

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 20 January 2025

Report Title

Recommissioning of Rotherham’s Domestic Abuse Refuge

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

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Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report sets out the recommendations for the future of the Domestic Abuse Refuge Service at the end of its current contract in September 2025. These services offer temporary emergency accommodation with support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse and their families fleeing their homes.

Recommendations

That Cabinet approve the recommissioning of Domestic Abuse Refuge and Temporary Accommodation Services, through a competitive procurement process, for a four-year term from 1 October 2025 to 30 September 2029 with the option to extend up to 2 years.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Equality Screening Assessment Part A
Appendix 2 Equality Screening Assessment Part B
Appendix 3 Carbon Impact Analysis

Background Papers

None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No consideration by any other committee, scrutiny or advisory panel

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Recommissioning of Rotherham's Domestic Abuse Refuge

1. Background

- 1.1 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, controlling, or coercive.
- 1.2 The Act places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure victims and their children are placed in refuges and other safe accommodation. Additionally, it ensures such safe accommodation services provide adequate trauma recovery, particularly for emotional and post – separation abuse. All those made homeless by domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance and support.
- 1.3 Domestic Abuse is a key priority of the Safer Rotherham Partnership. The Safer Rotherham Partnerships Domestic Abuse Strategy 2022-2027 vision is:

“To reduce the prevalence of Domestic Abuse. To provide a co-ordinated approach to tackling Domestic Violence and Abuse that enables early identification and improved response that safeguards and supports the victim and any children. Reach out to underrepresented groups and hard-to-reach communities by finding new ways to address this important issue.”

- 1.4 The Council has a range of services dedicated to domestic abuse. This includes commissioned services and inhouse services for domestic abuse support and domestic abuse accommodation. The Refuge contract forms part of Rotherham's wider domestic abuse offer and pathway.
- 1.5 **Commissioning Activity**
- 1.6 The Council commissions a Domestic Abuse Refuge service. This is currently provided by a specialist local domestic abuse charity – Hopian - (formerly known as Rotherham Rise). The contract commenced on the 1 October 2021 following a competitive tender process, with a contract term of 2 years and the option to extend by a further 1-year term resulting in the contract expiring 30 September 2024. An Officer Decision was taken to award a further 1-year domestic abuse refuge contract to the same provider on a direct basis in order to complete a review of the requirements for the service. This extension commenced 1 October 2024 and will expire on the 30 September 2025.
- 1.7 Following the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, additional funding was granted to local authorities by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MCHLG), formerly the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Part of this funding has been utilised to increase the provision of the commissioned Domestic Abuse Refuge service by increasing the number of dispersed properties for domestic abuse victims, known as Safer Option Properties (SOP). This has provided a minimum of an additional 8 units of safe accommodation in the

Borough for victims of domestic abuse and their families who have had to flee their home. From the 1 April 2025, funding for Domestic Abuse services is included with the Local Government Finance Settlement.

- 1.8 The current Domestic Abuse Refuge contract consists of:
- Women's only Refuge containing 10 units, 8 which are in the core refuge and 2 dispersed properties within close proximity to the main refuge building. The refuge includes support for women and children and features a playroom for younger children, a 'den' for older children and outdoor space.
 - Safer Option Properties (SOP): a minimum of 8 dispersed properties (2-3 bedrooms) distributed across the Rotherham borough. These are not restricted to women only. The children's worker at the Refuge can also support children living in the dispersed accommodation.
- 1.9 Overall, there are 18 units of supported accommodation in the Rotherham Borough for people fleeing domestic abuse.
- 1.10 The Council, Housing Services, also ringfences 13 temporary accommodation properties specifically for domestic abuse victims and employs two domestic abuse housing officers to support people in these properties and other non-commissioned emergency provision.
- 1.11 **Service Overview and Aims**
- 1.12 The Service supports victims of domestic abuse to keep themselves and their dependents safe, to live independently, developing confidence, enabling participation in group work and social activities to combat loneliness and social isolation. Individuals will also be supported to gain the skills required to manage their own tenancy, to participate as fully as possible in the local community, explore their housing options and move on to secure safe and settled accommodation.
- 1.13 The service adopts an integrated, trauma informed approach to support and supports both the victims and their families. There is a specialist Children's worker employed by the project.
- 1.14 The Refuge supports victims and survivors from all over the country and is not just a service for Rotherham Residents. This is due to the nature of domestic abuse and ensuring the safety of those fleeing is paramount. Victims of domestic abuse in Rotherham can access the refuge service in Rotherham if this is deemed a safe option but can also access refuge services commissioned by other local authorities across the country. Each referral is assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- 1.15 The current provision can support families with up to 5 children (dependent on the unit), and additionally 2 units in the refuge have lowered counters and an accessible wet room which could be suitable for a wheelchair user.

