

Agenda Item	5
Report No	HCW-02-26

# The Highland Council

**Committee:** **Health, Social Care and Wellbeing**

**Date:** **04 February 2026**

**Report Title:** **Update on the Highland Domestic Abuse Services**

**Report By:** **Assistant Chief Executive - People**

## **1. Purpose/Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the Highland Domestic Abuse Service (HDAS) procurement programme set in the context of the Council's wider review of commissioned contracts across children's health, social care and justice services.
- 1.2 Since late 2024, the Council has strengthened commissioning, governance, and contract management, implemented a multi-year grant funding model for outreach services, and issued a time-limited variation to maintain refuge funding while the wider review concludes.
- 1.3 The approach is designed to deliver consistency, transparency, sustainability, and best value. In so doing, it aligns with national policy, notably 'Equally Safe' ([LINK](#)) and it reflects the findings of the Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Services ([LINK](#))
- 1.4 An all-Members Briefing session was held on 15 January 2026 which set out the context and extent of services that are in place in relation to domestic abuse, including the role of Women's Aid organisations in providing services in relation to outreach, refuge and MARAC. A further Members briefing session has been arranged for 6 March 2026.
- 1.5 A chronology of dates and Frequently Asked Questions is included as **appendix 1**. The FAQs reflect questions that have been raised during the review process, specific questions asked at the Members' briefing session, as well as questions that have been raised subsequently.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
  - i. **Note** progress on HDAS procurement, including awarded outreach contracts in North, Mid and West Highland commencing 1 April 2026, and the further procurement for South Highland;
  - ii. **Note** a verbal update on the last remaining contract award for the South area will be provided to Committee;

- iii. **Agree** the approach and timeline for the Council's review of commissioned contracts, noting continuity arrangements in place throughout the review period; and
- iv. **Agree** the continuation of MARAC funding arrangements while the review of the most effective delivery model is completed.

### 3. Implications

3.1 **Resource** – The Council has no statutory obligation to fund organisations to provide domestic abuse services. Local Authority obligations are described at section 5.1

The Council has made financial commitments associated with new multi-year outreach contracts, which includes offering one off sustainability payments to assist suppliers to adjust to any financial shortfalls, providing time to identify new sources of grant funding. The Council has also confirmed the continuation of funding for refuge and non-contracted MARAC expenditure whilst reviews are ongoing. The Council is one of several current funders of Women's Aid services, with funding from the Scottish Government's Delivering Equally Safe (DES) programme forming a major direct contribution to Women's Aid organisations across Scotland as well as in Highland. The Council's projected future expenditure on domestic abuse services has been benchmarked against a range of other local authorities, including those with whom the Council shares commissioning arrangements.

3.2 **Legal** - Procurement has been conducted through open competition in line with the Council's approved Contract Standing Orders and applicable procurement legislation. Contracts embed safeguarding, data protection, and audit provisions consistent with statutory duties and best practice. Refuge and MARAC arrangements continue to support multi-agency public protection responsibilities. The Council also continues to meet the ongoing expectation from the Scottish Government and COSLA to maintain a Violence Against Women Partnership (VAWP) for Highland, in line with national Equally Safe guidance which sets out that all local authorities should have a VAW Partnership in place.

3.3 **Risk** - Service Continuity: the risk of a gap in South Highland is mitigated through phased procurement and interim arrangements. Workforce stability risks are mitigated through the introduction of multi-year funding and ongoing engagement with providers, including the provision of sustainability payments. Risks around leadership, quality and safeguarding, as highlighted in Care Inspectorate reports (see FAQs), are mitigated through embedding KPIs, audits, and escalation pathways.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – Risks around safety are mitigated through embedding KPIs, audits, and escalation pathways.

3.5 **Gaelic** – No risks identified

### 4. Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment. An Impact Assessment was undertaken alongside the commissioned contracts review, and included consideration of access for rural communities, disabled survivors, and families with children. The Review process also included engagement activity directly with service users through the use of questionnaires alongside meeting with the lead organisation representing the four Women's Aid groups operating across Highland.

