

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
19 March 2026

Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Provision in Oxfordshire

Report by Director of Public Health

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is RECOMMENDED to

1. Note Oxfordshire County Council's statutory responsibilities under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, including the duty to provide safe accommodation for victim-survivors of domestic abuse; and
2. Note the role of the commissioned Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service (ODAS) in meeting these duties and supporting the delivery of the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2025–28.

Executive Summary

3. Oxfordshire County Council has a legal responsibility under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to ensure that safe accommodation is available for victim-survivors of domestic abuse. These duties are delivered through ODAS, delivered by A2Dominion since 2018 (current contract 2023-2028) and guided by the county's Safe Accommodation Strategy 2025-2028.
4. Current provision includes refuge accommodation and Places of Safety (POS) delivered by A2Dominion, with specialist therapeutic support for children provided by SAFE!.
5. Demand for safe accommodation continues to rise with increased complexity of need and service utilisation is impacted by effective housing move-on pathways. Oversight of the system is maintained by the Safe Accommodation Working Group (SAWG), which reports directly to the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategic Board (ODASB).

Statutory Duties and Local Approach

6. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 requires Oxfordshire County Council to assess local need and ensure safe accommodation for people experiencing domestic abuse and their children. This duty is delivered through the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2025–28, overseen by the ODASB. The Strategy sets out a whole-system approach in which safe accommodation is understood not just as a physical place but as the

combination of safety, specialist support and pathways that enable recovery. It identifies refuge, dispersed accommodation, sanctuary schemes and move-on housing as essential elements of this system.

7. To meet these duties, the Council commissions refuge and dispersed accommodation through ODAS, jointly funded by the County Council and district councils. District councils also provide sanctuary schemes and support housing pathways, reflecting the Strategy's emphasis on partnership and coordinated delivery across local authorities.
8. The Council reports annually to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on its activity, Domestic Abuse Grant expenditure and outcomes for victim-survivors accessing safe accommodation.

Service Delivery Model (ODAS)

9. ODAS provides a trauma-informed, inclusive and countywide offer aligned with the Strategy's four pillars: Prevention, Provision, Pursuing and Partnership, and is key driver of the Provision offer.
10. The service provides a wide range of practical, emotional and therapeutic support for people fleeing domestic abuse, designed to meet immediate needs while also helping individuals and families recover and move forward. Alongside safe refuge and POS, staff work closely with adults and children to offer consistent one-to-one support, trauma-informed counselling and group-based interventions, helping people make sense of their experiences and rebuild confidence. Practical support is a core part of the service, including help with housing and resettlement, benefits and financial stability, GP and dental registration, school placements, legal advice and immigration issues.
11. Families are also supported with everyday essentials such as food through local arrangement with foodbanks, clothing, bedding, household items and white goods, reducing financial pressure at a time of crisis and allowing people to focus on safety and recovery.
12. Children and young people receive specialist, child-centred support that recognises the impact of domestic abuse on their wellbeing and development. This includes therapeutic one-to-one work, group activities and play-based interventions, as well as practical help to ensure children are connected with health visitors, schools, early years provision and specialist services where needed. Staff create opportunities for children to experience normality and enjoyment through creative activities, outdoor play, baking, trips and seasonal events, helping them feel safe, supported and valued. Improvements to children's spaces within accommodation, alongside structured activities, help create environments where children can express themselves and begin to recover from trauma.

13. The service is inclusive and responsive to different experiences of abuse, including support for male survivors, people with disabilities, older adults, and those with complex needs such as mental ill-health, homelessness or insecure immigration status. Male survivors are supported through safe accommodation where appropriate, counselling, peer and group support, advocacy and resettlement into longer-term housing, ensuring they are not excluded from help. For people with complex or overlapping needs, staff work closely with health, social care, housing, police and voluntary sector partners, providing coordinated safety planning, advocacy and ongoing support that adapts as circumstances change.
14. Strong links with local communities help reduce isolation and support recovery. People are encouraged and supported to access community groups, English language classes, wellbeing activities, faith-based support and local services, alongside organised social opportunities that foster connection and mutual support.
15. Together, these practical, therapeutic and relational elements within safe accommodation help people move from crisis toward greater stability, independence and long-term safety, ensuring that support addresses not only immediate risk but also the wider factors that help individuals and families rebuild their lives.

Access and triage

16. The Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Helpline operates Monday to Friday and provides a key access point. The Helpline supports early identification, risk assessment, safety planning and navigation to appropriate support, including refuge or POS where required. ODAS operates within the county's tiered response to domestic abuse, supporting those at medium risk, and working alongside Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and the high-risk Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy Service (IDVA) for high-risk cases. This integrated model and assessment of risk aligns with the Strategy's commitment to ensuring the right support at the right time across agencies.

