- 4.32 This work will provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the demographics and support needs of our tenants. This valuable information will also help us to monitor the fair and equitable outcomes of our vulnerable tenants as well as inform our strategic long-term planning of the Housing Service and our commitment to continuously improve service delivery and ensure it is meeting the needs of our communities.
- 4.33 A summary of all our actions related to launching this campaign has been provided to the Housing Ombudsman which they have highly commended on all the efforts we have undertaken. Furthermore, this work has also recently been shortlisted in the final of the UK Housing Awards 2024 under the category of "Campaign of the Year" and shortlisted in a further 3 awards in the UKCCF Awards, which further acknowledges and commends the continued efforts of this campaign, and the positive impact this work will have to reshape our service to meet the diverse needs of our tenants and ensure a more inclusive, accessible and tailored Housing Service.

### **CAST Team Case Studies**

#### **Case study 1.**

Tenant was referred by the Housing Care and Support team to the Social Worker with a myriad of housing challenges and a history of depression, anxiety and family issues. During a home visit she stated she had suicidal ideations, and the Social Worker referred her to Adult Social Care.

Shortly afterwards she was contacted by ASC and admitted into a mental health institution as a referral, this was significant as she had spoken of suicide attempts again. She was later discharged to her family and friends who would support her rather than have her return to living alone.

### **Case study 2.**

The Social Worker contacted a vulnerable Tenant who has learning difficulties after a referral from the Housing Care and Support Team. Initially the Tenant did not want to engage so the Social Worker engaged with the family who agreed to advocate on his behalf.

As a result of this intervention trust with the Council was developed and working with colleagues across Housing a decant was arranged so that work could be completed to resolve issues with damp and mould and the Council completed redecoration works and installed new carpets.

### **Case Study 3.**

Following a Household Support Review, Resident X informed the Housing Service of challenges in processing and retaining complex information due to Dyslexia and requested a reasonable adjustment.

Specifically, they asked for all meetings to be recorded and for copies of the recordings to be provided afterwards. In response, the Housing Service purchased a voice recording device and now records all meetings with the resident, providing them with a copy. This allows the resident to better retain and process information by reviewing the meeting discussions at their own pace for better understanding.

## **Workforce Culture, Training and Development**

- 4.34 As reflected in the Housing Service's vision and value, we strive to put residents at the heart of everything we do. We are ambitious and aspire to deliver the very best services for our resident. This requires a culture of empathetic customer service, where everyone is empowered to display a positive, solution-focused mindset.
- 4.35 We are very committed to equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI), including having a diverse workforce across our service which mirrors the diversity of the residents we serve. We are very proud of our diverse workforce and believe this will drive the quality of our service, our engagement with residents and ultimately the satisfaction of our residents and communities. To ensure our service is inclusive and accessible for our communities we will continue to focus, adopt and embed EDI within the workforce and as part of our service delivery.
- 4.36 To achieve our vision and values we have committed to investing in the training and development of our workforce to create a service that is compassionate, highly skilled and effective. We have invested in 3 complementary training programmes to achieve and embed our ambition:

- 1) **Customer Empathy** - The Customer Empathy Programme is based on the MGI Learning Mindset, Language & Actions Toolkit designed to give people leaders and staff the 'how to' skills to create this service culture enabling us to communicate in a confident, customer-focused and open way. Since Autumn 2023 we have had 251 frontline staff attend this training programme. Feedback from staff has been overwhelmingly positive describing how the programme has tangibly impacted their work with residents.
- 2) **Safeguarding/ Vulnerability** – The Housing Service has invested in all staff receiving mandatory bespoke Safeguarding and Vulnerability Training. The training covers recognising vulnerability and safeguarding issues; legal duties in relation to recording and reporting; joint working, escalation and governance; engaging and direct work to support vulnerable residents. Training commenced in January 2024 and is being run throughout the year. To date 249 Housing staff (48%) have completed the Level 2 Safeguarding training. In addition, 104 contractor based repairs staff have attended.
- 3) **Systemic Practice Model.** We are striving for ambitious improvements in how everyone within Housing Services seeks to understand and engage all residents through investing in a 3 year programme delivered by the Centre for Systemic Social Work. Housing Services within the Bi-Borough Councils are the first to implement this well-respected and researched practice model. Training commenced on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024 with 34 staff engaged in the first training cohort.

Through investing in this model of practice the service seeks to achieve visible improvements in staff interactions with residents. Systemic practice is an approach that promotes a way of thinking, acting and viewing that focusses on building relationships. The model helps staff develop and enhance their communication skills to facilitate respectful and productive conversations which promote positive outcomes, as well as to gain skills in identifying and resolving unhelpful interactions. The programme aims to create organisational culture improvements where every activity contributes to a better experience for residents. Systemic practice supports all staff to develop a strengths-based, solution-focussed approach to working with residents, colleagues and partner agencies that recognises power, difference and diversity and in how these influence working practices.