## 5. Legal/Regulatory requirements

5.1 Scottish local authorities do not have a statutory duty to provide domestic abuse services. The Scottish legislative framework provides protective powers such as Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders, which are issued by police and courts. It also introduces new housing-related powers for social landlords from August 2026. These measures do not create obligations on councils to commission or deliver domestic abuse support services. This is different from the position in England, where the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 places a legal duty on tier-one local authorities to provide accommodation-based domestic abuse support; no equivalent duty applies in Scotland.

5.2 Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) are local multi-agency structures operating under *Equally Safe*. They are not statutory bodies and do not have a dedicated statutory funding stream. Their work is supported indirectly through wider national funding. The Delivering Equally Safe (DES) Fund is the primary national funding mechanism for VAWG work and supports specialist services across all local authority areas, which in turn enables VAWPs to deliver local priorities. VAWPs themselves are not directly funded through DES. Additional national funding through the Victim Centred Approach Fund and subsequent Scottish Government uplifts further sustains frontline services that underpin local partnership activity.

5.3 Local authorities, including The Highland Council, contribute some core resource to VAWPs, through funding coordination functions such as VAWP lead officer posts, along with providing staff time and strategic support. Such contributions vary across Scotland and arise from local policy choices and community planning responsibilities rather than from any statutory requirement.

5.4 National work led jointly by COSLA and the Scottish Government is ongoing to explore more stable, long-term funding models for VAWG services. This recognises the importance of local VAW structures but does not introduce any new legal duties for local authorities.

## 6. Review Timeline and Procurement Process

6.1 A detailed Chronology is provided at **Appendix 1**.

6.2 An Internal Audit into Commissioned Children's Services identified the need to strengthen procurement practice. This included ensuring services are regularly re-procured through open competition to reflect current needs, costs, and deliver best value.

6.3 To address these findings, an agreement was established with the Shared Commercial and Procurement Social Work Team to provide dedicated support to Children's and Justice Services. This collaboration aimed to strengthen commissioning and contracting practices and to support the development of a newly formed commissioning team. The shared team provided access to contractual templates, procurement expertise, and best practice guidance.

6.4 An early priority for the shared team was reviewing contracts inherited by the new commissioning team. Many were significantly outdated, including four domestic abuse service contracts delivered by Caithness and Sutherland Women's Aid (CASWA), Lochaber Women's Aid (LWA), Inverness Women's Aid (IWA), and Ross-shire Women's Aid (RWA). These contracts had been subject to annual extensions since 2011–2012 without a full commissioning review to assess service needs, market capability, or value for money. This situation was non-compliant with the Council's Contracts Standing Orders.

6.5 In Spring 2024, a review was initiated to assess the provision of abuse services across Highland. Regular catch-up and dialogue meetings were conducted with all four Highland Women's Aid groups to understand their service delivery models and challenges whilst the review was ongoing. The review focused on the Council's future outreach provision need and involved representation from Justice, Housing, Operational Children's Services, and Integrated Children's Services. A separate review of refuge provision was scheduled to follow. In autumn 2024, the review recommended commissioning services that support all victims of domestic abuse, regardless of sex or sexual orientation. This proposal was shared with Women's Aid organisations, who raised concerns. Following individual discussions with each organisation as well as with Scottish Women's Aid, the Council undertook further reflection and refinement of its requirements.

6.6 The Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee considered an improvement plan in November 2024 which set out the range of commissioned services in scope for the review. A Members' seminar was held in December 2024 which focused specifically on domestic abuse services. This programme of work progressed over the following months, with updates provided to Committee in the Delivery Plan reports and is now moving through implementation.

6.7 In February 2025, a Prior Information Notice (PIN) was issued through Public Contracts Scotland. The purpose was to identify all potential providers capable of delivering domestic abuse outreach services and to gauge market interest in supporting a whole population service model.

6.8 The original PIN invited expressions of interest to deliver outreach services for all survivors of domestic abuse. It proposed moving to contractual arrangements of up to five years (3 years +1 +1) to ensure service stability and compliance with Contract Standing Orders, ending the previous practice of annual rolling contract extensions. Although the PIN generated interest, it did not fully meet the Council's requirements for a universal service. The Council undertook further engagement with PIN respondents and with other organisations willing to contribute their expertise to the commissioning process.

6.9 Council workshops were held on 24 June 2025 and 5 August 2025 to explore whether a Highland Domestic Abuse Service (HDAS) for all victims could be achieved and invitations were extended to all PIN respondents so their experience and expertise could inform the development of the Council's approach.

