

Safe Haven by the Sea One Year On

A look at what's changed – and what still needs to

The Safe Haven by the Sea report was commissioned by Brighton & Hove City Council and published by Stonewater in August 2024. It set out to explore the real barriers domestic abuse survivors were facing when trying to access safe, secure housing in the city. The work came in response to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which gave local authorities a legal duty to assess local need and provide support for victims and their children in safe accommodation. But we wanted to go beyond just ticking that statutory box this was about understanding what is happening on the ground, hearing directly from survivors, and being honest about where the system was falling short.

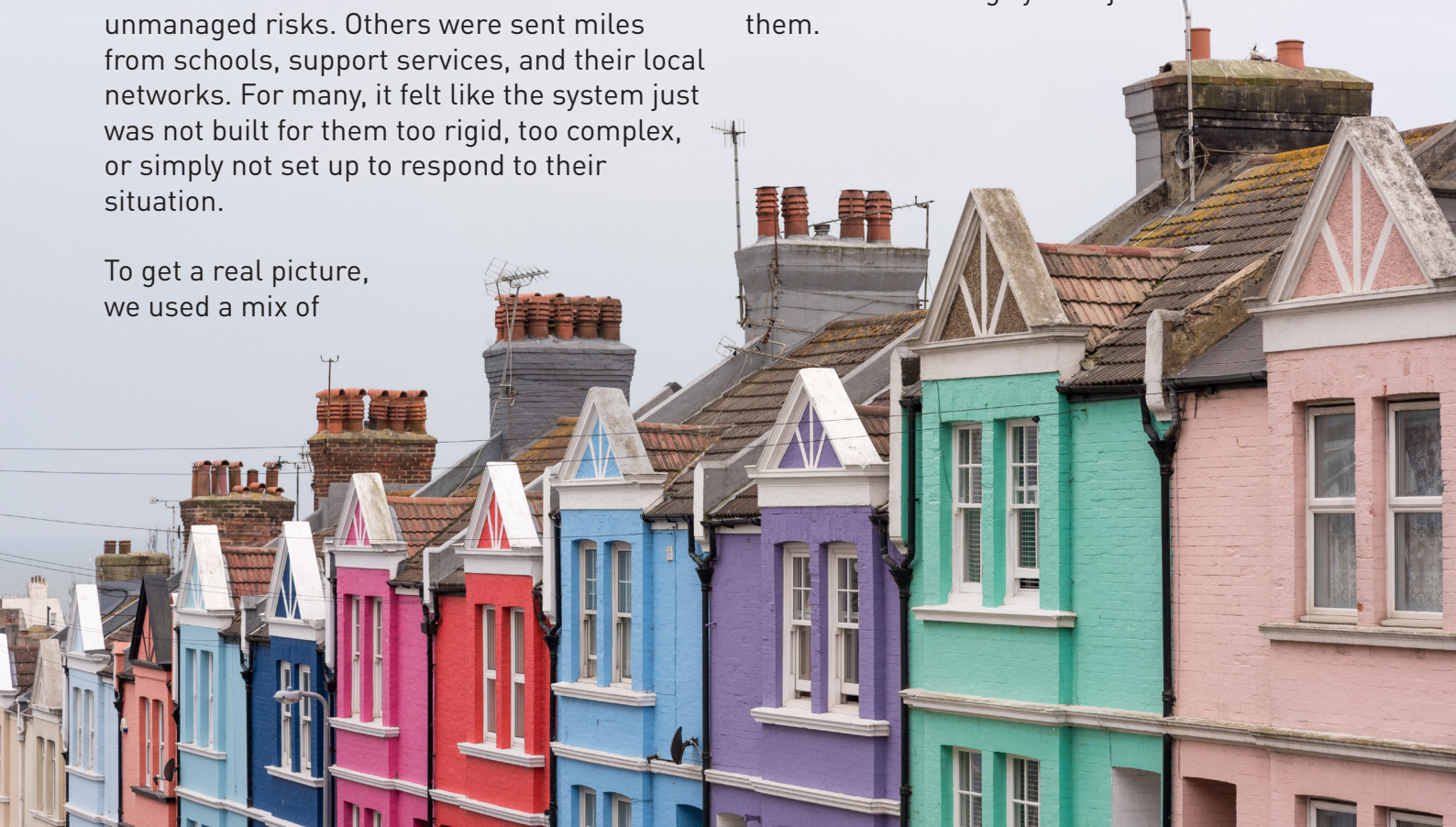
Building on the voices of survivors and local frontline experience, Safe Haven by the Sea set out practical, system wide recommendations, everything from improving trauma informed temporary accommodation and simplifying housing pathways, to increasing support for marginalised groups and making sure services work better together. It was not whether safe accommodation existed on paper, but whether people could access it, especially those with protected characteristics, insecure immigration status, or more complex needs.