Safe Accommodation Offer

17. ODAS provides two forms of safe accommodation (appendix a):
 - Refuge accommodation for women with or without children, offering longer-term, supported accommodation to enable stabilisation and recovery. There are two refuges made of 16 units in Oxfordshire.
 - Places of Safety (POS), providing short-term, emergency accommodation for adults of any gender at immediate risk, including people with pets or needs that cannot be met in a communal refuge setting. There are 5 Units; a mixture of 3 houses and 2 flats in Oxfordshire.
18. District councils complement this offer through commissioning sanctuary schemes (allowing victim-survivors to use safety measures to remain in their

own homes) and housing pathways, supporting a coordinated approach to safety and move-on.

Demand, Capacity and Performance

19. All households entering refuge or POS are issued with a six-month licence. Where suitable move-on accommodation is unavailable, or where immigration or support needs require additional time, licences may be extended at ODAS' discretion. While necessary to maintain safety, extended stays can reduce system flow and limit availability for new referrals.

20. In the past year, there have been a few examples where capacity pressures have been exacerbated where clients were mis-advised by housing professional to remain in accommodation beyond the notice period due to being on non-excluded licences. This resulted in bed-blocking, increased distress for residents and staff, and reduced service throughput, limiting the service's ability to support other victim-survivors of domestic abuse. This has since been addressed between ODAS and District Housing colleagues.

Numbers supported in refuge and POS			
Provision	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26 (Q1-3)
Places of Safety	12	8	9
Refuge	25	52	22
Total	37	60	31

Referral Volumes and Access to Accommodation

21. Overall referral volumes to ODAS remain consistent and high, with a growing proportion of contacts relating specifically to refuge or POS enquiries in 2025/26. The increase to 10.4% of all referrals in 2025/26 (Q1-Q3) indicates rising demand for safe accommodation, alongside increasing awareness of the service.

ODAS Key Performance Indicators			
KPI	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26 (Q1-Q3)
Total ODAS referrals	2,596	2,462	1,942
Refuge & POS referrals	206	168	202
Refuge/POS as % of all referrals	7.9%	6.8%	10.4%
Individuals supported in Refuge & POS	37	60	31

Referral Sources

22. Self-referrals remain the largest single source of enquiries, accounting for 43% of all refuge and POS referrals over the period. Self-referrals frequently come because of professionals signposting individuals to the service. Referrals from other domestic abuse services out of area form the second largest cohort. Referrals from housing services, while smaller in number, reflect acute

housing risk and place additional pressure on temporary accommodation pathways.

Referral sources to Refuge & Places of Safety				
Referral Source	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26 (Q1-Q3)	Total
Self	41	46	59	146
Non-A2D Domestic Violence Services	15	15	27	57
Non-A2D Housing	7	16	13	36
Children's Services	6	13	8	27
Health Services	11	4	1	16
Police	5	4	6	15
Other / mixed sources	16	12	14	42

Declined Referrals and Access Barriers

23. Not all referrals result in placement within refuge or POS. Many rejections from the client are either because accommodation is no longer required or alternative accommodation has been sought. In terms of the client being rejected, this is due to the client requiring accommodation with greater support needs than can be provided within refuge or POS. An example of high risk being if they have high mental health needs and this is linked to suicidal ideation, a refuge with 24-hour support would be more suitable in this instance and a referral would be made. Over the past year, clients with high complex needs that have moved into refuge/POS, has resulted in higher levels of support needed. Whilst support staff try to mitigate risks, there have been clients who have had to be moved on due to breaches of their license agreements and not adhering to refuge rules to protect all residents safety.

24. A lack of capacity refers to instances where ODAS is unable to offer accommodation because the required number of bed spaces is unavailable and no suitable alternative flat is available at the time of referral. The process of referral for refuge or POS can be slightly delayed as ODAS request Police background checks to ensure the space is suitable for the victim survivor. This delay can result in some referrals not progressing as the service are unable to meet the timescale needed.

25. Where referrals are declined by the service, onward referrals will be made, with the individual's consent, to alternative or more specialist services better able to meet their needs.

Numbers of declined referrals		
Reason	Client Declined	Service Declined
No longer required / alternative accommodation	71	–
Needs or risk too high	–	32
No capacity	–	26
Location not suitable	25	–
Unable to be contacted	20	–
Other safety or suitability concerns	–	14
NRPF / no DDVC	–	11
Other reasons	39	18
Total	175	101

Demographic Profile and Inequalities

26. Ethnicity data shows that while White British households represent the largest single group supported, households from minoritised communities account for approximately 48% of those placed in refuge or POS. In particular, households from South Asian communities may face additional barriers linked to insecure immigration status, language needs and limited access to public funds. These cases often require intensive advocacy and specialist immigration support provided by ODAS in partnership with specialist agencies.

