

DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY

Reference:

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Revised:

1 Statement of Intent

The Housing Solutions Group (the Group) is opposed to all forms of domestic abuse and will positively support its residents who are victims of domestic abuse. The Group will take the strongest action possible against perpetrators of domestic violence where it has power to do so. The Group encourages its residents and staff to report domestic abuse, whether they are victims of, or witnesses to, such incidents.

The Group aims to offer assistance to any of its residents who are suffering from domestic abuse, or threats of abuse, either from someone within their own home, or from someone outside their home (such as a boyfriend/girlfriend or former partner).

This policy applies to Housing Solutions Group and all of its subsidiaries:

- Bridgewater Housing Limited;
- and Furnival Housing.

2 Aims

The purpose of this document is to present the general policy on dealing with domestic abuse and setting out the aims, principles and values that will be adopted by the Group in its dealings with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.

3 General Policy in dealing with domestic violence

The Housing Solutions Group will encourage customers to report domestic abuse, whether they are victims of, or witnesses to, such incidents. The Group acknowledges the challenges for victims in reporting incidents of domestic abuse, due to the sensitive nature. Instances of domestic abuse can appear to be concealed amongst some groups, for example male victims and people from ethnic minority communities, where there may be a reluctance to report incidents and seek help.

The Group recognises the extreme impact which domestic abuse has on customers, including any children that may be living in the household.

Working within the law the Group will provide support to families to protect the public and victims of abuse and hold alleged perpetrators to account.

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The Group will ensure that staff have access to appropriate training to enable them to provide advice to the victims of domestic abuse; to be aware of the indicators and impacts, as well as local referral routes to appropriate support services.

4 Definition of domestic abuse

The Group defines domestic abuse as '*any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between partners who have been in an intimate relationship or between family members, regardless of gender or sexuality*' (family members are defined as: mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister and grandparents, whether directly related, in-laws, extended family or step family). This includes harassment where it is clear that it is domestically related.

The Group acknowledges that domestic abuse can happen to anyone, in any relationship; heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and can happen regardless of gender, social group, class, age, race, disability, sexuality, religion or geographic location.

The Group will accept an incident as 'domestic abuse' if anyone – e.g. the victim, a witness, a police officer or a housing officer – perceives the incident to be domestic abuse. In these circumstances a report of domestic abuse should be recorded and dealt with as such.

4 Victim-centered approach

The Group will adopt a victim-centered approach in dealing with domestic abuse.

Every effort will be made to ensure that those subjected to domestic abuse are dealt with in a sensitive and sympathetic manner by officers taking a non-judgemental approach. Key considerations include:

- The option of being interviewed by someone of the same sex
- To be interviewed in the location of their choice, (subject to satisfying any concerns about staff safety)
- Not to be interviewed in the presence of their children (if necessary another staff member should supervise children)
- Translation services being available
- The victim being able to have a friend or advocate present at the interview if they wish

Recognising that evidence of domestic abuse may not always be readily available, investigators will, in the first place, accept the incident without formal evidence until further investigations prove otherwise. This does not mean that the alleged perpetrator is immediately assumed to be guilty. While evidence or verification of some kind may be required for certain legal proceedings, this is not a requirement in order for the Group to provide support, advice and assistance to victims. Investigators will listen, support and, wherever possible, respond to the victims needs.

We recognise that it is often very difficult and distressing for victims to report or talk about domestic abuse and so they may use or be accompanied by an advocate at any stage during the process

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5 Confidentiality

Victims will be encouraged to allow us to share information with other agencies, including the police and local authority departments, to ensure that the full range of civil and criminal remedies can be pursued. However, all information provided by the victim will be treated with the utmost confidence, and only passed to external agencies with prior consent. The exception to this is where we consider a child is at risk in any situation or if there is a high risk of serious harm, emotional or financial abuse to anyone in the situation described. In these circumstances the relevant officer will approve any disclosure without the victim's consent.

In the case of joint tenancies, the perpetrator may have a right to access the contents of the tenancy file. Measures should be taken to ensure that it is not possible for confidential information from the victim to be seen by the perpetrator or anyone representing the perpetrator.

Any file notes or letters that are confidential should be clearly labeled or held separately in a confidential section within the file. Information will be shared with work colleagues **only** on a strict 'need to know' basis. We will, at all times, adhere to our 'data protection and confidentiality policy'.