6.10 Taking into account the PIN findings; supplier engagement; and procurement and legal advice, it was concluded that female only domestic abuse services would be best commissioned through geographical lots (North, Mid, West, South). The PIN process established that a direct award could be made and so contracts were offered to the single provider in each area that had formally expressed interest. Providers for the North, Mid and West each accepted; the provider in the South area did not. The new outreach contracts are due to commence on 1 April 2026. They will be subject to review at the 3-year point (2029) and may be extended for up to a further 2 years, to support long term service stability.

6.11 To secure provision in the remaining geographical area (South), a further PIN exercise was initiated to assess market interest and identify a suitable provider. **Appendix 2** provides a copy of the notice that was issued for the South Area and provides detail of the service required. This mirrors what was issued for all 4 Highland areas.

6.12 The Council has confirmed to Women's Aid groups operating under existing contracted funding arrangements that non-contracted funding, including MARAC funding and the historically provided voluntary organisation family funding, will continue while the planned review is undertaken. This review of future funding arrangements is being taken forward by the Highland Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership.

6.13 The commissioning model is inclusive of all survivors, recognising the disproportionate impact on women and girls. It aligns with the Scottish Government and Cosla's commitment to the Equally Safe Strategy. It implements one of the key recommendations arising from the Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Services for Violence Against Women and Girls (June 2023) which is for funding to be agreed for at least an initial 3-year period with the option of 2 further years thereafter. An Impact Assessment was undertaken alongside the commissioned contracts review, considering access for rural communities, disabled survivors, and families with children.

6.14 The contract revision includes the implementation of quarterly reporting that includes participation in best practice meetings with invested stakeholders to inform continuous improvement.

6.15 All awards have been made pursuant to the Council's standard model contract for Children's and Justice services, which promotes compliance with established governance standards and ensures consistency across commissioned services. This model embeds clear and enforceable provisions for safeguarding, data protection, performance reporting, and audit access, ensuring that providers operate to high standards of accountability and compliance. The procurement process was formulated to balance fairness, long-term outcomes and service stability. Lots were structured to reflect market realities, preserve local knowledge and service stability.

6.16 Awarding criteria places strong emphasis on quality, safety, and workforce capability, alongside price, to ensure that the services commissioned deliver meaningful outcomes for survivors rather than focusing solely on cost.

6.17 The introduction of a new funding model marks a significant improvement in sustainability and planning. Outreach awards now offer three-year certainty, with the option to extend for up to two additional years, with an annual 2% uplift built in. This multi-year approach supports workforce retention, reduces service disruption, and enables providers to plan strategically for the future. The award structure has also been revised to allow providers to access external match-funding streams that were previously unavailable under legacy arrangements.

6.18 This change strengthens financial resilience and creates opportunities to expand service reach and innovation. Providers will be required to report against a defined outcome framework that focuses on safety, stabilisation, recovery, and sustained wellbeing. These outcomes will be monitored through quarterly reviews and annual assurance processes, ensuring transparency and continuous improvement.

6.19 Continuity of service has been a central priority throughout this process. Existing outreach contracts will remain in place until 31 March 2026, guaranteeing uninterrupted support for survivors during the transition period. New services as part of HDAS will commence on 1 April 2026 in North, Mid, and West Highland, following successful procurement exercises. A dedicated second-phase procurement is underway to secure a provider for South Highland.

6.20 Financially, the contractual arrangement has shifted to a core-funding approach which allows the Council to provide foundational support rather than funding specific service delivery. This change enables HDAS providers to pursue a wider range of external funding opportunities and grants that were not accessible under the previous model. In addition, the Council has discussed with HDAS providers its intention to offer each organisation a sustainability payment for the 2026–2027 financial year to help support the transition to the new model.

## **7. MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment)**

7.1 Alongside outreach, the Council continues to support MARAC arrangements, which remain funded until 31 March 2026. Work is ongoing with MARAC partners to identify future needs and requirements through its current review process. Once the outcomes of this review are established, the Council will work to support a sustainable delivery model for MARAC services going forward ensuring that multi-agency risk assessment and safeguarding remain robust.

