

Housing Domestic Abuse Policy for Tenants

Stevenage Borough Council

2024 - 2026

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1. Purpose

Stevenage Borough Council has zero tolerance for violence and abuse. This policy will set out how the Housing department will tackle domestic abuse, support victims and survivors of domestic abuse and hold perpetrators to account.

Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on victims and survivors, their families, and the wider community. It can happen to anyone, in any type of relationship including ex-partners, family members or those who have or had parental responsibility for a child. We know domestic abuse is rarely confined to a single incident, may not involve physical abuse, and typically forms a pattern of coercive or controlling behaviour. We support the VAWG Strategy's recognition that the majority of victims and survivors are women, and the majority of perpetrators are men.

This policy supports the vision for the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy to improve the housing sector's response to domestic abuse through policy and strategy development and providing training for housing staff that work with victims, survivors and perpetrators.

We understand the serious and enduring impact which can be caused by domestic abuse. Therefore, identifying domestic abuse early and providing support to victims and survivors is a key priority for Housing. This will support us to prevent homelessness and improve the safety and wellbeing of tenants.

2. Scope

This document is for staff in the Housing department and front-line council staff who may deal with cases of domestic abuse or facilitate disclosures of domestic abuse. This policy is also for Stevenage Borough Council tenants and for any tenant accessing safe accommodation through Survivors against Domestic Abuse

The aims of the policy are identified below:

- Protecting victims and survivors of domestic abuse and preventing homelessness by providing safe and secure accommodation to Stevenage tenants and those who approach the borough for housing assistance.
- Intervene early to tackle domestic abuse and prevent further abuse and facilitate the necessary help and support for victims and survivors and their children.
- Hold perpetrators to account for their actions in a way that is prompt, decisive and proportionate, with a focus on rehabilitation and maintaining the safety of the victim and survivor and their children

- Support the delivery of the priorities within Hertfordshire's VAWG Strategy

3. Legal Framework

Housing Services has a legal duty and obligation to support people affected by domestic abuse under the following legislation:

- Housing Act 1996
- Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014
- Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Equality and Diversity Act 2010
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Data Protection Act 2018

Stevenage Borough Council's Housing department adopts the Government's definition of domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Act (2021).

This policy will align with the VAWG Strategy but will also build on the strategy by outlining the housing specific policy approach for tackling domestic violence and abuse and support victims and survivors, while holding perpetrators to account.

The priorities of the strategy are as follows:

- Priority one: specialist support
- Priority two: working together
- Priority three: community response
- Priority four: children and young people
- Priority five: reducing harm from perpetrators.

4. Equalities

Under the Equality Act (2010) the Council has a legal duty to fulfil the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). Through this duty, the council will carry out its functions in a way that:

- a) Removes discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is unlawful under the Equality Act (2010)

- b) Promotes equal opportunities between people who have a protected characteristic(s) and those who don't
- c) Encourages good relations between people who have a protected characteristic(s) and those who don't

Further information on the Council's fulfilment of the PSED is set out in the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy (2022) which is applicable to all employees of the Council, councillors and contractors or suppliers who provide services on behalf of the Council.

5. Data Protection

The Council regards respect for the privacy of individuals and the lawful and careful treatment of personal information as very important to its successful operations and to maintaining confidence between the Council and those with whom it carries out business. The Council will ensure that it treats personal information lawfully and proportionately as set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (2018).

The Council's principal aim is to ensure that all personal data processing carried out by the Council, or on its behalf, complies with the seven data protection principles and other key legislative requirements. For further information on the Council's approach to handling information please see [the Data Protection Act web page](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk) at www.stevenage.gov.uk

6. Policy

Domestic abuse may come to the attention of staff through direct disclosures and by way of potential indicators such as a higher-than-average number of repairs, presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness due to domestic abuse, abandoned properties, anti-social behaviour complaints and noise nuisance. Housing staff are well placed to recognise domestic abuse as abuse often takes place in the home environment. Housing staff should therefore be able to recognise the signs and respond appropriately and signpost to SADA if someone experiencing abuse asks for advice and support.

The Housing department in partnership with Survivors Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) will raise awareness amongst staff and improve our ability to identify cases of abuse by:

- Attending training and briefings for all staff on domestic abuse. This includes the mandatory domestic abuse training for all Stevenage Borough Council staff
- Ensuring all housing staff are aware of local referral pathways for specialist support including SADA and what to do in an emergency
- Ensuring all housing staff are aware of the Housing Domestic Abuse Procedure, including

how to refer an incident of domestic abuse to internal teams to manage the household.

- Ensuring all housing staff are familiar with the correct process for responding to victims and survivors who are at high risk of harm, including referring to SADA.
- Ensuring all housing staff are familiar with the correct process for making safeguarding referrals for children and adults at risk where appropriate.
- Repairs administrators reviewing repairs case notes to identify red flag cases (e.g. damage to doors / windows and frequent lock changes), which may be potential indicators of domestic abuse or criminal damage. Repairs will alert tenancy to conduct welfare checks on red flag cases.
- Enforcement teams investigating anti-social behaviour or noise complaints that may indicate domestic abuse and alerting tenancy teams and SADA.
- Maintenance staff and managers in Repairs to identify households with a higher-than-average number and cost of repairs and alerting Housing Management to conduct welfare checks.
- Creating opportunities to disclose abuse during home visits or assessments by tenancy team. Prompting disclosure will only take place where it is safe to do so (e.g., where the suspected victim and survivor is alone).
- Using the knowledge and expertise of SADA to raise awareness in the department of potential indicators of abuse and increase understanding of how to safely enable the potential victim or survivor to disclose abuse.
- Investigating – through interviewing and asking questions - areas of concern and potential indicators of abuse within cases of people presenting either as homeless or at risk of being homeless (as a result of self-referral or otherwise), to the Housing Options Team.

There are multiple and complex barriers that may prevent someone from disclosing their abuse. We will believe all victims and survivors who make a disclosure and therefore will not ask for proof to evidence domestic abuse. However, we will ask questions to support our understanding of the situation, help us determine the most appropriate action to ensure that we provide the right help and support. Stevenage Borough Council will take a victim and survivor-focussed approach and will provide support in a confidential and non-judgemental manner. We will work sensitively with those experiencing abuse to promote their safety and wellbeing under the guidance of specialist domestic abuse agencies.

There are often complex barriers that prevent someone from leaving an abuser. We recognise that people are more often at risk when leaving an abusive person and in the period of time following a separation. Our support offer will not be contingent on victims and survivors leaving their home because where appropriate we can support them to remain in their home.

We recognise that victims of domestic abuse who have a lifetime social tenancy may be reluctant to leave an abusive relationship if it means losing their security of tenure. In line with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we will ensure that lifetime tenants who suffer domestic abuse

will retain lifetime security if they are granted a new tenancy for reasons connected to domestic abuse.

In accordance with the VAWG Strategy, we will support the community response priority by delivering and supporting communications campaigns in the borough. This will support tenants to understand how to identify domestic abuse and how access help and support.

7. Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed every two years, unless legislation, business, sector developments, or wider council strategies and policies (including the VAWG Strategy) require an earlier review. This is to ensure that the policy continues to meet its objectives and takes account of good practice development.

8. References and Resources

- Housing Act 1996
- Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014
- Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Equality and Diversity Act 2010
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Data Protection Act 2018

9. Abbreviations and Definitions

EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
PSED	Public Sector Equality Duty
DA	Domestic Abuse

10. Version History

Date	Outlined Amendments	Author
01/03/2024	First Draft	Chloe Stewart