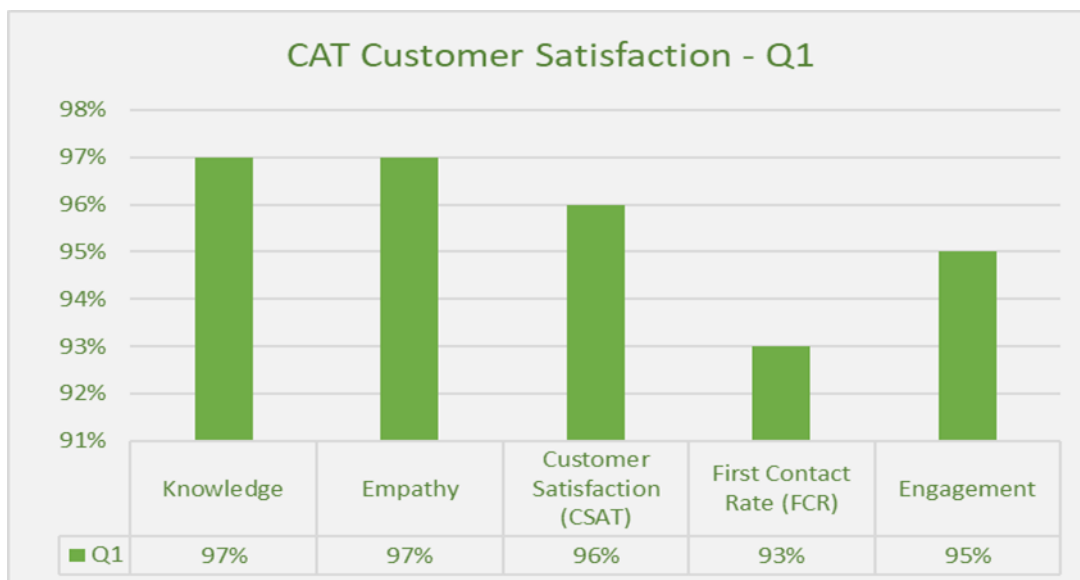
### **Improving how we respond to our vulnerable resident's needs.**

- 4.37 The additional flags on our system and information obtained through Household Support Reviews provide us with a significantly enhanced understanding of who are residents are with an improved understanding of their needs. However, it is critical that this information leads to a proactive tailored housing service to meet the needs of our vulnerable housing residents moving forward.

- 4.38 Learning from complaints and our interactions with residents to date has led us to proactively make some significant changes which have informed how we deliver our Housing service so that we can better respond to vulnerable resident's needs. An example of this is evidenced with the implementation of a new pilot team within the Housing Contact Centre team known as The Customer Advocacy Team (CAT). The operating model of the CAT team is helping us to gain a better understanding of how repairs can impact on a vulnerable tenant's situation and identify when additional support interventions and priority escalations are needed. This will help to shape continued improvements to the repairs service.
- 4.39 The CAT model has created an effective team structure for managing complex repair cases involving vulnerable residents with enhanced joint working practices between housing repair teams, contractors, Social Care and Housing Management. This has resulted in improved levels of care that better respond to the needs of vulnerable tenants, as well as the mitigation of risks associated with delayed repairs that can often exacerbate tenant's vulnerabilities further. (For further details on CAT team see section 4.43 and section 4.81 on monitoring vulnerable residents' repairs)
- 4.40 Over the course of the past two years, we have also increased the number of frontline housing officers and reduced patch sizes in recognition of building additional capacity to be able to support vulnerable households. We have also opened three new local offices (fourth this month), in order to provide a more personalised local face to face service and to locate housing teams within easy reach for home visits and locally based appointments.
- 4.41 In addition, we have listened to feedback and reflected on learning from complaints which identified that we needed to strengthen our understanding of how the problems reported by residents are impacting on their vulnerabilities. To address this we have:
- Created a Housing online complaints form which was introduced in April 2024 and gives residents the opportunity to set out their concerns and the desired outcomes, but also developed a separate requirement for the resident to notify us of how the problem has affected them, including on any health or support needs they have.
  - We have developed our complaints reporting to highlight which residents have a recorded vulnerability so that where appropriate, we can prioritise a response and any actions.
  - We are also upskilling our staff to ensure that where vulnerabilities are reported directly and there is no system record, that this is flagged with our Housing colleagues to trigger a Household Support Review if this has not yet happened.
- 4.42 Below is also a further summary of a selection of support and interventions delivered by a range of Housing Teams and Partner agencies which demonstrates how we are responding to our vulnerable residents. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to provide a window into the Services' approach.

## **The Customer Advocacy Team**

- 4.43 As outlined in section 4.38 , the service introduced a new Customer Advocacy Team (CAT) in March 2024 acting on behalf of vulnerable residents to case manage their repairs to completion.
- 4.44 The team is a pilot to help define a future operating model in the Housing Contact Centre. The aim of the CAT team is to proactively prioritise, and case manage repair requests for vulnerable customers. Rather than simply raising the request, this team has full accountability to ensure that cases are resolved to completion. The team act to break down barriers and facilitate resolutions, whilst providing regular updates to residents until the case is closed to their satisfaction.
- 4.45 A member of the Morgan Sindall planning team has been co-located since launch and this way of working has delivered real value when acting on repair cases. This new proactive approach to resolving requests and early identification of complex issues demonstrates our commitment to supporting the most vulnerable.
- 4.46 Both the Housing Care and Support and Customer Advocacy Teams are supported by a dedicated Housing Officer and a dedicated Social Worker, these roles support the team in joining up services and understanding the impact and processes surrounding vulnerability as well as attending home visits if a welfare or vulnerability Household Support Review assessment visit is required.
- 4.47 In Q1, the team made 6,850 outbound calls and closed 3,094 cases, with an average resolution time of 6.3 days, and in the year to date they have closed 4154 cases. The most common actions taken by the team include raising additional repairs, arranging home visits, and liaising with and making referrals to other departments.
- 4.48 The team has also been proactive in supporting residents with a range of vulnerabilities, including alcohol misuse, care leavers, dementia, elderly and frail, learning disabilities, and mental health needs, among others. They provide necessary support like translation and interpreting services to accommodate additional communication needs, ensuring comprehensive care for all tenants.
- 4.49 The team's proactive approach ensures that vulnerable residents receive the attention they need, demonstrating the Council's commitment to supporting its most vulnerable residents.
- 4.50 To date 2,648 reasonable adjustments have been made, with 36% requiring a phone call ahead of appointments, 28% needing additional time, and 4% requiring an in-person visit.
- 4.51 In Q1 the team introduced post call surveys, performance across Customer Satisfaction and Empathy has been particularly strong with Satisfaction levels of 96% and Empathy at 97%.



