

Reading's Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy.

2023 - 2026

Overseen by the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board

A sub-group of Reading's Community Safety Partnership

DRAFT

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1 FOREWORD

I take great pride in introducing Reading's 2023-2026 Domestic Abuse Strategy, which is dedicated to protecting and serving the needs of all victim-survivors of domestic abuse. The Strategy builds upon the work delivered through the previous Strategy, whilst embracing the duties set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and our new strategic priorities.

Through this Strategy, we are committed to a true partnership approach, ensuring that the public health issue of domestic abuse is 'everyone's business'. Underpinning our Strategy is an intelligence-led Plan, setting out our activity to address the needs identified in our recent Strategic Needs Assessment, including Safe Accommodation options through collaborative commissioning, ensuring our reach is inclusive across all our communities and continuing to safeguard and advocate for children and young people who have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse.

As a Partnership, we acknowledge that this Strategy is being launched at a time when domestic abuse is still prevalent and our residents are facing further challenges following the COVID 19 pandemic, with cost-of-living pressures adding to risks posed to victim-survivors. Agencies are not immune to the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, with resources across the Partnership being more limited than ever before as a result of continuing cuts in public spending. Therefore, we are committed to working together with a strong, collaborative multi-agency approach to address the priorities set out in our Strategy. Working together, we will continue to do all we can to ensure that individuals who have been and continue to be affected by domestic abuse are at the heart of how we take our actions forward to combat the harms caused by domestic abuse.

Councillor Karen Rowland

Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety

Reading Borough Council

2 INTRODUCTION

Reading as a partnership have acknowledged the increase in the prevalence of Domestic Abuse and the devastating effects it can have on the individual and the communities they reside in. Reading have continued to support and commit to a collaborative, multi-agency approach in reducing the prevalence of Domestic Abuse and bettering the lives of victim-survivors and their families. The development of this Strategy is in response to the new published [Domestic Abuse Act 2021¹](#), placing a statutory duty on all local authorities to produce a Domestic Abuse Strategy, with significant emphasis on the Safer Accommodation initiative. We believe that a coherent Strategy that tackles Domestic Abuse effectively needs to be informed by an understanding of the various forms of Domestic Abuse whilst considering the needs within our borough through an evidence-based approach. Therefore, this strategy has been consulted on and co-developed by the Reading Domestic Abuse Partnership Board, on the basis of a robust Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment and consideration of service user feedback and victim-survivors voices which are central to the development of this Strategy.

The Reading Domestic Abuse Partnership Board was re-formed in 2021 in alignment with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and reports into the Reading Community Safety Partnership. The main responsibility of the Board is to strategically oversee and take ownership of the development and implementation of Domestic Abuse related priorities within Reading. The Reading Domestic Abuse Partnership Board acknowledge that reducing the prevalence of Domestic Abuse is beyond producing a Domestic Abuse Strategy but also ensuring that all priorities are successfully achieved and implemented. This will be fulfilled through the development of a coherent action plan, produced by the Reading Domestic Abuse Partnership Board which will include clear objectives, timelines and a review process to determine that the needs as highlighted by the Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment are being met effectively.

Our commitment as a Partnership to successfully deliver the above will allow us to meet the four main objectives set out by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which are to:

- **PROMOTE AWARENESS** of Domestic Abuse
- **PROTECT AND SERVE** victims of Domestic Abuse
- **TRANSFORM** the justice response to prioritise victim safety and provide an effective response to perpetrators
- **DRIVE CONSISTENCY** and better performance in the response to Domestic Abuse across all local areas, agencies and sectors.



2.1 DEFINING DOMESTIC ABUSE

As a Partnership, it is understood that statistically women are disproportionately affected by violent crimes which has been highlighted in the national response to [Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\)](#).² Despite this, it is recognised that all local services must provide

¹ GOV.UK (2021) [Domestic Abuse Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

² GOV.UK (2021) [Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\) strategy 2021 to 2024: call for evidence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

inclusive and accessible services for those who may present with different sexual/gender identities alongside intersectional factors that need tailored support systems of support. This Domestic Abuse Strategy will exclusively focus on Domestic Abuse rather than the wider strands of VAWG. Reference to Domestic Abuse in this Strategy is defined by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as:

Anyone aged 16 and over who are ‘personally connected’ to one another who may be experiencing behaviours inclusive of:

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

The above only needs to occur once to be considered abusive.