System Pressures, Risks and Emerging Challenges

27. The most significant pressure on the system remains limited availability of suitable move-on housing. Housing shortages, property affordability, equity issues and a lack of specialist accommodation for people with complex needs result in longer stays in refuge and POS, reducing overall system throughput.

28. Rising complexity of need, including mental health issues, substance use, trauma and overlapping vulnerabilities, requires more intensive and sustained support. Households with no recourse to public funds face challenges, with delays in immigration processes and restricted access to benefits prolonging stays.

29. Operational challenges also arise from benefit administration and the interaction between temporary accommodation routes and housing benefit or Universal Credit, which can lead to short-term debt and anxiety for residents. The use of the 56-day homelessness prevention notification has supported earlier multi-agency planning, but allocation decisions often occur late in the process, increasing uncertainty and distress for victim-survivors. Extended stays, particularly within POS, can also contribute to isolation and negatively affect wellbeing, despite regular key-work sessions and daily check-ins from support staff.

Monitoring and Recent Developments

30. Service delivery and performance are monitored through quarterly contract reviews, national reporting and oversight via the Safe Accommodation Working Group, which reports to the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Strategic Board. This enables partners to identify trends, risks and inequalities and to agree collective actions.
31. Recent developments include the introduction of a complex need's worker and a cost-of-living move-on grant available to service users, directly addressing specialist support needs and financial barriers to move-on. A year three contract audit of move-on processes is being undertaken by ODAS currently, with the aim of using the findings to support improved data quality, clearer pathways and more effective system planning and inform future commissioning and delivery.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

32. Safe accommodation provision delivered through ODAS reflects the Council's values of prevention, partnership and supporting those most at risk. By maintaining oversight of demand, capacity and system pressures, the Council ensures that existing provision continues to align with its strategic objectives, meets statutory obligations under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, supports safer and healthier communities, and contributes to tackling inequality by providing access to safety and support for those disproportionately affected by domestic abuse.

Financial Implications

33. This is a report for information only. There are no direct financial implications in the body of this paper.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

34. The Council has statutory duties under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (the Act) to assess local need and to provide support within safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse and their children. These duties include publishing and regularly reviewing a Safe Accommodation Strategy informed by a needs assessment and ensuring that sufficient, appropriate provision is in place across Oxfordshire. The Act also requires the Council to report annually to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on activity, spend and outcomes related to safe accommodation support.

35. The arrangements described in this report, including operational oversight through contract monitoring and governance through the Safe Accommodation Working Group reporting into the ODASB, support ongoing compliance with the requirements of the Act.

Comments checked by:
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Equality & Inclusion Implications

36. Domestic abuse affects some groups more severely than others, including women, disabled people, and minoritised communities. Safe accommodation provision plays an important role in addressing these inequalities by ensuring that those at greatest risk can access safety and support. ODAS and district-led sanctuary schemes support people across a wide range of backgrounds, and demographic monitoring helps identify and address any barriers to access. All provision is subject to Equality and Community Impact Assessment (ECIA) requirements to ensure services remain inclusive and responsive to diverse needs.

ANSAF AZHAR
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Annex: A - Refuge and Places of Safety comparison table

Other Documents: Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2025-2028

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Appendix A - Refuge and Places of Safety comparison table

Feature	Refuge	Places of Safety
Units / Provision (to complete)	Two refuges – 16 units	5 Units; a mixture of 3 houses and 2 flats.
Primary purpose	Provides longer-term, secure accommodation for women (with or without children) fleeing domestic abuse.	Short-term, emergency safe accommodation for victim-survivors at immediate risk, including those with pets.
Who can access	Women aged 16+, including those with children; may require recourse to public funds.	Adults at immediate risk, including those unable to access traditional refuge settings (e.g., people with pets, urgent-risk situations).
Length of stay	Typically, longer-term to support recovery, stability, and move-on planning.	Short-term crisis stay until safer long-term accommodation is arranged.
Maximum length of tenancy (to complete)	6 months license	6 months license
Support available	Comprehensive support including emotional support, safety planning, practical help, counselling access, group work, and support for children.	Initial emotional support, risk assessment, safety planning, and signposting, with outreach follow-up.
Children's provision	Dedicated emotional support for children living in refuge.	Not specifically child-focused, though families can be accommodated in emergencies.
Specialist accessibility features	Building/environmental constraints may limit pets or complex needs.	More flexible, explicitly includes accommodation for people with pets and urgent-risk needs.
Intended audience	Women and children requiring safe, supported, longer-term accommodation.	Any victim-survivor requiring immediate, emergency safety.