## **8. Refuge provision**

8.1 Refuge services continue to play a vital role as a critical safety intervention for those at immediate risk. Existing contracts with Inverness Women's Aid and Ross-shire Women's Aid run until 31 March 2026. To maintain continuity during the wider review of commissioned contracts, providers have been offered and have accepted a contract variation extending refuge funding for six months to 30 September 2026. Emergency accommodation will remain available across Highland throughout this period, ensuring that no one is left without safe options. Women's only spaces will be protected.

## **9. Next steps**

9.1 During the first half of 2026, the Council will complete procurement for South Highland and mobilise new outreach services across all areas. By the third quarter of 2026, the review of commissioned contracts will conclude, and the outcomes of this, and the future delivery model for MARAC funding, will be presented to Committee. This will result in all elements of the domestic abuse service being aligned, sustainable, and fit for purpose.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – People

Date: 16 January 2026

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Chronology of dates and Frequently Asked Questions

Appendix 2 - PIN Notice

## Appendix 1

### Review of Domestic Abuse Services - Chronology

#### **May 2023**

Audit Report on the commissioning of Children's Services.

#### **June 2023**

Independent Strategic Review of funding for violence against women and girls published.

#### **Spring 2024**

Commence review of the contractual position of Women's Aid (WA) contracts and future domestic abuse service needs.

#### **September 2024**

Meeting with WA groups to advise of Prior Information Notice (PIN) intentions.

#### **October 2024**

First meeting with Scottish Women's Aid to discuss potential PIN.

#### **November 2024**

HSW Committee report – Agreed current activity to review Health and Social Care contracts and future developments.

#### **December 2024**

Member Seminar takes place in relation to the provision of domestic abuse services.

#### **February 2025**

HSW Committee Delivery Plan report recap.

#### **February 2025**

PIN issued for Domestic Abuse outreach provision.

#### **June 2025**

Post PIN - Workshop 1 with interested party.

#### **August 2025**

Post PIN Workshop 2 with interested parties.

#### **August 2025**

Following a request at Workshop 2, the Council's Standard Model Contract clauses forwarded to Highland Women's Aid groups.

#### **October 2025**

Agreement in principle reached with all four Highland WA groups on outreach arrangements for female domestic abuse services, geographical support splits and a core funding model.

**November 2025**

MARAC Short Life Working Group review initiated with Highland Violence against Women Partnership reporting to Highland Public Protection Chief Officer Group.

**November 2025**

Contracts signed by three Women's Aid organisations: Ross-shire, Caithness & Sutherland, and Lochaber.

Inverness and South area outstanding.

**2 December 2025**

Confirmation to Inverness WA and Ross-shire WA of **Refuge** contract extensions until 30 September 2025.

**18 December 2025**

PIN issued for Inverness and South area.

**15 January 2026**

All-Members briefing session

**February 2026**

Outcome of Inverness and South Area Outreach PIN known

**6 March 2026**

All-Members briefing session

## DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICES – FAQs

**Date: January 2026**

This provides answers to frequently asked questions regarding domestic abuse services and funding arrangements in Highland and reflects questions asked at the Members briefing in January and queries raised following that session.

### **What is Domestic Abuse?**

Domestic abuse is a pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading or violent behaviour between people aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members. It can include physical, emotional, psychological, sexual or financial abuse, as well as coercive control. Domestic abuse is never the fault of the person experiencing it and help and support are available.

### **Do Scottish local authorities have a statutory duty to provide domestic abuse services?**

No. Scottish local authorities are not legally required to provide or commission domestic abuse services. Scotland does not have an equivalent duty to the one placed on English local authorities under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

### **What does Scottish legislation require instead?**

Scottish legislation provides protective powers, such as Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders issued by police and courts. These measures safeguard victims but do not create obligations on councils to deliver support services.

### **Do upcoming housing changes create duties for councils?**

No. The housing related provisions due to take effect in August 2026 apply to social landlords. They give landlords additional powers to protect tenants experiencing domestic abuse but do not impose service delivery duties on local authorities.

### **How does Scotland's approach differ from England's?**

England places a statutory duty on local authorities to provide accommodation based domestic abuse support. Scotland does not. Domestic abuse support in Scotland is delivered through local policy and national funding rather than through a legal requirement.