‘Personally connected’ in this instance can be defined as those who are:

Intimate relationships

- (1) In intimate relationships (both historic and current)
- (2) In civil partnerships (both historic and current)
- (3) Have agreed to marry one another (regardless of whether the agreement has been terminated)

Familial relationships

- (1) Those who maybe related
- (2) The person is a parent of the child
- (3) The person has parental responsibility for the child

The definition of Domestic Abuse relates to more than just intimate relationships, with a significant increase reported by statutory agencies around child to parent abuse. However, this Domestic Abuse Strategy will focus specifically on Domestic Abuse perpetrated in intimate relationships with our response to Child to Parent Abuse highlighted in the [One Reading Young People and Extra Familial Harm Strategy 2021/24](#)³. We also acknowledge and support that children and young people are individually victims of Domestic Abuse, regardless of whether they have personally experienced, heard or witnessed Domestic Abuse.



³ One Reading children and Young People’s Partnership (2021) [Early Help Strategy 2021-2023 update](#)

2.2 THE PREVALENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

2.3 NATIONAL CONTEXT:

- Police recorded 845,734 domestic abuse related crimes in the year ending March 2021 across England and Wales⁴
- 73% of victims involved in Domestic Abuse related crimes were female in the year ending March 2021 ⁵
- Domestic Abuse has cost communities an estimated £66.2 m in 2017⁶
- Costs the economy 47bn in total annually thus far
- March 2020 - 2.3 million victims of Domestic Abuse are aged 16-24 (1.6 million women and 757,000 men)⁷

2.4 LOCAL CONTEXT:

- 2020/21: 4,597 reports of Domestic Abuse related incidents (1% increase compared 2019/2020)
- 2,816 were recorded as crimes from the above number
- Most common reported crime was violence without injury (60%)
- 75% of victim survivors were female (Highlighting the gendered nature of domestic abuse)
- 75% of perpetrators were male
- Females aged 20-28 were most at risk of reporting domestic abuse
- Males aged 28-37 were most at risk of being reported as perpetrators
- 304 cases were discussed at MARAC 2020/21 (21 cases per 10,000)
- 2020/21 BWA received 243 referrals for their Reading Refuge Spaces
- 2020/21 99 refuge referrals were unsuccessful. Most common reasons for unsuccessful referrals:
 - Complex needs
 - Not safe in area
 - No recourse to public funds
 - High safety risk
 - No available refuge spaces

Domestic abuse is more than an individual or societal issue but rather a public health issue and a human rights violation⁸. This is due to the negative and long-lasting affects that Domestic Abuse has on the livelihood of victim-survivors'. It is estimated that annually, Domestic Abuse costs the economy £47bn⁹, with 2.3 million victim-survivors reporting instances of Domestic Abuse in 2020 and the police reporting 845,734 Domestic Abuse



⁴ Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2021) [Office of National Statistics \(ONS, 2021\) Domestic abuse prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2021](#)

⁵ Office of National Statistics (ONS,2021) [Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶GOV.UK (2019) [The economic and social costs of Domestic Abuse](#)

⁷ GOV.UK (2021) [Office of National Statistics \(ONS, 2021\) Domestic abuse prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2021](#)

⁸ World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) [Violence against women \(who.int\)](#)

⁹ GOV.UK (2019) [The economic and social costs of Domestic Abuse](#)

related crimes in 2021. Despite the severity of these statistics, it is well recognised that nationally, Domestic Abuse cases are under-reported. Irrespective of this, roughly £66.2m¹⁰ has been put forward by communities to reduce the prevalence of Domestic Abuse, with a continuous need for additional resources. Reporting Domestic Abuse can be a fearful experience, with many victim-survivors reporting barriers which can deter them from reaching the point of disclosure. Therefore, there is a significant emphasis across the Partnership in understanding and tackling the barriers and gaps within services to support victim-survivors and reduce the prevalence of Domestic Abuse within Reading.