- 4.52 In May, the CAT received external recognition when they received a “highly commended” award for their efforts to support our vulnerable residents after being nominated at the UK National Contact Centre awards in the “Supporting vulnerable customers “category. This is the longest running and most highly respected awards programme dedicated to the UK contact centre industry with a rigorous judging process by industry experts. We have also been contacted and visited by other councils / landlords who are very interested in this model.
- 4.53 The team have identified and supported several complex cases to resolution, these required rapid interventions across issues such as aids and adaptations, damp and mould, loss of heating, leaks & flooding, and welfare concerns.

### **CAT Case Studies**

- 4.54 The introduction of the Housing Officer and the Social Worker roles in the team has greatly increased our ability to respond to issues rapidly with home visits. Below is a case study providing an example of the successful outcomes managed by the team.

#### **Case study 4.**

Elderly, vulnerable resident with severe arthritis and stage 4 cancer (who was unable to use pillar taps in wash basin) and was underclaiming on her benefits. Following a home visit and support from the team this tenant has improved her financial situation through a referral to Citizens Advice who completed a financial assessment and supported an application for pension credit, in addition to this the Council has changed the bathroom setup.

## **Tenancy Sustainment**

- 4.55 Tenancy sustainment support is available to tenants to help them to sustain their tenancy with a dedicated WCC Housing Service landing page outlining the support available.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.56 The Housing Service also promotes the People First website which is an information and resource directory for Westminster City Council and Kensington and Chelsea councils. This provides details of a range of support services that can support Council tenants.<sup>4</sup>
- 4.57 The service also refer tenants to The Single Homelessness Project (SHP) Floating Support Service to help tenants sustain their tenancies. SHP are commissioned by Westminster City Council to provide tailored support to help tenants to retain their independence and support their well-being. Referrals for support from this service are made by Housing Officers, support networks and residents can self-refer.
- 4.58 The service helps residents with needs relating to tenancy sustainment, tenancy issues, income maximisation/benefit issues, budgeting, and personal development with living skills and employment, training and educational related matters through home visits, phone calls, or online communication. Empowering residents to set and achieve their goals, the service fosters self-confidence and resilience. It strives to support residents to upskill so they can feel more confident in tackling issues that may arise in the future and connect residents with relevant resources, ensuring a safe and stable living environment while encouraging self-sufficiency.

## **Changing Futures**

- 4.59 The Council has been awarded Changing Futures funding for a project in the Pimlico South Ward, also delivered by SHP, supporting individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage. The project acknowledges that where vulnerability is presented in multiple ways to the same person, this can have a cumulative effect on their wellbeing and ability to sustain a tenancy. This work has also broadened the awareness of the Housing Service to trauma informed approaches and the complexity of multiple disadvantage, equipping staff better to respond to more complex need.

## **Rent Support Fund**

- 4.60 The Westminster City Council Rent Support Fund has been created specifically to help tenants in financial difficulty. The fund is used to support households who are not entitled to full housing benefits with rent increases.
- 4.61 Tenants can request support online through the Council website or through their Income Officer. The fund was first established for financial year April

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<sup>3</sup> [www.westminster.gov.uk/housing/tenants/support-services](http://www.westminster.gov.uk/housing/tenants/support-services)

<sup>4</sup> [www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk](http://www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk)

2023 – March 2024. Funding was then provided for financial year April 2024 – March 2025. The annual budget is set at £1 million. This covers Westminster tenants including TMO tenants.

4.62 Number of tenants supported, and average spend:

Period	Tenants Supported	Fund Allocated	Average award
April 2023 – March 2024	2261	£967,162	£427.76
April 2024 – August 2024	1153	£591,082	£512.65

We promote the Rent Support Fund through a range of media:

- Promotion through WCC website
- WCC Cost of Living hub page and social media pages.
- Posters at Housing Service Centres, estates, local libraries and doctors' surgeries
- Through the Income Services Team via Phone, Texts & Emails and other housing teams.

**Additional Financial Support**

4.63 Money advice support/debt support is provided to help sustain tenancies. The service commission Westminster Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide specialist advice to Council tenants. The Income Team use an online booking system to arrange appointments for tenants with the CAB. These appointments are completed over the telephone.

4.64 The table below sets out the reasons for referral for the full year 2023- 2024, and the referrals to since April this year. It indicates that the number of referrals has increased to an average of 33 per month from 13 per month last year partly due to an increased awareness of tenants needs and the likely impact of the cost-of-living pressures.

