

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board

12 March 2025

-: Present :-

Councillor Long (Chairman)

Councillors Cowell, Douglas-Dunbar, Fellows, Foster, Johns, Law, Spacagna (Vice-Chair), and Tolchard

(Also in attendance: Councillors Bye, Carter, Penny, David Thomas, Tranter and Tyerman)

50. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Hutchings.

51. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 12 February 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

52. Housing Audit and Compliance Framework

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Finance, Councillor Tyerman, Managing Director, Liam Montgomery, and Housing Manager, Anita Merritt presented the submitted Quarterly Housing Audit and Compliance Report for Quarter 3 2024/2025 for all housing stock for TorVista Homes and those that had been transferred to the Council together with the temporary accommodation units and responded to questions.

Members were updated that the data in red relating to temporary accommodation was all compliant and had been completed but the Council was just waiting for some dates to come through. There was some outstanding PAT testing which had been ordered for temporary accommodation, but the dates were still to be confirmed. Temporary accommodation was currently being managed by a different Team of Officers, but it was intended to bring all housing elements together to ensure a consistent approach to all the Council's housing stock.

The Board asked questions in relation to there being two or three properties with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating below C, with new lettings being required to be C or above later in the year, what plans did the Council have to look at EPC ratings on those properties and does the Council have any ambitions to uprate the C rated properties to A or B; it was understood that all properties from TorVista Homes were being transferred to the Council, what was the reason that this had not

happened; was it expected that the Council would not be able to transfer existing tenants from TorVista Homes to the Council; the report mentioned adaptations such as wet rooms and level access showers, would the properties have other accessible elements as well; when accessible properties become vacant would they be considered for use by people fleeing domestic abuse; page 8 referred to a vacant property and alternative use being explored, what was this; and had fire risk assessments been completed for the temporary accommodation.

In response to questions in respect of EPCs, Members were advised that upgrading EPCs was part of the wider programme linked to climate change looking at all Council properties including the housing stock. It would be included as part of the ongoing repairs and maintenance. The Council would ensure that all properties were rated C or above within the required timeframe to ensure compliance.

The Board was advised that it had been planned for all TorVista Homes properties to be transferred to the Council, but this had been delayed as some of the tenancies could not be changed for existing tenants, those would be transferred as they become vacant. The Council was aware that there were some limitations on the type of accommodation that Councils could offer as this was one of the reasons that TorVista Homes was set up in the first place, but it was a surprise that the Council would have to rely on them becoming vacant before they could be transferred. This made it hard to put an end date on the process. All those that could be transferred had been transferred. There was no difference to the tenants in the way the property was being managed apart from the name on the bill. It was noted that there were still some administrative costs associated with running the TorVista Homes accounts for longer than anticipated.

In response to questions around accessible properties, Members were advised that the Council was trying to get to a stage where they would look across all areas of the Council when a Council owned property became vacant to use the stock as strategically as possible to make the best use of the size and type of accommodation, this could be for cared for young people, adult social care clients, people on waiting lists, people fleeing domestic abuse or those in temporary accommodation. All the temporary accommodation purchased was intended to house families but there was also a need for single person properties. Members received a verbal update on the vacant house of multiple occupation (HMO) property and the restrictions relating to the Government Grant and some of the potential options being explored. Officers from across the Council were working together to find the best solution for the property and clients moving forward.

It was noted that all compliance testing for temporary accommodation (TA18) had been completed. Following the meeting it was confirmed that all fire extinguishers were up to date for Council owned stock with all the certificates received except for the two HMOs which had been completed but the certificates had not yet been received. There were two outstanding Fire Risk Assessments, but they had been booked in for week commencing 14 April 2025.

Resolved (unanimously):

1. that the Overview and Scrutiny Board note that the Housing Audit and Compliance Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Report demonstrates that Torbay Council is compliant in all areas regarding their housing stock. This now incorporates the existing TorVista Homes housing stock, transferred housing stock and temporary accommodation stock;
2. that the KPIs will continue to be mirrored and reported for all housing stock held by Torbay Council; and
3. that this will be presented quarterly to the Overview and Scrutiny Board as part of the quarterly performance monitoring report.