6 Support for victims

The Group's staff will offer support to its residents who are victims of domestic abuse. This support may be provided directly by Group employees, or through other local agencies that are able to give appropriate support.

The safety of the victim is of paramount importance. Where it is practicable for the victim to remain in their home, every effort will be made to provide additional security and support as appropriate. This may include:

- Installation of a panic alarm in the home;
- Provision of security equipment, such as a safe letterbox, additional door and window security, to safeguard the victim and their home;
- Replacement of broken windows, the removal of rubbish or the carrying out of any other emergency repair to the home as a result of a domestic violence incident without delay (within 24 hours).

Generally, victims of domestic violence will not be charged for these security measures or clean-up operations.

Where it is supported by evidence that the victim would be in acute danger if they remained in the home, we will aim to provide either temporary or permanent alternative accommodation, in accordance with the Group's transfer policy. (Where urgent re-housing is necessary and the Group does not have a dwelling available, we will liaise with the appropriate local authority homeless person unit and other specialist refuges in an attempt to provide temporary accommodation).

Where we provide alternative accommodation, whether temporary or permanent, we will provide, as necessary, any additional security measures as noted above.

We will discuss and work with the victim in deciding our course of action and we will regularly communicate with them to ensure that they are kept informed about developments.

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7 Action against perpetrators

The Group will adopt a multi-agency approach in dealing with perpetrators of domestic abuse against its residents. This will include working with the police and appropriate local authority departments, but may involve other organisations and agencies. Our multi-agency approach is intended to ensure that the full range of civil and criminal remedies can be pursued.

The action taken against perpetrators will depend upon the individual circumstances. From the Group's point of view, this may include taking possession action against a perpetrator, where other members of the household have left the home due to domestic abuse. Dependent upon the circumstances, this would provide an opportunity for the victim and children to either return to the home, or to provide the victim and children with an alternative permanent home and re-let the original home to another family.

Generally, the Group's staff will not be involved in interviewing alleged perpetrators. Such interviews will only be undertaken if:

- considered appropriate by the investigating officer and their manager;
- the victim is in agreement with such a proposal; and
- it is considered safe to do so.

Where it is considered necessary and appropriate to interview a perpetrator, there will always be two housing officers present and the venue must be considered safe.

8 Closure of cases

A case will be closed when:

- it has been successfully resolved by whatever means; or
- the perpetrator of the domestic violence has been evicted or sent to jail; or
- there is no further action which can be taken.

A clear conclusion is important to all concerned, i.e. the victim, the alleged perpetrator and the Group. Ideally, the victim should be satisfied with the result, but some cases will have to be closed even though the victim is not satisfied. This may be due to insufficient evidence to support action, whether legal or otherwise.

Housing Officers should never raise a complainant's expectations falsely. Clarity is essential. If there is no rational basis for the complaint, or rigorous investigation cannot verify the problem, the complainant must be advised that the case is closed unless further evidence is available.

A decision to close a case should always be discussed, and ideally agreed, with the victim in a formal review meeting before confirming this in writing. Formal closure of a case must be in writing to both the complainant and alleged perpetrators, clearly

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explaining the reasons. The appropriate manager will evaluate the effectiveness of every closed case.

9 Who to contact within the Group

The first point of contact can be any member of staff who will be supported by a trained domestic violence representative within Neighbourhood Housing. The representative will be supported by external agencies.

We work in partnership with a specialist multi-agency forum called the Royal Borough Domestic Abuse Forum.

10 Appeals

Where a victim or alleged perpetrator is dissatisfied with the investigation or the decision, they may appeal against the way an investigation has been handled or a decision reached and request a review of the case. The Assistant Director of Housing Services will conduct this review.

11 Monitoring and reporting

Managers of front line housing staff will regularly monitor each case of domestic violence, provide appropriate advice and support to the housing officer dealing with a domestic violence case, ensure that they receive appropriate training; and also ensure that all cases are appropriately recorded and dealt with in line with detailed operating procedures.

12 Equality & Diversity

Housing Solutions Group is committed to a policy of fair and equal treatment for all its members, residents, employees and applicants, regardless of religion, sexual orientation, age, class, racial origin, sex, disability or marital status, as determined in the Equal Opportunities Strategy.

13 Review

The Group will continue to monitor the effectiveness of its Domestic Abuse policy. The Domestic Abuse policy will be reviewed on a three yearly basis or in response to changes in legislation, regulatory guidance, good practice or changes in other relevant Housing Solutions Group policy.