Reason for Referral	No. of Referrals, April 23 – March 24 (12 months)	No. of Referrals April 24 – August 24 (5 months)
Debt & Money Advice	68	103
Energy Support	6	2
Maximising Income	18	12
Benefit Support – PIP	4	2
Benefit Support – UC	12	3
Housing Benefit Appeal	3	0
Council Tax Support	8	2



Follow Up Apt Requested by CAB	5	8
Benefit advice	28	27
Legal Advice – Tenancy Related	1	0
Tenant Request	1	0
CTS CLAIM – CAB	0	1
Housing Benefit Overpayment	0	3
Risk of Eviction	0	1
Supermarket Voucher	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>165</b>

4.65 The Income Team also work closely with Shelter to support tenants who are at risk of homelessness. The Income Team make referrals and Shelter contact the tenant by phone to carry out an assessment of needs. Shelter has helped sustain many tenancies through homeless prevention payments. The income team also facilitates 'roadshows' on behalf of Shelter, making use of our residents halls and meeting rooms, and by promoting the events with targeted texts. The first joint roadshows took place in April and May in 2023, where 137 tenants attended over 6 dates. We are committed to supporting Shelter and our residents and will be helping to facilitate the roadshows once again from September 2024.

#### **Support for vulnerable victims of ASB**

4.66 In all cases, where there is a known victim – the Housing Service's Anti-Social Behaviour team will complete a risk assessment matrix (RAM). This is a nationally recognised matrix that was developed in 2010 to support landlords and the police to identify and assess risk to vulnerable victims.

4.67 It is made up of carefully constructed questions covering the history, vulnerability and support needs of the victim. Once complete the matrix will produce a score which will be translated automatically into low, medium or high risk. This will help the case handler to effectively prioritise and manage cases and take appropriate steps to protect victims from further harm. If the case is scored as high risk, the case officer must contact the victim within 24 hours – except where it is received during a late evening or before the weekend.

4.68 Advice is always given to the victim/ complainant on support available, particularly if there is vulnerability in the case and where there has been a crime and all referrals made to support services are followed up to ensure appropriate engagement.

- 4.69 The Housing Anti-Social Behaviour team also complete checks to enquire into if the victim/complainant, or a member of their family is known to other agencies such as Children's or Adult Social Care services.
- 4.70 There are several different types of support offered to victims and perpetrators of ASB and throughout the management of the case a Housing ASB case handler may consider the following for victim or perpetrator, as appropriate:
- Referral to drug or alcohol support services
  - Referral to family or parenting support programme
  - Referral to mental health / community care services / floating support / safeguarding
  - Referral to other support agency such as floating support (SHP)
  - Signposting to report incidents to police
  - Referral to Victim Support if the victim has been a victim of crime
  - Domestic Abuse support services
- 4.71 The ASB Case Officer will consider whether a victim of ASB may have been specifically targeted because of their vulnerability. If there are concerns about potential adult abuse, the ASB team will liaise with Adult Social Care (Safeguarding Team) and the Police as appropriate.
- 4.72 Advice is given to victims of ASB on their right to request a "case review" (formerly known as the Community Trigger). In Westminster this can be activated if the victim reports three incidents of ASB in the last six-month period, either to the Council or Police, and they feel no action has been taken.
- 4.73 Internal or external case conference relating to the complainant/ victim are also held with appropriate agencies and attended by a member of the ASB team where appropriate. All ASB cases will also have weekly contact with the victim/complainant unless it has been agreed otherwise with the victim/complainant directly, and this is using the agreed method of contact.
- 4.74 Learning from cases where the victim has a vulnerability has resulted in an even more victim-centric approach to case management. Training is in place in systemic thinking, and to ensure all staff are 'trauma informed' and understand in greater depth how vulnerability can exacerbate a victim's experience. Alternative means of engagement are now also explored such as alternative reporting channels, or escalation to the Housing Complex Case Panel (HCCP) (see section 4.79) if the victim does not engage with offers of support with case conferences and use of the joint working protocols embedded into the ASB service offering.

### **Housing and Joint Working**

- 4.75 As outlined in section 4.11 in the report, we have developed and embedded joint working protocols between Housing, Public Protection, Children's and Adult Social Care which outline when, how and who to contact when staff across these services are concerned about a vulnerable resident, their wellbeing, the standard of their home and issues impacting how they sustain their tenancy. The protocols outline the necessity of staff across directorates

consulting with one another if they are unsure about whether referrals should be made and provides staff with named contacts within every directorate. The protocols outline that everyone has a responsibility to be alert to and to respond to any safeguarding concerns.

- 4.76 National and local guidance and strategies are embedded into the protocols to further support practice. The protocols emphasise that all staff have a responsibility to be alert to issues affecting home standards including damp and mould and that social care staff must quickly report such issues to Housing Services.
- 4.77 Children's Social Care have delivered several Connect and Learn sessions with Housing Services regarding when and how to refer when concerned about children and their families to improve partnership and joint working between Housing and Children Services. In addition, staff briefings have also been delivered between Adult Social Care and Housing to ensure staff understand their responsibilities and duties towards the welfare of vulnerable adults as well as to encourage regular joint working practices between services.
- 4.78 In order to further improve joint working, timely referrals and clear referral pathways for vulnerable residents, Housing Services created a Housing Social Worker post which was recruited to in April 2024. The Social Worker currently works across the CAT and CAST Housing Teams to provide coaching, support and guidance; to conduct joint visits with Housing Officers; and support with referrals, signposting and navigating service pathways. The postholder receives line management supervision from Adult Social Care, further demonstrating a whole Council approach to collaborative working to deliver high quality support for vulnerable residents.

### **Joint Working Partnership Panels**

- 4.79 We have several well-established joint working partnership panels with statutory services which seek to navigate and resolve complex needs:
- Self-Neglect and Hoarding Panel
  - Housing Complex Case Panel (HCCP)
  - Children's and Housing Services Joint Panel

### **Successful Joint Working Case Studies**

- 4.80 Below are some examples of successful joint working case studies demonstrating the good practice of Housing joint partnership panels to improve the outcomes of our most vulnerable residents and ensure they are supported.