53. Update on Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Needs Assessment Refresh

The Cabinet Member for Adult and Community Services, Public Health and Inequalities, Councillor Tranter, and the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Commissioning and Strategy Lead, Shirley Beauchamp, presented the submitted report on the Domestic Abuse Service Safe Accommodation Needs Assessment Refresh and responded to questions. The Director of Adult and Community Services, Jo Williams also attended the meeting and responded to questions. An updated Action Plan (Appendix 2) was circulated prior to the meeting following confirmation of changes the additional £400k funding.

Members were advised that out of 23 units there were only 3 or 4 single person units and the Council was looking to increase the number of single persons units. There had been an increase in demand of people accessing the Domestic Abuse Service by 58% being referred. This did not necessarily translate into the need for safe accommodation but highlighted the increase in demand for support since the new Domestic Abuse Duty came into force in October 2021. It was noted that there was also an issue with people presenting themselves as fleeing from domestic abuse to secure safe accommodation, however, in many cases following a risk assessment this was as a result of relationship breakdown rather than domestic abuse.

The Board was informed that the Government had confirmed an additional £400k funding for Domestic Abuse included within the Base Budget which would enable longer term commissioning. There remained a number of short term grant funds supporting the Service which had been extended to March 2026. The Team was awaiting the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review due in June 2025 to have a view on longer term funding and sustainability for some of the projects. Members were advised that the Team was working with Children's Services colleagues looking at emotional and therapeutic support to children and their families impacted by domestic abuse and would be procuring the Adult and Young People's Recovery Toolkit as a way to support this.

Members asked questions in relation to how the Peninsula therapeutic approach would work; how long did people stay in safe accommodation (this was 6 to 9 months); what was economic abuse; how was the Service reaching out to minority groups; what action was taken to try to keep people's pets with them when they flee

domestic abuse; what was being done in respect of behaviour change programmes for perpetrators and what would the cost be; the launch of the Older People's Charter was due in November 2024 but was now scheduled for April 2025, was this on schedule; paragraph 2.4 of the report referred to reliable Devon and Cornwall Police data not being available, was this still the case; there had been a 58% increase in referrals how many people did that equate to and was that a result of increased awareness of the Service; in other areas it had been raised that people from the transgender community were unable to access domestic abuse safe accommodation for women and were placed in unsafe temporary accommodation, how were they supported in Torbay; and would Local Government Reorganisation impact on domestic abuse.

Members were advised that it was hoped to work with the colleagues from the wider South West Peninsula on an emotional trauma offer as part of the Domestic Abuse Programme funded through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) and NHS England, but they had recently decided not to include domestic abuse in that work unless sexual violence was also a major factor. Officers would be speaking with the OPCC and looking at how a therapeutic offer could be supported and funded.

It was noted that economic abuse was wider than financial abuse as for example this covered access to work or study as well as finances and made victims depend on the perpetrator financially.

Members were advised that the Team recognised the importance of pets as well as the impact on the pets themselves of domestic abuse and works closely with Refuge for Pets which provides foster placements for pets until families move into permanent accommodation. Some of the commissioned accommodation did allow pets, this was normally in houses rather than flats.

The Board was informed that the co-ordinated community response sat alongside Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance accreditation and the Whole Housing Approach, looking at the whole housing system to try to prevent the need for people to come into domestic abuse accommodation in the first place. This takes a lot of work and a lot of resource (£160k a year over two years, plus membership of relevant organisations). It includes co-ordinating, reviewing policies and procedures, and training to ensure early identification and would take money out of the support requirements identified as part of the safe accommodation needs assessment. It was noted that there was a risk within the Service Risk Assessment on capacity to deliver the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy objectives. Therefore it had been decided not to progress this work at this time but it remains a recommendation in the action plan.

