

Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee

(Remotely via Teams)

Members Present:

16 April 2021

Chairperson: Councillor S.K.Hunt

Vice Chairperson: Councillor R.L.Taylor

Councillors: D.Cawsey, C.J.Jones, H.N.James, S.Pursey, S.Rahaman, N.T.Hunt and S.A.Knoyle

Officers In Attendance S.Brennan, C.Plowman, N.Headon, A.Fisher, C.Jones, E.Wellington, L.Potterton and N.L.Thomas

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors A.Wingrave and M.Harvey

1. **Chairs Announcements**

The Committee was informed of an amendment to the following reports on the Cabinet Agenda:

Agenda Item 6 – Metal Detecting Policy

Agenda Item 7 – Commercial Property Grant: 44 Victoria Gardens, Neath, SA11 3BH

It was clarified that these reports were being amended to include reference to the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) as per the IIA guidance.

2. **Declarations of interest**

The following member made a declaration of interest:

Cllr. M.Harvey -

Re. Agenda Item 5 –
Community Safety –
Violence Against Women,
Domestic Abuse and Sexual
Violence During the

Pandemic as he works for South Wales Police.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the following meetings were approved:

- 5 February 2021
- 17 March 2021

4. **Community Safety - Violence Against Women Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence During the Pandemic**

Members were provided with a presentation on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) during the pandemic.

Since the start of the Covid 19 pandemic, it was noted that there was concern over an anticipated 'spike' in domestic abuse at a local and national level; there was little time to prepare or adapt services for this expected demand. Officers explained that from the introduction of the UK lockdown in March 2020, local support services saw a 40% increase in demand which was across every risk level including standard, medium and high risk; this also included the Independent Domestic Violence Advisors service who specialised in supporting the highest risk victims. Rather than a 'spike' in demand, it was highlighted that the increase remained consistent across all services, which was still currently the case.

The Committee was informed of the Extraordinary Leadership Group which oversaw all of the work in relation to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence during the pandemic; this group enabled Officers to liaise with partners about the immediate concerns, demands, funding and staffing matters in order to identify what could be done as a collective to try and respond appropriately. It was noted that all of the services had resilience plans in place and tried to adapt to home working arrangements, whilst maintaining a presence in the local refuges to support those at greatest risk; there were some added pressures such as the additional deep cleaning services that were required, as well as PPE and appropriate risk assessments to safeguard staff and residents alike.

It was highlighted that there were concerning trends early on in the first lockdown. It was evident that the cases had a rapid increase in escalation and severity of violence being used, with many of the

cases reaching high risk when the incident was first reported to the Police. Officers stated that a lot of the referred cases had not been previously known to the Police, the Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA) Service or the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) process, which caused a great deal of concern.

Officers explained that there was an increase in the numbers of referrals that were coming from the health sector, particularly A&E departments; the number of referrals were higher than previous years. After looking into this increase further, it was noted that it was likely due to Covid 19 restrictions which only permitted the patient to attend appointments or the A&E department; this meant that Officers could identify some of the high risk cases that they might not have been able to under usual circumstances.

As a result of the demand on the service, it was stated that the number of staff case-loads that were being held by the IDVA Service were increasing very early on and elements of safety planning work was affected due to the closure of courts; Officers provided support within the criminal justice system and trials were delayed for many months, therefore there were cases held in service that would have likely moved on previous to the pandemic. Officers mentioned that some of their safety planning work will include relocation, however there were delays in housing which resulted in cases being held up. It was added that partner agencies, who provided the 'step down second phase support', were also seeing increased demands and waiting lists were developing with those services; this created a backlog in cases.

The presentation included data in relation to IDVA referrals from April 2019 to April 2021; the graph showed monthly data, however Officers usually analysed the data over the 12 month period. It was stated that the service received a total of 437 high risk referrals (high risk of harm or homicide), with 401 of those referrals being female victims and 36 male victims; 408 of those referrals came from South Wales Police as a result of incidents being reported to the Police.

Officers highlighted that they were pleased with the increase in the level of engagement during lockdown and homeworking; nearly 300 cases engaged with the service and Officers were able to address safety planning and risk management with those cases. However, it was noted that there were concerns around the high number of

children (479) who were linked to the cases referred into the service; 17 of those referrals were identified as pregnant females.