Domestic Abuse within Reading is ‘everyone’s business’, with the Partnership taking a collaborative approach to reinforce this across all working networks.



3 SUMMARY OF OUR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

3.1 SAFER ACCOMMODATION

- A need to review and increase safer accommodation spaces through commissioning/de-commissioning where needed
- A need to explore dispersed accommodation for those who need it
- A need to explore self-contained accommodation for those who need it
- Exploring alternative accommodation solutions for older victims and those with disabilities
- A need to explore safe spaces for male victim-survivors
- A need to support those victim survivors with no recourse to public funds.

3.2 DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICES

- A need to increase available outreach support
- More specialist support workers to provide support that is fit for purpose for those with complex needs
- Understanding why younger victims are reluctant to access services
- Increasing interventions to support children and young people
- A need to make Domestic Abuse support services more visible in Reading

¹⁰ GOV.UK (2019) [The economic and social costs of Domestic Abuse](#)

4 READING'S DOMESTIC ABUSE & SAFE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY - 2023-2026 PRIORITIES

The Domestic Abuse Strategy for Reading 2023-26 set out the following five priority areas, which will be the focus of the three-year Delivery Plan:

4.1 PRIORITY 1: EFFECTIVELY COMMISSION REFUGE AND OTHER SAFE ACCOMMODATION SPACES

To ensure:

- There is a range of appropriate Safe Accommodation options for all victim-survivors of Domestic Abuse who need it
- Effective support is available to enable victim-survivors to return home safely or to move into alternative permanent accommodation quickly and safely

Safer accommodation is defined as the following:

- **Refuge accommodation** - Accommodation and intensive support where victim survivors must be residents to access support
- **Specialist safe accommodation**- Specialist refuges for specific groups, for example: BAME, LGBTQIA+, disabled victims and their children (this list is not exhaustive)
- **Dispersed accommodation** - Safe dedicated housing to supporting victims of domestic abuse in a self-contained area for victim survivors who are unable to stay in communal refuge or semi-independent accommodation with support for victims who may not require intensive support but are still at risk of abuse
- **Sanctuary schemes** - Properties within the local authority that have safety measures put in place to allow victim survivors to remain in their own homes where it is safe to do so
- **Move-on and second stage accommodation** - Projects temporarily accommodating victims' survivors and their families who no longer need an intense level of refuge support but would benefit from low level domestic abuse support
- **Other forms of domestic abuse emergency accommodation**- Safe places with appropriate support to give victim survivors the opportunity to make decisions within a temporary time span in an environment which is self-contained and safe.

Safe Accommodation provision in Reading up until June 2023.

- 3 refuge properties across 2 locations, providing a total of 21 beds which meets the criteria for the Women's Aid Quality Standard
- There are 4 Asian-specialist spaces which have shared funding between BWA and Reading Council.
- Reading Council also operates a Sanctuary Scheme which is considered safe accommodation under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, with the demand for this service significantly increasing between 2020-2022.

A significant part of the new Domestic Abuse Act 2021 highlights the importance of providing safer accommodation spaces for victim survivors and their children. The Act emphasises how critical it is to make safer accommodation accessible, encompassing the array of needs that victim-survivors present with. Reading Borough Council has adopted a more proactive approach to early intervention and prevention to homelessness and are able to rapidly facilitate access to private rented sector accommodation; including offering financial assistance where needed with deposits and rent in advance, however, at the time of writing this Strategy, access to private rented accommodation is becoming more challenging and the Partnership will explore options ensure the burden of lack of move-on provision is relieved. The Partnership also acknowledges that there are specific issues in relation to those victim-survivors with no recourse to public funds and will actively explore what support and help can be provided.