#### **Case study 5.**

M is a 51-year-old female living in the Soho area. Her behaviour was impacting on neighbours and local community in terms of noise, abuse, damage to property and allowing others into the block.

Her case was presented to the panel (HCCP) in October 2023 due to the number of services involved and because enforcement action was being considered. She had been admitted to hospital but was due to be discharged.

A panel convened where it confirmed the date of discharge and the medication routine of M. It was agreed at the panel that a social worker would visit M prior to being discharged to explain the current legal position. A care plan was then put in place to start that month and the Floating Support service were also involved and agreed to pick the case up upon M's discharge from hospital.

This remains a complex case but through the work of the HCCP, stable communication links have been established between Housing and ASB, NHS and Social Care support workers and a third-party voluntary agency to avoid blockages and a lack of clarity on ownership and case management responsibilities.

Without this panel the Housing service would have faced significant challenges in bringing the relevant professionals together to arrange a coordinated joint response to better support the tenant and avoid the escalation of enforcement actions.

#### **Case study 6.**

G was a 62-year-old male living in the North of the City. He was identified as being at risk of abuse by a friend who had moved in.

Through links established at the HCCP panel, Housing, ASC safeguarding, the police and an advocate were able to co-ordinate the removal and exclusion of the individual who presented the threat and arrange for their rehousing options to be explored elsewhere.

#### **Case study 7.**

D was a recently widowed mother of 3. She has no recourse to public funds and was concerned that she would not be able to succeed to a tenancy and be made homeless with her family. Her case was referred to Children's Panel where Housing Solutions, Housing Services and Children's Services have been able to carry out the necessary planning to enable D to currently remain in the home. This has included supporting D to secure relevant financial support via grants to avoid the risk of rent arrears and possible threat of homelessness.

### **Monitoring Vulnerable Residents' Repairs**

- 4.81 Our refreshed Repairs policy sets out our commitments to residents with a vulnerability when they raise a repair. This includes identifying vulnerability in the household when a repair is raised. We also endeavour to attend urgent work within 3 days for vulnerable residents.

- 4.82 Since the launch of the CAT team in March, the number of jobs with identified adjustments for vulnerabilities has increased from 2% of the WIP to circa 18%. These jobs are tracked separately with in target performance at 70% at the end of Q1.
- 4.83 104 MSPS staff have completed the council's Safeguarding training and the monthly core group includes an item on safeguarding concerns in the previous month.
- 4.84 We provide details of the reasonable adjustments that our residents require when raising a repair to ensure our contractors make the necessary adjustments. We monitor the volume and types of adjustments at Core Group meetings to identify where communication and performance can be improved

### **Next steps – Vulnerable Tenants**

- 4.85 There will be continued strong oversight of our work with vulnerable residents. Key performance measures to monitor activity are embedded in the Housing Performance Management Framework and will continue to be a focus at the Housing Performance Board.
- 4.86 We will also continue to strengthen cross council joint working approaches to supporting vulnerable residents, enabling greater strategic collaborations and partnerships, with cross council departments such as our Communities, Public Health, Adults, Children's, Community Safety and the Voluntary and Community Sector. This collaborative approach will aim to foster future innovations that continually support our vulnerable residents and ensure they have access to a range of different services as needed and that they experience fair and equitable outcomes.
- 4.87 To ensure our contractors reflect our approach to vulnerability we will ensure that future contracts meet the needs of our residents. As we commission new services in Housing, our approach to vulnerability will be included as a key requirement, with standards and SLAs that match our policies and processes. We will work with residents to ensure that they help to co-design services that meet their needs and that bidders are evaluated on their capability to meet these requirements.
- 4.88 Work is in progress to implement a referral pathway into the Customer Advocacy Team from Westminster re-enablement team, this will ensure that any repair requests for tenants supported by this team will be case managed until resolution along with any support needs explored and flagged on the CRM system.

## **5. Domestic Abuse**

- 5.1 This section of the report provides information to the Committee on Domestic Abuse which has been requested and is feeding into this report.

## **Violence Against Woman & Girls (VAWG)**

- 5.2 Violence Against Women and Girls is the umbrella term used to describe a range of violent and abusive acts, behaviours, which disproportionately affect women and girls. The offences include, domestic abuse, control and coercion, rape and sexual abuse, modern slavery, human trafficking, stalking and harassment, so called 'honour' based violence, forced marriage, genital mutilation, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation.
- 5.3 Activity to tackle VAWG is governed by the VAWG Bi-Borough Strategic Board, who are working to deliver upon the priorities outlined in the Bi-Borough VAWG Strategy 2021/26 with a vision to end VAWG through a coordinated community approach. There are four broad aims: that VAWG is prevented, that survivors are supported, partnership working to end VAWG and that abusers are held to account. Housing Services are a core member of the VAWG Board Housing Operational sub-group represented by our Housing Community Safety Manager. This group oversees, shapes and influences how services respond to and address housing issues in relation to domestic abuse including that properties are secure and that survivors are well supported when needing to relocate.
- 5.4 The Council funds and commissions wide ranging services to address VAWG and works directly with survivors, children and perpetrators of domestic abuse. The commissioned VAWG services operate at a national, regional and local level and are commissioned through a variety of agencies. For example, The Community Safety team receive funding from the GLA that supports the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation (DASA) programme.
- 5.5 In addition, London Crime Prevention funding from The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and core funds is used to fund the Angelou Integrated Support Service, Cranstoun Male Victim Service and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA).
- 5.6 STADA provides operational support for the VAWG operational groups, MARAC co-ordination and co-ordination for the specialist domestic abuse Court. Other departments in the Council namely Children's Services and Public Health also fund STADA to provide VAWG operational posts. There are a range of domestic abuse specialists co-located and embedded within Children's and Adult Social Care. They work with survivors and perpetrators of domestic abuse and closely with the professional network including Housing Services.
- 5.7 Housing Services works very closely with Children's and Adults Social Care to ensure that domestic abuse issues are quickly and effectively addressed and that survivors are supported and safeguarded.
- 5.8 Both Housing Services and Housing Solutions Service domestic abuse practices are closely aligned with VAWG to ensure survivors receive appropriate support such as secure housing, priority access to housing and assistance with tenancy sustainment and access to the VAWG commissioned specialist support agencies.