Survivor voice was central to the whole report, and they shared experiences of housing that felt unsafe, isolating, and detached from what they needed. Some were placed in shared accommodation with others who had unmanaged risks. Others were sent miles from schools, support services, and their local networks. For many, it felt like the system just was not built for them too rigid, too complex, or simply not set up to respond to their situation.

To get a real picture, we used a mix of

approaches. We ran focus groups with women in refuge. We offered one-to-one interviews for people who wanted to share more in private. With support from partners like Rise, Switchboard and Victim Support, we invited survivors to join a wider advisory panel. That part did not work out as we had hoped, but we found other ways to keep those voices at the centre through feedback collected by support workers, anonymised case studies, and open conversations in safe spaces.

The insight we gathered was powerful and at times difficult to hear. We listened to older women who felt invisible, LGBTQ+ survivors retraumatised by communal settings, and people with no recourse to public funds who felt like the housing system just was not for them.



Repeatedly, we heard how badly we need housing that does more than just remove survivors from risk, it needs to support their recovery and restore their sense of safety and dignity.

The report made it clear: we need joined up services, more inclusive housing options, and a range of safe accommodation that reflects the real life needs of survivors, not just the minimum requirement. But we need to make sure survivors are not just heard, they are actively involved in shaping what comes next.

This report set that ambition and it now sits alongside the newly adopted Brighton & Hove VAWG, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy (2025–2028), approved by Cabinet in January 2025. That strategy sets a shared direction for the city, with four key goals: strengthening the coordinated response, prioritising prevention, improving survivor support, and holding perpetrators to account. It also introduces a new oversight board to make sure we stay focused and stay accountable.

Progress Update

This progress update looks at what has been done, where change is still needed, and how our local work connects with the city's newly adopted strategic framework on violence, abuse, and sexual violence. There's progress some fast wins, some long term groundwork but there's still real work to do.



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Progress from Brighton & Hove City Council – Housing

Over the past year, we have started to see real improvements in how the housing department respond to domestic abuse. Risk assessments for temporary accommodation now routinely involve DA specialists, which has helped improve safety at the point of placement.

The Private Rented Sector Team has become more visible too, with clearer referral routes and a stronger focus on supporting survivors to access private housing where that is a practical possibility. The updated Allocations Policy has been shared widely, helping partners understand how survivors can be prioritised, though there is still work to do to make that process feel truly consistent and survivor friendly, for example ensuring clarity around how survivors of domestic abuse qualify for priority bands and when local connection rules are waived.

There has been better joint working between housing and domestic abuse services, especially where survivors have more complex needs, although capacity remains an ongoing challenge across the board. We have also made progress on raising awareness around things like the No Recourse Fund and DDVC options, but survivors with insecure immigration status still face significant barriers when it comes to accessing safe and stable housing.

These include the complexity and delays involved in securing DDVC or other leave to remain, very limited access to public funds, a lack of clear housing pathways for those with no recourse, and fear of data sharing with immigration enforcement which can stop survivors from seeking help.

Even where short term crisis support is available, moving on into longer term settled housing remains extremely difficult.

Some key pieces of work are also now moving forward. The survivor feedback model is ready to launch, and the Enhanced Housing Pathway is under review, which should help better understand how people move through the system and where blockages sit.

Discussions are ongoing about putting a service level agreement in place for the Temporary Accommodation Scheme, and the Emergency Accommodation Charter is being refreshed to make sure domestic abuse is reflected throughout.

The original recommendation to recruit a dedicated Domestic Abuse Housing Officer did not go ahead, but instead we have embedded Refuge Champions across the housing service. These Champions now act as the main point of contact for domestic abuse cases, bringing a specialist perspective into day to day work and improving the consistency of responses.

The Champions have also started running monthly drop in sessions at the Brighton refuge, giving survivors a space to raise housing issues and get direct support.

Regular meetings between refuge managers and housing leads are now in place too, helping unblock cases and build shared accountability. Survivors have said they feel listened to and supported, a clear shift from feeling like just another number in the system.