4.2 PRIORITY 2: RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

With a focus on:

- **Workforce Development** - Continue to support a knowledgeable and a well-trained workforce and develop new innovative ways to engage the workforce to commit to training development
- **Community awareness** - Promoting and supporting community mobilisation and awareness to understand and reduce the prevalence of Domestic Abuse.

All front-line services and agencies have the potential to interact with someone who has experienced or witnessed Domestic Abuse. The Domestic Abuse Partnership Board are committed to improving victim-survivors experiences, ensuring they receive appropriate and impactful responses from professionals. It is recognised that when Domestic Abuse concerns are resolved effectively and at an earlier stage, this sets positive and streamlined responses and support for the entire course of professional interactions with the victim-survivors, reducing the negative impacts of Domestic Abuse on victim-survivors and their children.

Moreover, the awareness and understanding of Domestic Abuse does not stop at training workforces. It is equally important to encourage and aid community mobilisation and training continuity, to make the issue of Domestic Abuse more visible and understood across all communities.

The training that has been delivered throughout 2019-2022 was positively received by 100% of delegates. This speaks to the positive impact training uptake has had across the Partnership, suggesting competency and a strong knowledge base that can empower and support victim-survivors accessing Reading's front life services.

The following strengths were identified:

- Confidence in dealing with disclosures of Domestic Abuse
- Confidence in asking the right questions and providing appropriate responses to disclosures
- A positive understanding in risk management

- Understanding referral pathways dependant on victim-survivors needs.

The Partnership acknowledges that this needs to continue but also that workforces need to be alert to changes in legislation, best practice and emerging themes, and this will be a focus within the Action Plan.

4.3 PRIORITY 3: ENGAGEMENT WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

With a view to:

- Encourage and gain trust from those experiencing abuse to remove barriers to accessing services
- Supporting victim-survivors to view seeking help as realistic at an earlier stage.

Diverse communities can be at a higher risk of experiencing Domestic Abuse due to their protected characteristics. These characteristics can sometimes make it difficult for diverse groups to have the confidence to seek support from mainstream Domestic Abuse organisations out of fear of being judged and a lack of understanding for their needs from professionals. The Partnership is committed to promoting equality and inclusivity, creating the same opportunities for all victim-survivors and their children and will set out clear actions within the Action Plan as to how it will tackle these priorities and the links across other areas of work across the wider Partnership.

4.4 PRIORITY 4: DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING A MULTI-AGENCY APPROACH TO WORKING WITH AN ARRAY OF GROUPS, INCLUSIVE OF PERPETRATORS, VICTIM SURVIVORS (IRRESPECTIVE OF GENDER/SEXUALITY IDENTITY)

With a focus on:

4a: Providing the highest standard of support for victim-survivors

The empowerment and advocacy of all victim-survivors is central to all statutory agencies' responses to Domestic Abuse. The Partnership will continue to prioritise the protection and respect of all victim-survivors accessing routes to support, irrespective of gender or sexual identity. Every Domestic Abuse related incident is different, with no direct definition of how a victim-survivor of Domestic Abuse may present. Therefore, it is important that all services supporting victim-survivors are adaptable and accessible to allow for anyone suffering from Domestic Abuse to feel confident to seek support and have their needs met effectively.

4b: Strengthening the local response to perpetrators to break cycles of abuse

Commonly, when addressing Domestic Abuse incidents, victim-survivors and their families are prompted to make drastic changes in their lives. This can be very distressing as victim-survivors and their children are forced to detach themselves from their communities, friends, family and social networks which can often place blame on the victim-survivor. Therefore, the Partnership will focus on targeting perpetrator behaviours, forming the correct response first time to bring perpetrators to justice and break the cycle of abusive

behaviours and repeat Domestic Abuse offences. Through our action plan, we will explore how as a Partnership we can make best use of the tools and powers available to remove perpetrators from the properties in which the abuse is taking place to ensure that victim-survivors can remain in their homes without causing further distress and disruption.