1.16 **Service Performance**

- 1.17 The performance data below is captured from contract monitoring in 2023/2024.
- 1.18 The availability rate across the Refuge contract has remained high throughout the year (96%-100%) and the occupancy rate has also fluctuated between 87.8% and 100%. This presents the demand for the services. The occupancy rate is less than 100%, due to the time taken to prepare the unit for the next tenant including finding a suitable referral and completing all the appropriate checks and the time spent on unit refurbishments due to building upgrades.
- 1.19 The Refuge service has supported a high number of children - this ranges between 16 - 29 children per quarter in 2023/24.
- 1.20 For the year 2023/24, 37 service users have accessed and left both Refuge and SOP with the majority of service users accessing the service for less than 6 months (56%).
- 1.21 69% of service users who left the service were able to secure and obtain their own settled accommodation upon leaving the service and for 51% of service users this was within Rotherham. Reasons for those service users who did not meet this outcome include when a service user abandons their tenancy (2.5%), they choose to return to perpetrator (5%) and they move in with friends and families (11%).
- 1.22 60% of service users had a reduction in risk upon leaving the service (22 service users) and 40% of service users maintained the same risk level (15 service users).
- 1.23 Outcomes reporting for those who have accessed the service in 2023/24 and left the service show that where a need was identified, 100% of the needs were met in relation to improved economic wellbeing, increased life skills, reduced isolation and increased confidence measures.
- 1.24 Outcomes experienced from the Domestic Abuse Refuge Service have been overwhelmingly positive. Additionally, quotes from service users and case studies from the service demonstrate the impact these services have for victims/ survivors of domestic abuse and their families who have had to flee their homes.

2. **Key Issues**

- 2.1 The Council has a statutory duty to place victims and their children made homeless due to domestic abuse into safe accommodation. The current Domestic Abuse Refuge Contract is due to expire on the 30 September 2025. Recommissioning the service on this timeframe will ensure continuous service provision and stability for those who are accessing the current Refuge Service.

- 2.2 The Refuge contract offers emergency accommodation with domestic abuse support. The support is aimed to be temporary with appropriate move on discussed once someone accesses the accommodation. There are barriers to moving on including delays with accessing suitable affordable housing which can increase the length of stay families have. However, most service users access the service for less than 6 months, this allows appropriate throughput to the service.
- 2.3 The current Refuge building was purpose built and is owned by Together Housing. It is in a discreet location, with good access to local amenities and transport, that is only shared on a need-to-know basis, to maintain safety of the residents. Due to the positive feedback on the suitability of the Refuge Building, and a reported barrier to the market of other suitable available properties, the current Refuge Building can be offered as an option to be utilised again during the contract.
- 2.4 **Contract Value:**
- 2.5 The overall current contract value per annum is £250,000 for the core contract.
- 2.6 **MHCLG Funding for SOP properties:**
- 2.7 From the 1 April 2025, funding for Domestic Abuse services is included with the Local Government Finance Settlement. Previously it was provided as a separate New Burdens grant from MHCLG.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 3.1 Option 1 and recommended: Engage in an open tender procedure in line with Procurement Regulations 2015. This contract will have an initial term of 4 years with the option to extend for a further 2 years (on a 1+1 basis). The annual value of the contract is £250,000, which will be fixed and firm for the initial contract term, with the opportunity to explore any uplift in line with CPI for the extension years if utilised. The contract will be mobilised by the 1 October 2025. A contract will be established for the core requirements and a single provider framework alongside will enable the ability to enter call off contracts for the additional funding should this arise. Any additional funding will be utilised for innovation including increasing the number of dispersed properties if grant money is received from the MHCLG.
- 3.2 The core refuge will remain for women only and a single sex space as recommended in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Any additional dispersed properties will have no exclusion criteria and referrals will be accepted by the successful provider based on need.
- 3.3 Option 2 and not recommended: The domestic abuse accommodation services are terminated at the end of the contract term on the 30 September 2025. This option is not recommended as the Council will be unable to fulfil its statutory duty. This would also put additional pressure on

the Council to source ad-hoc emergency accommodation for victims and their families made homeless due to domestic abuse.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 Adult Care, Housing and Public Health have undertaken consultation with a range of key stakeholders, including service users who are residents of the refuge, staff at the refuge and the Council Homeless Team, as well as members of the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Priority Group, via questionnaires and in person focus groups.