It was stated that in late March of 2020, difficult decisions had to be made in regards to mobilising the team to be able to work from home, in a very limited amount of time; however it was effective from early on and the changes in the working practices and processes had been working really well, ensuring the team could continue to provide a premium service.

Members were informed that one of the main barriers the team had to overcome was that access to the South Wales Police database had been lost; Officers would routinely use this database during some of the safety planning work they do, particularly at the point of crisis. However, it was highlighted that South Wales Police had been very helpful in providing some alternative options for Officers to be able to gain access to the information that they would have gained from the database; particularly around the criminal justice system and their responses in relation to criminal offences and outcomes for the cases Officers were working with.

Throughout the pandemic, it was noted that there had been zero face to face appointments with the service, and instead all contact was virtual or via telephone; this helped provide the IDVA Service with more time to engage with the cases. It was confirmed that the team were going to carry out an analysis from this to see if engagement rates could be improved going forward; initially, it was thought that contact and engagement would dip during the pandemic, as people were unable to leave their homes, however this proved not to be the case which was encouraging for Officers.

Detailed in the presentation, it stated that some of the repeat victims with complex needs did not access services as routinely as usual; this was a continued concern for Officers, as some had multiple other support needs around mental health and/or substance misuse. It was mentioned that a piece of work would be carried out in relation to the repeat cases; Officers had asked South Wales Police for assistance in carrying out this work by looking at some of the cases that were familiar to the service, to identify why they hadn't used the service over the last 12 months. Alongside this work, it was added that Officers would be re-visiting a piece of work that was started prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, which looked at adapting the service approach to try and improve engagement rates and obtain more successful outcomes with them.

A discussion took place in relation to funding arrangements, to which it was noted that during 2020/2021 Welsh Government awarded an additional £130k of funding to VAWDASV services across the Country Borough; this was primarily to support some of the additional demand and pressures caused as a result of the pandemic. It was explained that this money was provided through a number of funding streams with varying criteria; there was a lot of administration involved in this and it often hindered the service from being able to make quite a significant impact. However, the team had made good use out of the funding provided, which included:

- To further promote local services to reassure people that services and help was still available despite the lockdown; this was done through the Communications and Engagement Group.
- To train local specialist providers staff on working with perpetrators.
- To contribute to the employment of two additional IDVA's; this doubled the capacity of resources, helping with factors such as the demand and pressures on the service and staff wellbeing.
- To support local refuges and accommodation with PPE, cleaning products and any additional facilities to help them better respond to the new needs placed on services and to keep residents safer

It was added that the service had been fortunate to receive further funding from the Police and Crime Commissioners Office, to employ a regional DRIVE IDVA and to support the roll out of the DRIVE perpetrator programme in Neath Port Talbot; the service also received a Housing Support Grant which had been used to purchase additional target hardening equipment for victims, including window locks, panic alarms and CCTV.

The Committee was informed that in April 2020 the new NPT VAWDASV strategy 'Healthy Relationships for Stronger Communities' was introduced; this was a refresh of the first strategy that was introduced in 2016. It was noted that as a result of the pandemic, an addendum was added to the strategy which outlined the areas that could be progressed and those which may have needed to be postponed temporarily. Officers confirmed that the Leadership Group and its sub groups continued to make excellent progress on the key objectives in the strategy, despite having additional demands and challenges to address.

It was explained that there were a number of sub groups that had been set up to deliver on the objects within the strategy:

- Communications and Engagement – this subgroup had been mobilised during the pandemic and throughout the last year staff had been able to promote the services which had been available; this included distributing leaflets across Neath Port Talbot and displaying banners in various places such as supermarkets and where football events would take place. It was added that services such as hairdressers and foodbanks had been given flyers in order to try and promote the services to the communities who were usually harder to reach.
- Relationship and Sexuality Education – lesson delivery had been paused during the pandemic due to the school closures and key events like the Crucial Crew event were also on hold; however, since the restrictions had started to ease there were plans in place to get these events back up and running again.
- Perpetrator Work – there was ongoing work with the Police and Crime Commissioner on rolling out the DRIVE programme across Neath Port Talbot and there was also continued discussions in relation to the expansion of the Swansea Equilibrium Programme.

With regards to training, it was noted that Group 2 training had continued to be rolled out across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot; Group 1 training was being delivered on a virtual platform whilst the face to face delivery had been paused.