### **What are Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs)?**

VAWPs are local multi-agency coordination structures that support delivery of the Scottish Government's [Equally Safe](#) Strategy. They are not statutory bodies and do not carry statutory responsibilities.

### **Do VAWPs receive direct statutory funding?**

No. VAWPs do not have a dedicated funding stream.

## **What national funding supports VAWP related activity?**

The Delivering Equally Safe (DES) Fund is the main national funding mechanism supporting VAWG services. It funds specialist organisations whose work underpins VAWP priorities. Additional support comes from the Victim Centred Approach Fund and periodic Scottish Government uplift packages.

No funding is provided to the Council either for direct provision of services or to fund the provision of services by others.

## **Do local authorities fund VAWPs?**

Local authorities typically contribute by providing coordination functions, such as VAWP lead officer posts, and by providing staff time and strategic support. These contributions vary locally and are policy driven rather than statutory.

## **Is work underway to improve funding stability?**

Yes. COSLA and the Scottish Government are jointly exploring long-term funding models for VAWG services. This work recognises the role of local VAW structures but does not introduce new legal duties for councils.

## **Does any current policy or legislation create future obligations for local authorities?**

No. There is no forthcoming statutory duty requiring local authorities to provide domestic abuse services. Current work focuses on improving funding stability rather than imposing new obligations.

## **Is the refuge review financially driven?**

No. There are no savings targets attached to the review. The aim is to improve commissioning arrangements and ensure services meet needs effectively. Recommendations will be reported to the Health and Social Work Committee.

## **Why were the previous contracts reviewed?**

An Internal Audit into Commissioned Children's Services highlighted the need to significantly strengthen procurement practices across the service. The audit found that a number of contracts which had transferred from NHS Highland to Children's Services had not been subject to formal review for many years. In response, officers undertook a systematic assessment of all contracts managed within Children's Services, giving priority to any that had not been reviewed for five years or more.

This assessment identified that the domestic abuse contracts had not been re-procured since 2011–2012, evidencing clear compliance risks and providing no assurance that services reflected current needs, costs, and best value. This made a full commissioning and procurement process essential.

The review was also informed by the Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Services, which called for greater consistency, transparency, and sustainability in how domestic abuse services

are funded. The national review specifically recommended moving away from single year funding towards multiyear contracts to provide stability and reduce annual uncertainty for providers.

The new Highland arrangements follow this national direction by introducing multi-year outreach contracts, including a 2% annual uplift, improving certainty for providers and supporting sustainable service delivery in line with best practice.

### **Have domestic abuse services delivered by Women's Aid groups across Highland been externally assessed?**

Care Inspectorate evidence shows a mixed picture across Highland Women's Aid services. Recent inspections identified significant weaknesses in both Inverness Women's Aid and Ross-shire Women's Aid, with multiple "weak" evaluations in areas such as leadership, staffing, safeguarding, and the consistency of support provided to women and children. These inspections also highlighted gaps in support planning, inconsistent oversight, and, in some cases, limited support for children. A return visit to Inverness Woman's Aid identified improvement.

For Lochaber Women's Aid, the most recent published Care Inspectorate report in 2019 rated the service as "very good" across care and support, an evaluation of adequate for Management and Leadership.

Caithness & Sutherland Women's Aid (CASWA), most recent report was in 2018 where their services were rated as excellent. However, no recent regulatory assessments are available to confirm current performance.

### **What is the role of elected members in deciding how and with whom the Council procures or commissions services?**

Members of the Corporate Resources Committee are responsible for agreeing the Council's Contract Standing Orders (CSOs). The purpose of the CSOs is to:

- ensure that consistent contracting procedures of the highest standard are laid down for use throughout the Council;
- secure compliance with the law;
- ensure that the Council obtains best value in its procurement activity and all resultant contracts;
- provide a framework for a more detailed Procurement Manual; and
- protect the Council and its staff.

The Council intends to hold an all-Members' Procurement Briefing. This will outline the legal framework governing procurement; the extent of Member involvement in live procurement processes; assurance and transparency mechanisms; and how procurement decisions must be taken to avoid disadvantaging any potential bidders. It is intended this will strengthen Member confidence in the process and improve clarity around roles, responsibilities, and governance.

## **What does the Council currently fund for externally provided domestic abuse services?**

Outreach Services: Support for people affected by domestic abuse across Highland.