4.2 Key themes from the consultation indicate that there is a need for more accommodation spaces for people fleeing domestic abuse, and that both the current standard of building and accommodation and level/ quality support is extremely high.

4.3 Service users and support staff have fed back that the refuge building is in a good location, close to GP's, schools and other local amenities and that support workers help them to get to know the local area and access services.

4.4 Examples of service user voice present the positive feedback around the services including:

"I wish that all refuges had the level of training, care, consideration and support and access to everything the children have here".

"The refuge saved my life".

"Refuges should learn from the refuge here".

"I feel safe in this area".

4.5 Key internal partners; Housing, Children and Young People's Services, Regeneration and Environment and Adult Safeguarding are involved in the development of the specification to ensure that it takes account of their requirements.

4.6 Neighbouring local authorities market engagement events have provided feedback. Where possible, if potential accommodation for the main refuge is included in the tender this has advantages for potential bidders, especially when mobilisation timescales are tight. Additionally, having longer term contracts adds more stability to the market and makes the contract a more attractive option for potential bidders and provides stability for service users.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1

Activity	Target Date	Accountable
Approval of the recommissioning process via a competitive procurement process.	January 2025	Cabinet
Undertake a competitive procurement process.	February 2025	Strategic Commissioning/ Procurement
Award and mobilisation of contract.	June 2025	Strategic Commissioning/ Procurement
Domestic Abuse Refuge and Temporary Accommodation Services Commence.	October 2025	Strategic Commissioning

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 The competitive procurement of this service will be undertaken in compliance with the Council's Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules and Public Contract Regulations 2015 (as amended).

6.2 The value of this contract is expected to be £250,000 a year. This is an increase on 2024/25 due to a full year effect. Funding is available in Adults and Children's budgets.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The estimated value of the Contract is £1.5 million (with both the extension periods), and as such it falls above the threshold for Social and Other Specific Services (SOSS) in the Public Contract Regulations 2015 (as amended) of £663,540. The contract is also subject to the Council's Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules which require competitive tendering for SOSS contracts with a value above the Relevant Threshold. The recommended approach would comply with both provisions.

7.2 Legal Services will be consulted on the form of the Agreement.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no perceived human resource implications associated with this report. However, Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) may apply should the contract be awarded to a new supplier and potential providers will be required to declare their commitment to adhering to employment legislation regarding the TUPE regulations.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 The Domestic Abuse Refuge supports the whole family, there is dedicated provision for children, this will remain in place for the re-commissioned service.
- 9.2 Children and Young Peoples Service have been involved in the development of the service specification, Key Performance Indicators and contract monitoring to measure the impact of services on children and young people. This will continue in the new contract.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 The contracts will include Equality, Diversity and Accessibility monitoring and access to services will be for survivors and victims from a wide range of backgrounds.
- 10.2 Equality and Diversity data is collected as part of ongoing contract management.
- 10.3 An Equality Screening Assessment Part A and Part B has been completed and is attached in Appendix 1 and 2 respectively.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 The impact on the Council and borough CO2 emissions and climate change are considered to be small.
- 11.2 See Appendix 3 for the Carbon Impact Assessment.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1 Domestic Abuse is a key partnership issue and is currently a priority through the Safer Rotherham Partnership. Partners have been fully engaged in the review processes to date and are kept updated through the partnership priority group.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 There is an identified need and statutory duty to ensure that victims and survivors of domestic abuse and their children can access the right support in safe accommodation when they need it.
- 13.2 The needs analysis and consultation with people who access the services and those who work in the service supports the need to re-commission services when the current contract term ends.
- 13.3 One of the key risks identified is that if there is a change in the current provider, a lengthy mobilisation period will be required for any necessary recruitment, staff training, subcontract agreements etc. to avoid any disruption to the women and families residing in the Refuge. The current

timeline allows three months for bidders to implement. A project group is managing the timeline and working to achieve set deadlines which will avoid any delays.

- 13.4 The risk of a gap in service provision is mitigated by having the proposed procurement timeline and team involvement and market engagement prior to publication of the tender.

14. Accountable Officers

Ian Spicer, Strategic Director, Adult Care, Housing and Public Health

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp OBE	23/12/24
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	18/12/24
Assistant Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	06/12/24

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