Members were informed that the criminal courts had reopened and cases were now being heard; the IDVA staff were hoping to return to court as soon as they were able, to support victims within the court process. It was mentioned that developments were underway for an increased remote evidence facilities across Wales.

A discussion took place in relation to latest developments and the current work streams within the services; one of which was Safe Spaces for Women. Following the recent murder of Sarah Everard in Clapham, it was stated that there had been a subsequent public outcry on women's safety in public; a Task and Finish Group had been convened to address the various matters in relation to this. It was noted that this was going to need to be a national piece of work, however Neath Port Talbot had a very strong local partnership and had the opportunity to influence and change at a local level. Officers

explained that the Task and Finish Group will be completing the following:

- Designing and implementing a '#SafeSpaceNPT' campaign; to establish a recognisable brand and get as many businesses and retailers on board as possible who could sign up to the scheme and advertise in their windows with the posters or stickers produced. It was added that this would provide a safe space for individuals in the communities and a place in which they could make a phone call to the appropriate service or obtain information about the service.
- Considering safety apps that individuals could download onto their phones. It was mentioned that there was a particular app already in existence called Hollie Guard; when downloaded onto a phone, if that person felt in danger they would need to shake their phone and the app would notify three of their contacts of their location to let them know they were in need of immediate help.
- Considering training hospitality staff and taxi drivers on these matters and safety; Neath Port Talbot had an excellent training and development department, and the contact Rachel Dixon was very supportive and had been involved in the Task and Finish Group.
- Continuing to develop awareness raising, particularly in the education settings as early intervention and early education opportunities were really important.
- Continuing to consider additional ways to work with perpetrators and those who were responsible for why people felt unsafe in the community.

Another work stream discussed was in relation to Children and Young People Services; it was importance for Officers to ensure that all of the children that were identified in the homes where domestic violence was taking place, were supported appropriately. It was highlighted that another Task and Finish Group was convened to do the following:

- Look at the demands into services and offer reassurance to the Leadership Group that appropriate referrals were being made and that individuals weren't being missed off the systems.
- Establish whether Social Services had delivered more in-house throughout the pandemic, which Officers confirmed that they had.

- Identify whether some local specialist providers had launched new services during the pandemic that had not been as widely promoted as they would have pre-covid.
- Complete a mapping exercise of all services and develop an information leaflet on available services and their criteria for wider circulation.

Members asked if the additional funding that was awarded to the VAWDASV services in 2020 was going to be continued into the next financial year. It was highlighted that some of the funding would continue, however other funding opportunities would need to be explored moving into the next financial year in order to be able to continue supporting the two additional members of staff in their roles; the two new IDVAs had 18 month contracts, therefore there was a window of opportunity to explore the funding opportunities and identify how these posts could be continued. It was added that there was likely to be another increase in demand and people within the community needing continued support from the service, which highlighted the importance of maintaining the two new members of staff.

It was asked if there were larger data samples available which displayed the trends on a wider scale and if there was any way to deal with the trending peaks that Officers were aware of. Members were informed that there was a range of data available and that the presentation only included a snapshot of the trends over the past 12 months; it could be useful to overlay data across a longer term, and also look into the data from the support providers in the communities in order to provide a comparison. It was stated that Officers were aware of certain peaks of when individuals may access help or when referrals were brought into the service; historically, there were always peaks identified around particular sporting events such as the Six Nations and during these times Officers hold various campaigns in order to try and raise awareness of VAWDASV. In regards to the IDVA service, it was noted that when Officers had looked into the peaks post-Christmas/January time it was partly due to the resources involved in processing the referrals; there is usually a surge of referrals during this time and a surge in processing as staff return from Christmas leave, therefore the peaks weren't necessarily related to an increase in incidents over the Christmas period. It was added that high risk cases were not that influenced by the particular times or year or events, instead it was the low risk cases that were impacted.

Officers explained that the communications and engagement sub group were currently looking at data trends from the past few years to identify if there continued to be a peak during the particular times of year.