Refuge Services: Emergency accommodation for Women in Dingwall, Skye and Inverness.

MARAC: Funding for engagement with multi-agency risk assessment meetings, which help keep people safe.

### **What changes are being introduced for outreach services?**

A procurement exercise has identified providers to deliver outreach services for women across Highland from 1 April 2026. Contracts have been awarded for North, Mid, and West Highland areas. South Highland is still subject to procurement. Existing outreach contracts remain in place until 31 March 2026. A contract has also been awarded to support non women including men. The non woman contract is a test of concept funded through the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme.

### **How will the new funding model for Outreach work?**

The new grant funding model provides multi-year certainty (three years, with potential two-year extension), enables providers to apply for match funding, and uses a standard model contract for consistency and compliance. There is a 2% year on year increase to the contracted rate for this contract.

### **What is happening with refuge services?**

Refuge services for Inverness Women's Aid and Ross-shire Women's Aid are confirmed until 30 September 2026. Emergency accommodation will still be available for anyone who needs it.

### **What about MARAC funding?**

MARAC funding remains in place until 31 March 2026. Discussions are ongoing with the Violence Against Woman and Girls Partnership (which includes the Highland Council) to identify the best model for supporting MARAC delivery and safeguarding.

### **Why is South Highland still in procurement?**

Interest from providers did not fully meet requirements during initial engagement, so a further Prior Information Notice (PIN) was initiated to identify a suitable provider. The outcome of this is expected by the end of January 2026.

### **How is continuity of services being ensured?**

Existing outreach contracts remain in place until 31 March 2026, with the new Highland-wide outreach service commencing thereafter; and refuge services are extended to 30 September 2026 whilst the review is ongoing to avoid any service gaps.

The provision of emergency accommodation by the Council's Housing Service is unaffected by the commissioning review.

## **What is the Council doing to support Women's Aid Groups that have reduced funding?**

The Council recognises the financial pressures facing Women's Aid groups during the transition to the new commissioning model. To support sustainability, the Council has offered **time limited sustainability payments** to organisations whose funding levels have reduced as a result of the outreach procurement exercise.

These payments are intended to help organisations manage the shift to the new model and provide time to identify new grant funding streams. This is intended to maintain service continuity and ensure that victims of domestic abuse continue to receive support throughout the transition period. Sustainability payments sit alongside the continued funding for refuge services until **30 September 2026**, ensuring stability while the wider review of commissioned contracts is completed.

## **Why were Members not asked to approve the outcome of the Outreach Review?**

Members approved the commissioning improvement plan and review of Commissioned services, including Domestic Abuse services, in a report to HSW Committee in November 2024; updates have been provided in subsequent committee reports.

The review led to the procurement exercise for domestic abuse outreach services. Under the Council's Standing Orders, procurement processes must follow prescribed, legally compliant procedures and cannot be subject to Member approval in a way that could risk influencing or disadvantaging bidders. Formal approval of contract awards must likewise follow procurement requirements, which place operational responsibility with officers.

## **Why were Members not told about the review of Women's Aid contracts sooner?**

The review of Women's Aid contracts formed part of the wider review of commissioned Children's Services contracts, which began following Internal Audit and review recommendations. Updates on this work were provided through formal Committee reporting, including:

- The improvement plan considered by the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee in November 2024, and
- The Members' seminar in December 2024, which focused specifically on domestic abuse services and upcoming commissioning changes.

These set out the need to bring long-standing, repeatedly extended contracts into compliance, and to establish a consistent, transparent, sustainable commissioning approach. As the review progressed, further updates were included in Committee

papers. Further detail is included in a report on the Highland Domestic Abuse Service for the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing committee in February 2026.

### **Are we confident that groups are working together and we have cross-agency communication?**

Through the various partnerships – Violence Against Women, Child Protection Committee and Integrated Children's Services Board – we ensure that we have oversight of agencies providing support to children and families, including victims of domestic abuse. The procurement process also ensures we know what services are required to fill any gaps in provision.

### **How do we ensure issues are reported to Police and victims are supported?**

Statistics show an increase in reporting of issues to Police Scotland (3% increase in 2023/24) although domestic abuse is still under-reported. As services, we continue to encourage victims to recognise and report domestic abuse situations, as well as using the [Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse Scotland](#) to establish if a partner has an abusive history.