Some areas, though, have not moved forward in the way we hoped. Work around DAHA accreditation and exploring safe accommodation options for perpetrators has been delayed, mostly due to resource and capacity constraints. These are still priorities, but they will need renewed focus and support if they are taken forward.



Commissioning and VAWG Work

The council has kept its commitment to the dedicated refuge service and continues to prioritise staff training. This was the third year of delivering specialist domestic abuse housing training, covering areas like DASH, MARAC, trauma informed practice and intersectionality.

The training is delivered in partnership by Stonewater, Rise and Victim Support, and feedback from staff has been consistently positive. There is also growing demand for more in depth training on complex needs, including topics such as honour based abuse. To respond effectively, training should go further than individual forms of abuse and build confidence in supporting survivors from all marginalised communities.

This means embedding learning on how racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination intersect with domestic abuse, and ensuring staff can recognise and respond to the additional barriers faced by survivors with disabilities, LGBTQ+ survivors, and those from Black and minoritised backgrounds. A more inclusive training approach would help frontline staff provide safe, appropriate, and equitable support. This is still one of Brighton and Hove's real strengths, building capacity across services so that responses feel confident, joined up and survivor focused.

New Burdens funding has strengthened safe accommodation provision and helped prevent homelessness, both through the Sanctuary Scheme and through additional capacity building roles including specialist training for housing staff. In 2024/25, 594 survivors were supported. While the continuation of this funding is not guaranteed, the duty to provide safe accommodation remains.

Funding pathways like Women in Safe Homes and Shared Lives Plus are still being explored, with the aim of broadening what safe accommodation could look like locally.

Alongside that, there has been significant investment in a range of targeted posts and projects to improve access, inclusion, and specialist support. This includes increased access to interpreters and BSL, a Housing Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) based within Housing Options, a dedicated LGBTQ+ caseworker through Switchboard, and several roles supporting children and young people affected by domestic abuse, including outreach work, Children and Young Peoples Domestic Violence Advisor support and group programmes for young people using harmful behaviours. Stonewater is also leading on a BAME Capacity Building Programme, with an experienced staff member in post.

In the last financial year 40 survivors have been supported through casework, drop ins and specialist groups, with referrals coming from a wide range of partners. Alongside direct survivor support, the role has had a strong focus on raising awareness and building professional confidence: more than 45 awareness raising sessions (including craft groups and drop ins) have been delivered this year, and the coordinator has trained professionals at multi agency continuous professional development events on honour based abuse, with further training booked with the Violence Against Women and Girls Network, Survivors' Network, Domestic Abuse Champions, and the Refugee and Migrant Network. Feedback shows that this work is shifting understanding, equipping frontline staff to better recognise hidden risks and provide culturally responsive support.

That said, a few of the original recommendations from Safe Haven by the Sea still need more focused attention. Proposals to introduce a Children's Advocacy Worker, strengthen offers for older survivors and explore DA Safety Worker roles to support civil orders are still in the initial stages. These areas would benefit from stronger coordination and clear leadership if they are going to move forward.

Reciprocal Housing: The Shift in Direction

One of the more ambitious ideas in the original report was a Sussex wide reciprocal housing scheme, designed to give survivors the freedom to move safely between local authority areas without risking their housing rights. It was a bold and hopeful concept, and while it was fully explored, East and West Sussex chose not to move forward with it. There were concerns around limited buy in from local authorities, uncertainty around devolution, and growing confidence that a national reciprocal scheme would be introduced by 2026.

Rather than lose momentum, Brighton and Hove took the opportunity to refocus. Attention has shifted towards strengthening our own internal model, building clearer move on pathways with local Registered Providers, and ensuring that survivors here still benefit from improved housing flexibility. At the same time, Stonewater have continued to feed into national discussions through engagement with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office. This means we are helping to shape what a future national scheme could look like, while still making real, practical improvements for survivors right now.



Conclusion

A year in, *Safe Haven by the Sea* has delivered. It has not just raised flags, it has driven real change, brought new investment, and kept survivor safety and accountability firmly on the agenda.

This work now sits within the wider trauma informed direction of the Brighton and Hove VAWG and Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025 to 2028. The new Oversight Board gives structure to make sure progress is tracked and promises are kept.

Domestic abuse is no longer sitting to the side, it is being seen as a core part of housing, safeguarding and community safety.

Deciding not to pursue a Sussex wide reciprocal scheme may have seemed like a step back, but it was the right choice. It meant we could focus energy where it counts, strengthening local systems, improving training, embedding specialist roles, and feeding into the national picture. Brighton and Hove is leading by doing.