Officers were asked if they anticipated the levels of demand to increase or decrease, to which it was stated that the demand was likely to stay the same or increase over time; Officers had to rely on staffs commitment and dedication to what they do in order to respond to the increase in demand as there was little warning. It was noted that Officers felt very fortunate that they had been able to strengthen the service with two additional members of staff; however in the longer term, dealing with the demand was a worry and the need to be one step ahead in terms of reaching out to those in the community was a challenge. The Committee was informed that the communication work and training that the team carry out will increase the demand even further, as a lot of people within the community did not associate themselves with being a victim of domestic abuse; it was often the training and talks provided that made these individuals aware of their situation and realise they needed to get help.

Members asked if Officers could elaborate on the support that the team provides to children and young people involved in the cases. It was explained that the IDVA service only dealt with adults, however there was an array of children services that were available in which the team would refer into based on the circumstances of the individual cases. Officers provided examples of how the team and partners link in to ensure children obtain the support that they needed. The presentation briefly highlighted the current work ongoing around children and young people, and one piece of work mentioned was a mapping exercise in relation to what services were available for those in the community; it was suggested that once this visual was ready it could be circulated to Members. Officers stated that there were so many different services and even additional services which were brought in during the pandemic, which had not been as widely promoted; another piece of work scheduled to be carried out involved balancing out the services, as there were currently services which had waiting lists for children and new services which weren't as widely known, therefore the latter could help with alleviating some of the pressure of those in demand. Officers also expressed the challenges around the different funding brought in for particular services/pieces of work.

A discussion took place in relation to the new referrals and victims that had been brought into the service as a result of the pandemic, mainly through the health services. It was stated that the Health Board jointly owned the VAW Strategy with the Council and sit in on the teams communication group, as well as carrying out their own communication work; health settings and hospitals continued to promote domestic abuse services. The IRIS programme was mentioned, which was noted to be a positive development in the area as it enabled all doctors and medical staff in GP surgeries to be trained to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and ask the right questions; there was dedicated staff within those surgeries or cluster of surgeries, who would then meet with the patients to discuss the matter in more detail and make the appropriate referrals. It was suggested that when the time allowed, it would be useful to look into data for the number of new referrals that had become known throughout the pandemic.

A discussion took place in relation to the support that was available to male victims. Members were informed that the title of VAWDASV reflected the Welsh Government Act that was introduced in 2015 where it was felt that recognition was needed to the fact that women were disproportionately affected by this issue. It was stated that males were also victims of domestic abuse, however there was a challenge in getting male victims to disclose. Officers confirmed there was an array of support services for male victims and the teams promote these helplines where possible. It was noted that there was a key piece of work being carried out in relation to how to promote services and engage in a different way based on the type of victim, for example male victims, younger victims and those in the LQGTQ+, as there wasn't one overall approach for disclosing and engaging with the service. In terms of figures, it was highlighted that there had been 36 male referrals into the service during the last 12 months and engagement levels were above 80% for those few cases; Officers had received very good engagement from those involved in high risk cases, however there were barriers to engagement with the lower risk cases. It was added that there had been a lot of success with the virtual contact.

The Committee thanked the Officers for their presentation and all the staff in the Service for their hard work throughout the pandemic.

5. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

The Committee chose to scrutinise the following Cabinet Board items:

Metal Detecting Policy

Members received a report in relation to the adoption of a formal Policy in respect of metal detecting activities on Council owned land.

It was asked if any metal detecting groups were consulted with in relation to the policy, to which it was confirmed that they were not; however, other Local Authorities and interested parties, such as Natural Resource Wales (NRW) and the Canal Trust, were consulted with.

Officers were asked to confirm if any finds over 300 years old had to be reported to museums, to which it was clarified that any finds had to be reported to the local coroner within 14 days of the find.

It was queried why Neath Port Talbot Council differed from Swansea City Council whom had a policy of cooperation with metal detectorists. Officers stated that a significant amount of money was needed in order to carry out any development work as ecologists and potentially archaeologists would be involved in these processes. It was noted that disrupting ground in which there was no policy would also be difficult to track, therefore it was proposed that the Council does not support metal detecting activities on its land.

Moving on from the discussions, one Member stated that they did not agree with the recommendations contained within the circulated report.

Following scrutiny, the majority of the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by Cabinet Board.

6. **Forward Work Programme 2021/22**

Members noted the Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Forward Work Programme for 2020/21.

It was mentioned that the Active Travel Plan report would be presented to the Committee at the next scheduled meeting which was Friday 14 May 2021.

CHAIRPERSON

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