4.5 PRIORITY 5: CONTINUING TO SAFEGUARD AND ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED DOMESTIC ABUSE

Children and young people are recognised as victims of Domestic Abuse, regardless of whether they have witnessed or experienced Domestic Abuse. The Partnership recognises that the voices and opinions of children and young people are often overlooked and that their contributions need to be incorporated into all strategies and action plans relating to Domestic Abuse. To prioritise and understand the needs of children and young people allows for interventions and support mechanism to be put in place which can address unhealthy behaviours that can cause cycles of abuse, leading to children and young people being at a high risk of being perpetrators or victims themselves and our Action Plan will set out how we will ensure the voices of young people are captured and used to inform service delivery.

4.6 HOW WILL WE TACKLE OUR PRIORITIES?

This Strategy will be accompanied by a Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Plan, which will be delivered through the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board, reporting into the Community Safety Partnership Executive Group. The Domestic Abuse Partnership Board and wider Community acknowledges that this Strategy is being launched at a time when public finances are considerably impacted and when there are resourcing challenges across the Partnership, both factors of which impact on its response to tackling Domestic Abuse and supporting Victim Survivors in Reading. In response to these challenges, the Partnership is committed delivering a realistic and achievable plan and to ensure more effective and efficient use of the resources within each agency to tackle Domestic Abuse collaboratively.

Underpinning these priorities is the need to embed a strong communication strategy to ensure that residents feel well informed about what is happening to tackle issues of crime and disorder and promote reporting mechanisms and make best use of data available to the Partnership to ensure resources are effectively utilised to achieve successful outcomes for these outcomes.

5 GOVERNANCE AND LINKS TO OTHER STRATEGIES

This Strategy and plan will be delivered by Reading's Domestic Abuse Partnership Board and will be monitored by Reading's Community Safety Partnership. This Strategy will also complement other key strategies across the Partnership and nationally, aiming to improve day-to-day life for residents. These include:

[Reading's Community Safety Partnership Community Safety & Serious Violence Strategy and Plan 2023 - 2026 - Link to be added when finalised](#)

[National Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2021-2024](#)

This National Strategy not only focuses on Domestic Abuse, but various strands of VAWG affecting Women and Girls such as sexual violence, stalking and harassment, forced marriage and so-called ‘honour’ based violence (this list is not exhaustive). The four main objectives of this Strategy which Reading’s Domestic Abuse Partnership Board are committed to prioritising are to, prioritise prevention, support victims, pursue perpetrators and have stronger working systems across agencies.

[Local Thematic Review: Services provided to young people and their families in relation to serious youth violence \(Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership\)](#)

Following two incidents in 2021 involving six young people who were charged with serious offences, the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership commissioned a Thematic review that found that some young people who committed serious offences had adverse childhood experiences and were often involved with a range of agencies with limited engagement and successful outcomes. These young people were also more likely to be involved in crime and/or sexual exploitation. This thematic review allows for the Partnership to consider interventions and collaborative working with relevant agencies to inform decision making and intervention development, regarding the prevention of unhealthy behaviours in children and young people.

[Local One Reading Young People and Extra Familial Harm Strategy 2021 - 2024](#)

The One Reading Young People and Extra Familial Harm Strategy focuses on responding and bettering the challenges young people face outside their homes and wider social contexts. Extra Familial harm within the Strategy includes child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, missing children, gang affiliation, county lines and serious youth violence. All of these crimes can occur through social media, peers, schools, neighbourhoods and wider community settings, which ties into the work the Partnership aim to support within schools to better the experiences of children and young people



6 REVIEWING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STRATEGY

This Domestic Abuse Strategy will be reviewed over the course of three years (2023-2026). To ensure that this Strategy is being effectively delivered, it will be assessed using a detailed action plan that will be agreed and monitored by the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board. The Partnership will also be responsible for reporting into the Community Safety Partnership every six months, to maintain accountability and achieve the objectives as set out by the Strategy and action plan. It is important to consider that due to legislations being published at different times under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the action plan will remain under review and continue to be a flexible document that aligns with all Domestic Abuse legislation.