### **Are exclusion orders effective?**

Exclusion orders can be effective in protecting victims of domestic abuse. However, they can be difficult to enforce as victims can be coerced into letting perpetrators back into the home environment. The use of camera doorbells can support victims to identify perpetrators at their door, and to gain evidence for the Police if a perpetrator is breaching the order.

### **Are we seeing an increase in domestic abuse against males?**

Domestic abuse reports are increasing for both men and women. 83% of victims in reported domestic abuse cases are women and 81% of cases have a male perpetrator. 62% of children living with domestic abuse are directly harmed. This includes boys and girls. In cases such as sextortion (online blackmail where a perpetrator threatens to share sexual images, videos or information) the victims are predominately young males under the age of 30. It is important that anyone affected by domestic abuse has access to the right support.

## Appendix 2

### SUMMARY OF REQUIREMENT

#### A FEMALE DOMESTIC ABUSE OUTREACH SERVICE FOR INVERNESS AND SOUTH TO SUPPORT THE HIGHLAND DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICE

##### 1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Highland Council (the Council) has recently conducted a procurement review of its future need for services that provide domestic abuse support.
- 1.2 The procurement review has determined a requirement within the Inverness and South area to provide core funding to assist a potential provider in delivering outreach support to female victim survivors of domestic abuse. This would cover an area that includes Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey.
- 1.3 The service will form a part of the Highland Domestic Abuse Service (HDAS) which will work collaboratively with other HDAS partners to share best practice opportunities in relation to domestic abuse support in Highland.
- 1.4 Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) see domestic abuse as:

*"Any form of physical, verbal, sexual, psychological or financial abuse which might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, cohabiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse may be committed in the home or elsewhere including online".*

- 1.5 The Council is looking to use a Prior Information Notice to invite interested parties to note their interest as to whether they can accommodate this requirement. This will allow the Council to plan the next phase of its procurement approach.

Please note that refuge is not part of this requirement.

##### 2.0 Service Outline

- 2.1 The Council is seeking a high quality female domestic abuse outreach provider who can provide counselling, practical and emotional support and offer help and guidance on matters such as housing, tenancy sustainment, resettlement, safety planning, risks and management of risks, emotional support, welfare benefits, legal options, health, education, training and parenting.
- 2.2 The service will deliver outreach support to Service Users who have either experienced domestic abuse or who are at risk of experiencing domestic abuse and any accompanying children or young people who have experienced domestic abuse, including those from hard minority communities. It will ensure those supported are assisted to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and are aware of their rights whilst providing appropriate advice that ensures that pro-active support is available to safeguard them and maintain independence in their own home. This can extend to providing support to Service Users at related appointments or to attend Court. This support may include continuing to live in the family home with the perpetrator at the time of being supported, or returning home, assisting a Service User who is fleeing from a domestic abuse situation and /or to assist the Service User to find a new home elsewhere.

- 2.3 The service will be able to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the types of crisis support required to deliver the service and will ensure that those delivering the support have the required expertise and real life experience to deliver domestic abuse services.
- 2.4 The service will aim to empower those who have suffered domestic abuse and any accompanying children or young people to regain control over their lives that they may have lost through abuse. The service will also recognise that children and young people experiencing domestic abuse may also have additional support needs in relation to learning, wider family circumstances, disability or health needs, and social and emotional factors.
- 2.5 The service shall provide a localised, quality and flexible service to females and their children whose lives have been adversely affected by domestic abuse.
- 2.6 The service will be an active partner within the HDAS.

### **3.0 Service Delivery**

- 3.1 The service will support female Service Users in the geographical service delivery area who have experienced domestic abuse.
- 3.2 The service will provide advice and advocacy to Service Users.
- 3.3 The service will be delivered to Service Users in a number of ways including but not limited to face to face support, group support, telephone/video calls and text messaging/emails. There will be an emphasis on ensuring that the support is provided in safe environments and that all these types of support are available across all of the service delivery area including any remote areas.
- 3.4 The support will be sensitive, non-judgemental and person centred and directed by Service Users to meet their needs, goals and aspirations.
- 3.5 The service will respect the privacy of Service Users and will provide access to premises that allow for Service Users to receive the service in a private and confidential manner.
- 3.6 The service will promote itself and its services to the wider community. This may include for example providing information on personal safety and greater awareness of domestic abuse issues and prevention through education in schools and community groups.
- 3.7 The service will work positively with all relevant statutory services where appropriate including the Council's Justice Services, Police Scotland and NHS Highland and will become involved in any partnerships and external initiatives which seek to improve the options available to those experiencing domestic abuse, particularly in relation to women and children.
- 3.8 The Service will offer individual tailored support to all who are affected by domestic abuse and will ensure Service Users are actively involved in the planning and development of the service they receive.