We have already had valuable feedback from survivors, especially those in refuge. Many say they feel heard and supported in a way they had not before. That shift matters. And with the survivor feedback model about to launch, we will have even more to learn from.

The city is building stronger foundations, better partnerships and keeping survivors at the centre. There is more to do, but we have the momentum to make the next 12 months count.

Safe Haven by the Sea

Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been made based on feedback from survivors, professionals and models that are working well nationally, and are presented below under the agency who would be best placed to address them.

Brighton and Hove City Council VAWG Unit

It is acknowledged that the recommendations below align with the six Strategic Priorities captured within the Pan-Sussex Strategy for Domestic Abuse Accommodation and Support 2021-2024, and as such encourage regional joint working/resourcing where appropriate

- Form a DA and Housing Providers Working group to develop a coordinated responses across the range of providers
- Continue commissioning of a dedicated Refuge for female identifying survivors, consideration of increasing license agreement period given the multiple complex needs of survivors
- Consider dedicated LGBTQ+ safe accommodation in the needs assessment linked to pan – Sussex priorities in the refresh of the Pan Sussex Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy
- Consider DA support for those ages 55+ who have experienced abuse in next DA needs assessment, ensuring this is linked to pan – Sussex priorities in the refresh of the Pan Sussex Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy
- Raise awareness of the No Recourse Fund and the Destitution Domestic Violence Concessions (DDVS) for those with insecure immigration to support with cost of safe accommodation.
- Ensure survivors in emergency accommodation are provided with a comprehensive support package which includes information on options and guidance around next steps – e.g. civil order, flexible fund, refuge etc. This resource will be developed by BHCC VAWG Unit and updated regularly and communicated to Welfare Officers and DA Specialist Services
- Review the impact of the Enhanced DA Housing Pathway funded by the New Burdens Allocation
- Continue to support joint working practices between housing first model for rough sleepers and domestic abuse specialist agencies to ensure the right support is being received at the right time
- Develop training that is accessible to staff working in supported housing settings and private rented sector (PRS) landlords to improve response to disclosures and support with domestic abuse informed practice, including where intersecting needs are present
- Stakeholders suggested that a Children's Advocacy Worker role to be considered, providing short term support to children who have been subjected to domestic abuse and residing in safe accommodation, ensuring that their educational, social and wellbeing needs are being met
- Creation of Domestic Abuse Safety Worker role who will support victims in obtaining non molestation orders and act as a McKenzie friend for those who are unable to obtain legal representation
- Consider and explore small scale pilot project around housing for perpetrators

Brighton and Hove City Council – Housing Department

- Consider review of risk assessments in ensuring suitability of temporary accommodation for survivors in partnership with specialist domestic abuse organisation
- Private Rented Team to raise awareness of their work amongst local agencies following feedback that pathways to PRS are unclear
- To consult upon and share reviewed allocation policy amongst stakeholders
- Consider a commitment to a service level agreement with Stonewater refuge for the temporary accommodation scheme
- Consider gaining DAHA Accreditation
- Review efficacy and adherence of Emergency accommodation charter and consider introduction of Temporary Accommodation Charter to improve quality of accommodation and accountability of landlords – with a domestic abuse lens
- Consider the Introduction of Domestic Abuse Housing Officer role with responsibilities to include management of all DA cases including refuge cases, and application of civil orders for those wishing to remain in their homes
- Introduction of feedback model for domestic abuse survivors who are accessing the local authority housing pathway to ensure that service improvement is ongoing

Registered Housing Providers

- Introduction of reciprocal arrangements amongst registered providers across Sussex for households fleeing domestic abuse, with coordination role resourced by registered providers or local authority
- Registered housing providers to capture data around DA to allow understanding around scale of the issue
- Map registered and supported housing providers' with Brighton and Hove and develop coalition to share approaches to identifying and responding to DA
- Introduction of domestic abuse code of practice for registered social landlords within Brighton and Hove which reflects the newly introduced Housing Consumer Standards, with a requirement to hold a DA specific Policy, regular DA Training, and to also consider gaining DAHA membership / accreditation membership/accreditation DAHA, as well as attendance at the Southeast DAHA Regional Group
- Work with Stonewater to replicate Southdown refuge move on pathway where viable

Voluntary Sector

- Continue horizon scanning for funding opportunities and consideration of Shared Lives Plus, Women in Safe Homes for survivors of domestic abuse with consideration to joint/consortia funding bids