## **Housing Landlord Service Supporting Victims/Survivors of Domestic Abuse**

- 5.9 The Housing Service plays a crucial role in supporting residents who are survivors of domestic abuse, and all Housing Management staff follow a comprehensive Housing Domestic Abuse procedure.
- 5.10 Westminster City Council has a council wide Domestic Abuse Policy, which provides the overarching framework for the Housing Services' activity in this area. The Housing Service is also in the process of developing a policy for housing which will be aligned with this.
- 5.11 All reports of domestic abuse are taken seriously, and the Housing Service will always treat survivors with respect and dignity ensuring swift action is taken to improve the survivor's personal safety and housing security.
- 5.12 Residents who are experiencing domestic abuse are encouraged to report this directly to our commissioned specialist domestic abuse support services or to their Housing Officer to receive housing support and referrals to specialist support agencies. When a resident discloses domestic abuse, the Housing team will case manage and prioritise the resident's safety immediately.
- 5.13 A Housing Services manager will conduct a risk assessment using the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour based violence risk identification checklist (DASH). This is risk-based assessment which scores risk based on an individual's circumstances and the questions and scoring are designed to establish levels of risk, to assist with prioritisation and to help prepare and implement a safety plan and advise a household of their available options.
- 5.14 Following the completion of a DASH risk assessment, Housing Service staff will manage low/medium risk cases through specialist support agencies. See section 5.15 The Angelou Partnership. Where cases are assessed as high risk the service will refer the case to Westminster's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). The MARAC take place monthly with key agencies, of which Westminster Housing Services is a core member and represented by our Housing Community Safety Manager. The role of the MARAC is to facilitate, monitor and effectively share information between key agencies to ensure the appropriate case management actions can be taken to reduce the risk of serious harm, support and manage the safety of the survivor and their family.
- 5.15 Alongside MARAC referrals, following completion of DASH assessments Housing Services seek specialist support for survivors via referrals to the Angelou Partnership. The Angelou Partnership is an alliance of specialist organisations commissioned by the Community Protection Service that has come together to support women and girls experiencing domestic or sexual violence. In addition, a new specialist service called Cranstoun launched in November 2023 provides male survivor domestic abuse services within the borough and Housing Services seek support for residents as appropriate.

- 5.16 Where there is immediate risk, alternative temporary accommodation may be sought, and a longer-term solution may be to assist with an application for a management transfer to enable an urgent move to another suitable council or social housing property. Such decisions take account of whether it is necessary for survivors to relocate to undisclosed locations in order to seek to safeguard them from future harm from the perpetrator of violence and abuse.
- 5.17 If a resident wishes to stay in their home, the Housing Service can also refer a resident for security improvements under Westminster Council's Sanctuary Scheme, this could include high specification security improvement such as organising additional window and door lock replacements or installations, window alarms, door chains and sanctuary rooms.
- 5.18 A tenant may also be signposted to legal advice if this is something they wish to pursue. Legal advice often includes advice about non-molestation orders, occupation orders or issues around joint tenancies.
- 5.19 Where there are is information or disclosures indicating domestic violence or abuse within a household the Housing Service will make referrals to Children's or Adult Services in accordance with safeguarding procedures and joint protocols. The Housing Service is a key partner agency with statutory services. Staff regularly attend meetings in relation to individual households and contribute to the development and execution of safety planning.
- 5.20 Between April 24 to July 24 the Housing Service supported 10 new domestic abuse cases with a range of actions such as approving 4 new management transfers and referring 2 domestic abuse cases to the MARAC to safeguard domestic abuse survivors. Additionally, 36 domestic abuse survivors living with our housing management stock were also heard at the MARAC between April 24 to July 2024 to enable multi-disciplinary casework support aimed at reducing the risk of serious harm for Westminster residents. In the year 2023-24, 10 cases of domestic abuse were approved for management transfers.

### **Domestic Abuse Housing Accreditation (DAHA)**

- 5.21 The service has recently commenced a project to gain DAHA accreditation. This accreditation is centred on improving social landlords' approach to domestic abuse and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of tenants who are survivors of domestic abuse.
- 5.22 To achieve accreditation there are 8 priority areas outlined by DAHA which the Housing Service will need to work towards and evidence as meeting. The DAHA is an all-encompassing and nationally recognised gold standard approach to managing domestic abuse and therefore requires a variety of workstreams within these 8 priority areas, ensuring the framework is embedded into the culture of how survivors are supported by their landlord, including enforcement action against perpetrators.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [dahalliance.org.uk/membership-accreditation/what-is-daha-accreditation](https://dahalliance.org.uk/membership-accreditation/what-is-daha-accreditation)



- 5.23 A Housing Project Manager and the Community Safety Manager have been assigned to lead on this work, with project planning now in development. The service has been advised that on average organisations typically achieve accreditation within 18-24 months.
- 5.24 Key to progressing and achieving the DAHA accreditation is the implementation of a Housing Domestic Abuse Policy. A draft policy has been developed and is being reviewed by tenants/ residents with lived experience as survivors of domestic abuse for their input and further revisions into this policy. This included taking this for discussion to the Residents Panel in January. Following review, the Housing Service will progress this through the appropriate decision-making process, formally requesting the approval and adoption of this policy for the Housing Service.