- 3.9 The service will actively seek the views of those experiencing domestic abuse as well as their associated children, young people and their families in the planning and delivery of the service and will take actions to improve service delivery and inform wider partnership planning.
- 3.10 The service will make referrals for onward support via mainstream services when it is appropriate to do so.
- 3.11 The service shall be registered with and regulated by the Care Inspectorate.
- 3.12 Any service provider will ensure that all staff and volunteers confirm to having access to all relevant safeguarding protocols and procedures for adults and children including but not restricted to child protection legislation, national policy and procedures and local child protection procedures.
- 3.13 Any service provider will ensure that all frontline practitioners have the relevant level, for their role, of training and ensure that all individuals are subject to a valid PVG.
- 3.14 The service will actively support and participate in HDAS quarterly meetings for the purpose of supporting all victim survivors of domestic abuse in Highland.

#### **4.0 Service challenges for potential providers**

- 4.1 Any provider will be required to demonstrate a robust plan for service provision that demonstrates an understanding of how the service can be delivered to the whole geographical service delivery area.
- 4.2 The Council would welcome interest from organisations who could provide the services outlined or have the resources to accommodate delivering the requirement with the core funding. Additionally, interest is also welcomed from potential joint providers, consortiums and organisations who would be interested in providing part of a service to support a future provider.
- 4.3 The Council's existing outreach contract in the service delivery area ends on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026 and potential providers are advised that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (as amended) may apply. It would be the responsibility of any interested party to consider any implications of TUPE on any proposals, including any obligations relating to staff transfer, terms and conditions, and associated costs. Furthermore, interested parties are advised to make their own enquiries and seek independent legal advice as necessary.

#### **5.0 Service anticipated length, budget, contract and reporting requirements**

Note the detail in this section 5.0 is not definitive and could be **subject to change**.

- 5.1 The Council anticipates a contractual start date during the first financial quarter of 2026-2027 (April - June 2026) until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2029. In addition to this there will be an opportunity to extend the term for up to a further two years.
- 5.2 In relation to budget the Council is facing a number of challenges across its health and social care services however the Council can advise that a minimum budget of £75,000 for each year of the contract (excluding VAT) has been allocated.

- 5.3 For service transparency and consistency, any future provider will be required to sign the Council's model contract terms which are provided within the PIN documentation.
- 5.4 As part of the service provision there will be a requirement to ensure community benefits are delivered in accordance with The Highland Community Benefits Policy.
- 5.5 The Council will request monthly reporting in respect of service delivery numbers with an expectation that these comply with the Council's Social Care Contract Management Framework.

### **Next Steps**

The Council now requests that any potential interested parties note their interest and detail in no more than **700** words (in font Arial 11) in a word processed document how they would intend to deliver the service. It would be appreciated if the following questions were answered in your submission:-

Why are you interested in providing this service?

Do you have experience of providing similar or related services, and how would you apply this experience to delivering the requirement? Please provide exampled details of good intervention practices.

How would you deliver (or be part of) a service that delivers support and advice to female victim survivors of domestic abuse as well as their associated children and families in the HDAS south geographical area. This answer should in part address recruitment / employment of suitable staffing and supporting the aims of HDAS.

The timescales required for service start up, any barriers to meeting an April to June 2026 start date and any other service delivery challenges beyond this that may exist.

This document is to be submitted by email with the email title heading "**HDAS South**" to [socialcare10.contracts@highland.gov.uk](mailto:socialcare10.contracts@highland.gov.uk) (please check correct email spelling) by a closing time of **5pm** on Wednesday **21<sup>st</sup>** January 2026.

**Please note this is not a call for competition.**