In response to questions around minority groups, Members were advised that there were very low numbers of people coming forward from black and ethnic communities, and that the Service was starting to see a small number (under 5 households) approaching the service who have indefinite leave to remain status, or were experiencing honour based violence. There was a challenge over a lack of understanding in the Council about the legal position if someone was not entitled to public funds. There was support available through the Olive Project, a Devon based charity working for minority black and ethnic women experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence; and free training had been provided to Adults and Children's Services

staff. Due to the low numbers it was not felt viable to commission support ourselves however the Council continued to work with Peninsula partners on a targeted population strategy to prepare for the future and what may come out of the funding review to meet common needs identified in our safe accommodation needs assessments. It was noted that due to funding eligibility criteria a lot of small grass roots organisations were unable to access “by and for” grant funding that was available last year. Officers had lobbied the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Home Office regarding this issue as larger national organisations were not interested in developing services in the South West.

Members were advised of the various behaviour change programmes that had been in place since 2014, but that they had always been carried out using temporary funding. This included a grant funded project working with the Craft Framework supporting families and identifying domestic abuse at an early stage and to put in intervention to address this, however the project was unable to demonstrate the impact to make a suitable business case to take it forward. Work was still being delivered by the Standing Tall voluntary sector partnership through grant funding. A Peninsula bid for Perpetrator Funding, led by the OPCC had been submitted in 2023 but was unsuccessful. Members recognised the need for funding for behaviour change programmes to be sustainable and not one off as the programmes usually lasted for 26 weeks. There were two types of programmes for behaviour change, a high risk high harm programme costing around £90k per year, or a community based programme for medium risk perpetrators costing around £70k per year, both included support for the partner to manage escalation of risk whilst the perpetrator attends the programme.

Members were advised that the launch of the Older People’s Charter was on track, but it had not yet been decided how it would be rolled out e.g. through domiciliary care providers, voluntary sector groups, Healthwatch etc. It was noted that it was difficult for some older people to recognise that they were victims of domestic abuse. There was also a blind spot in the statistics which stop at 74 as well as this being a cultural issue.

The Board was informed that data was now being received from Devon and Cornwall Police but the accuracy of the data was being reviewed by them. National data was being used through the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

Members noted that there were 1,569 referrals in 2023 and by the end of March 2025 there were projected to be 2,483 referrals to the Domestic Abuse Service. It was felt that this was partly due to awareness of the Service and whilst this did not translate into the same numbers of people needing safe accommodation this did indicate that those numbers were also increasing.

The Board was advised that it was not known what the impact of Local Government Reorganisation would be on domestic abuse. However, Torbay Council was already working closely with Peninsula peers, which was not necessarily the case across the Country.

Members were informed that whilst there were no statistics on how many victims stay in the home with children, it was not often that a perpetrator was left in the family

home. The Council was working with other areas on a Managed Reciprocal scheme whereby a victim in a social housing tenancy could be moved out of Torbay and directly into another social housing property where appropriate, and then Torbay would reciprocate and provide a similar offer to people from that area. This could be applied to perpetrators as well to enable the family to stay in their home. There was not a problem with transgender people accessing safe accommodation in Torbay as our accommodation units were all self-contained.

The Board noted that the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board was due to undertake a spotlight review on domestic abuse later in the year.

Resolved (unanimously):

1. that the Cabinet be recommended:
 - a. that the Overview and Scrutiny Board supports the Safe Accommodation Action Plan set out in the revised Appendix 2 to the submitted report as a way forward; and
 - b. to explore identifying £100k to be put into the Base Budget to fund suitable behaviour change programmes (aimed at perpetrators) for domestic abuse and sexual violence;
2. that the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board be requested to write to the two Members of Parliament:
 - a. to ask them explore what opportunities there are for funding for behaviour change programmes (aimed at perpetrators) for domestic abuse and sexual violence to ensure that there is sustainable funding within the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review; and
 - b. to ask them what is being done to challenge the National Crime Statistics only including people up to 74 when people are living longer and are still subjected to domestic abuse and sexual violence;
3. that the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board be requested to write to the Police and Crime Commissioner to ask if there is any funding available to support behaviour change programmes (aimed at perpetrators) for domestic abuse and sexual violence.
4. that the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to present an all Member briefing on funding for domestic abuse and sexual violence following the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in June 2025 so that Members can be aware of the impact on the projects which currently only have 12 months funding.

Chairman