### **Domestic Abuse and Homelessness**

- 5.25 Westminster Council has a statutory duty to support those who present to our services at risk of or who are experiencing domestic abuse. Abuse deeply affects families and the wider community and leaves a devastating impact on survivors.
- 5.26 Domestic abuse is one of the top 3 reasons for homelessness applications among women, and the risk of homelessness is a key barrier for women attempting to leave perpetrators.
- 5.27 In line with our statutory responsibilities, Westminster City Council Housing Solutions Service treats any requests of housing assistance from individuals fleeing domestic abuse as a homelessness application. This process will involve actions such as:
- Ensuring there is an appointment with a homelessness caseworker to undertake a statutory homeless assessment application and a DASH assessment.
  - Providing an appointment with an IDVA (Independent Domestic Abuse Advisor) from one of the specialist commissioned services. This is a service for women only.
  - Referrals to Westlets for assistance with private sector accommodation.
  - Placement into temporary accommodation where the person meets the necessary criteria to be considered for this assistance.
  - Hostel referral and checks for refuge vacancies.
- 5.28 Between April to July 2024 131 homelessness applications were received where domestic abuse was given as the reason for approach. 13 of these applications were referred to MARAC as a result of also being assessed as high-risk by the DASH assessment. (See section 5.13 full explanation of the DASH assessment tool and section 6.13 for MARAC multi-agency meetings)
- 5.29 A number of the households that come to the Housing Solutions Service will either be already open to the MARAC process or do not require the Housing Service to make this referral. Reasons for this include the survivor having had

contact with other services before the approach who have already referred to MARAC, they have fled from other local authority areas into Westminster therefore reducing risk or through a domestic abuse refuge, they are already linked into services and risk has either been mitigated or sufficiently reduced. The Housing Solutions Service will always proactively make MARAC referrals where this is deemed appropriate.

- 5.30 The Housing Solutions Service also ensures referrals are made to commissioned domestic abuse services such as the Angelou Partnership as well as provide general homelessness advice, contact details for help lines and signposting to other organisations.
- 5.31 We ensure that survivors are given appropriate and timely support and advice to make informed choices about the options available to them. We prioritise the immediate safety of the survivor and any children and respect the choices of the survivor. We believe and actively support survivors without judgement and treat those affected with sensitivity and uphold confidentiality. We ensure our staff explore all domestic abuse issues as an integral part of our best practice service delivery. This includes staff being alert to domestic abuse even when survivors have been unable to report this.
- 5.32 The Council has achieved funding through Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) and Changing Futures until March 2025 to address the risks of domestic abuse for women who present to services with multiple disadvantages including mental health, drug/alcohol dependencies and who may also be rough sleeping. The funding has enabled the provision of specialist accommodation managed by commissioned services, some of which are only resourced by women to support those who are highly vulnerable, complex and traumatised.

### **Male Survivors of Domestic Abuse**

- 5.33 As outlined in section 6.13 the Cranstoun service provides a male domestic abuse survivor service which was commissioned in November 2023 due to the lack of available support through existing pan London provision. In Q1 there were 18 referrals made to the service demonstrating a need for this service in Westminster.
- 5.34 The service offers practical help supporting male survivors to support their wellbeing including those with physical or mental health needs. They offer a range of immediate safety and support advice, emotional support as well as providing a 12-week trauma informed programme called FORTIS. They have recently developed a programme PLOARI designed for LGBTQIA+ people in response to an increase in referrals from this community.

### **Engaging with Domestic Abuse Perpetrators**

- 5.35 Data from the MPS as of September 2023 indicates that 25% of all perpetrators of domestic abuse are repeat offenders, highlighting the necessity of engaging with this group to reduce risk to their current and future partners.

- 5.36 The Housing Solutions Service works closely with the Restart Scheme. This is a Mayors Officer for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) funded scheme operated via the 'Drive Partnership', a conglomeration of third-sector providers: Safelives; Respect; Cranstoun; Social Finance and the Domestic Abuse Housing Accreditation (DAHA).
- 5.37 Cranstoun leads on the accommodation element of the Restart scheme for domestic abuse perpetrators, operating separately and with distinct funding from the main Cranstoun Male Domestic Abuse advice service.
- 5.38 The scheme was first mobilised as a pilot in August 2021, Westminster City Council was one of 5 trailblazer Local Authorities to trial the scheme, still in practice today, alongside Camden, Croydon, Havering and Sutton.
- 5.39 Restart aims to "keep families safe at home through early intervention with those causing harm". Referrals to the scheme are made by Children's Services where it is identified that domestic abuse has taken place within a household or there is an assessed risk that it will take place without a proactive intervention.
- 5.40 Once referred, the perpetrator is supported to address their offending behaviour and are referred to a longer-term behaviour change programme if appropriate. The survivors and children are also provided with enhanced support at this time through practitioners 'partnering' with the survivor and aimed at breaking cycles of behaviour that lead to abuse. Children's Service staff have completed accredited training to support their interventions with survivors and children.
- 5.41 In some circumstances however it might be identified that the best way of breaking the cycle of abusive behaviour is through the survivor and perpetrator no longer living together. Commonly in cases where domestic abuse has taken place it is the survivor and children that are forced to leave the home in part because the perpetrator has limited housing options legally. This often results in survivors and children becoming homeless and living with uncertainty as a result. Such upheaval and loss is often retraumatising and can result in survivors returning to live with the perpetrator. The scheme aims to redress this by creating a pathway for the perpetrator to leave the home and be provided with alternative accommodation instead of the survivor and children. In Westminster this involves the perpetrator being financially and practically assisted to find a property in the private rented sector.

### **Domestic Abuse Next Steps**

- 5.42 In summary, the Housing Service is committed to continuing to learn, review and improve how we respond to and support domestic abuse survivors through taking a whole family approach, having a dedicated focus on domestic abuse and working in close partnership with partner agencies. There are a number of key priority actions in development to strengthen our approach and response to supporting survivors of domestic abuse. As previously outlined this includes finalising and implementing the Housing Domestic Abuse Policy,

achieving DAHA accreditation and improving the collection and monitoring of our domestic abuse performance information.

## **6. Legal and Governance Implications**

- 6.1 As a local authority Westminster City Council is required to comply with legislation in relation to Domestic Abuse, as outlined in this report this is primarily the Housing Act 1996, The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and The Domestic Abuse Act 2021.
- 6.2 New Housing Consumer Standards introduced from April 2024 places a duty on social housing landlords to treat our tenants and prospective tenants with fairness and respect and to take action to deliver fair and equitable outcomes for our tenants and prospective tenants. The adoption of a Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment Policy is one of the ways to demonstrate how we will achieve this.
- 6.3 In addition, The Equalities Act 2010 places a duty on social landlords to ensure that residents with a disability or any other protected characteristics are not subjected to direct or indirect discrimination when accessing and using their services, this may involve the making of reasonable adjustments to their services.
- 6.4 A Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been completed for the data collection, recording and vulnerability flagging of personal and sensitive information. This assessment identified several recommended actions to ensure the service is compliant with GDPR and Data Protection regulations. These actions have been completed and include the updating of Housing Management Privacy Notice outlining how the service collects, records and flags residents' information in relation to vulnerabilities and support needs to ensure the service can tailor and deliver accessible services.<sup>6</sup>

## **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 There are no additional finance or resource implications associated with implementing the Housing Domestic Abuse Policy. This policy brings together existing process and formalises into this one document. Costs are however associated with obtaining DAHA accreditation such as the accreditation fee and staff training, these costs will be met by the HRA Community Safety budget.
- 7.2 Eight FTE positions have been created and funded by the Housing Contact Centre to create the CAT team with funding being requested to fund this as part of the future operating model in the Corporate Contact Centre. It is anticipated that to sustain this level of support the resources in the CAT would need to increase.
- 7.3 In addition, 13 FTE fixed term positions have been created and funded from the Housing Service HRA budget to establish the Housing Care and Support

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<sup>6</sup> [data-protection/housing-management-privacy-notice](#)

team for a fixed period to maximise our response rates from the Getting To Know You Tenant Census.

## **8. Carbon Impact**

8.1 No impact identified

## **9. Equalities Impact**

9.1 There have been no identified circumstances where the improvements we have made have negatively impacted particular groups within our community who share protected characteristics. The improvements we have made to support our vulnerable residents is to ensure that everyone has equality of opportunity to access and benefit from the Housing Service.

9.2 The aim of this work in conjunction with the development of an internal Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment Policy is to have a positive impact on residents by raising awareness and understanding of the types of responses and support the service provides to vulnerable residents.

9.3 In addition, The Housing Domestic Abuse Policy and The Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustments Policy will also undergo an Equalities Impact Assessment that will be reviewed by Westminster City Council's Community Equalities Manager to ensure that any negative impacts can be mitigated.

## **10. Consultation and Engagement**

10.1. A briefing was delivered earlier in year to the Housing Residents Panel outlining the developments and improvements to our approach to better respond and support our vulnerable housing residents. Feedback from the panel informed and shaped the development of The Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment Policy further ensuring the policy and our operational practices support the needs of all household members so that consideration and adjustments are identified for all individuals within the household and not just the lead tenants. See section 4.9.

10.2. The development of the Housing Domestic Abuse Policy has included consultation with Housing Residents Panel in January 2024. The Panel made various suggestions to help raise awareness of domestic abuse and to help survivors feel more confident to report this to the housing service. These suggestions are being taken forward either as actions within the DAHA project or included as additions to shape the Housing Domestic Abuse Policy further. Furthermore, consultation has taken place with Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Public Protection and Licencing and Advance – the lead agency within the Angelou Partnership and as outlined in section 5.15. The draft Housing Domestic Abuse Policy is now currently being reviewed for survivor input and further development.

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the  
Background Papers, please contact Chantell James,  
[cjames@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:cjames@westminster.gov.uk)**

## **APPENDICES:**

APPENDIX A Internal Vulnerable Residents and Reasonable Adjustment Policy

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. [housing-ombudsman spotlight report on attitudes respect and rights relationship-of-equals](#)
2. [Westminster getting-to-know-you landing page](#)
3. [www.westminster.gov.uk/housing/tenants/support-services](http://www.westminster.gov.uk/housing/tenants/support-services).
4. [www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk](http://www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk)
5. [dahalliance.org.uk/membership-accreditation/what-is-daha-accreditation/](http://dahalliance.org.uk/membership-accreditation/what-is-daha-accreditation/)
6. [data-protection/housing-management-privacy-notice](#)