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# Essex Police's Approach to Managing Cases of Domestic Abuse

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. What is domestic abuse?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Risk assessment in domestic abuse cases</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Inspection methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Background and context in Essex</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Governance and leadership</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6. Call-handling</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>7. Responding to incidents</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>8. Investigation and managing offenders</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>9. Supporting victims</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusions and summary of key issues</b>	<b>21</b>

## Executive summary

In 2013, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary inspected the effectiveness of Essex Police's response to criticisms following four domestic murders that took place in the county between 2008 and 2011.

In December 2008, Maria Stubbings was strangled and murdered by her ex-boyfriend, Marc Chivers. An initial investigation carried out by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) resulted in a number of criticisms of Essex Police's handling of the case. However, the report was subsequently withdrawn, following concerns raised by Ms Stubbings' family about some aspects of the investigation. The case has since been re-investigated, and the publication of the new IPCC report was pending at the time of the fieldwork for this inspection.<sup>1</sup>

On 6 June 2011, Christine Chambers and her two-year-old daughter Shania were murdered by Shania's father, David Oakes. Less than two months later, on 24 July 2011, Jeanette Goodwin was murdered by her ex-partner, Martin Bunch. Both these cases were subject to investigations by the IPCC, with the resulting reports<sup>2</sup> again critical of a number of aspects of the force's response to domestic abuse.

At the request of the Chief Constable (and subsequently with the agreement of the Police and Crime Commissioner), HMIC examined whether risks to victims of domestic abuse are now being adequately managed in Essex. The inspection also aimed either to prove or to allay HMIC's concerns<sup>3</sup> that the significant resource Essex Police has invested in tackling domestic abuse has had a detrimental impact on the force's effectiveness<sup>4</sup> in tackling other types of crime.

## Findings

Since 2011, Essex Police has taken some important steps to improve the way in which it deals with cases of domestic abuse. We found that the force has established good governance arrangements in relation to the investigation of domestic abuse incidents. The focus is very much on ensuring that risk assessments are completed in a timely fashion, and that no backlogs develop in the processing of cases.

<sup>1</sup> The report was subsequently published on 21 May 2013. IPCC (2013) *Maria Stubbings: Investigation Concerning the Activities of Essex Police in 2008*. Available from [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk).

<sup>2</sup> IPCC (2012) *Christine and Shania Chambers: Independent Investigation Summary Report*, IPCC (2012) *Mrs Jeanette Goodwin: Investigation into Essex Police's Contact with Mrs Jeanette Goodwin Prior to Her Death*. Both available from [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk).

<sup>3</sup> These concerns were raised through HMIC's regular monitoring of force performance. See HMIC (2012) *HMIC's Approach to Monitoring Forces in England and Wales*. Available from [www.hmic.gov.uk](http://www.hmic.gov.uk).

<sup>4</sup> HMIC has a statutory duty to inspect and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales (Police Act 1996, section 54(2)).

However, there is less emphasis on the overall quality of service provided to individual victims of domestic abuse. More needs to be done to ensure staff fully understand that taking a victim-focused approach to cases of domestic abuse is a critical aspect of homicide prevention.

The force has good systems in place to identify calls from high-risk victims, and to provide background intelligence to attending officers. However, almost all domestic abuse incidents are assigned at least a priority response, which requires police attendance within an hour. This happens even when such a response is clearly inappropriate and unnecessary. By treating every case of domestic abuse as a priority, there is a risk that the more urgent cases are not being properly identified and prioritised. As a result, victims could be put at unnecessary risk.

Officers who attend reports of domestic abuse generally complete accurate risk assessments and act appropriately to protect the victim. However, when repeat victims contact the police they are asked to provide much of the same basic information (such as details of family members) on every occasion. This happens even when repeat incidents take place within a very short space of time. This can act as a barrier to effective victim care and could make victims less willing to contact the police on subsequent occasions.

Investigations are generally well managed, with a strong focus on arresting the alleged perpetrator at the earliest opportunity. However, more could be done to adopt a problem-solving approach<sup>5</sup> in relation to repeat perpetrators, including more targeted police activity supported by better analysis. The force should also develop (in consultation with the Crown Prosecution Service and the Courts and Tribunals Service) a clear policy in relation to pursuing cases where the victim is unwilling to support the prosecution (for example, because she or he is too frightened), but there is other evidence available.

While individual officers act appropriately to protect and support victims, the overall approach to dealing with victims is fragmented: this is an area of particular concern to HMIC. We found poor communication between those providing victim care, investigators and voluntary sector support workers. This risks undermining trust among victims and increases the likelihood that they will be unwilling to support any future prosecutions.

In conclusion, while Essex Police has made some important changes to improve the way in which it deals with domestic abuse, more still needs to be done to ensure that the risks to victims are adequately managed. HMIC will continue to monitor the force's progress as it works to achieve this vital outcome.

<sup>5</sup> A problem-solving approach is one that involves the police working with other agencies to address the underlying causes of problems.

# 1. What is domestic abuse?

The statistics reported in the Government's *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in the UK* policy are stark: in 2011/12 more than 1 million women suffered domestic abuse in the United Kingdom. Of these, over 400,000 were sexually assaulted, 60,000 were raped and thousands more subjected to stalking.<sup>6</sup>

Both women and men are victims of these crimes, many of which take place behind closed doors. Fewer than one in four people who suffer abuse from their partners report it to the police.

At the time of the fieldwork for this inspection, the Government's definition of domestic abuse was:

*... any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality... This includes issues of concern to black and minority ethnic (BME) communities such as so called 'honour-based violence', female genital mutilation and forced marriage.*

An "adult" was defined as any person aged 18 years or over. "Family members" were defined as mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, and grandparent, whether directly related, related by marriage, or stepfamily.

On 31 March 2013, the definition of domestic abuse was broadened to include those aged 16 to 17, and to reflect that such abuse can take the form of "controlling" or "coercive" behaviour. It is now defined as:

*... any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; emotional.<sup>7</sup>*

"Controlling behaviour" is defined as:

*a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.*

<sup>6</sup> All statistics from HM Government (2013) *A Call to End Violence against Women and Girls: Action Plan 2013*. Available from [www.gov.uk/government/policies/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-uk](http://www.gov.uk/government/policies/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-uk).

<sup>7</sup> All 2013 definitions are taken from <https://www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse>.

“Coercive behaviour” is defined as “*an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.*” This definition includes so-called 'honour-based' violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage, and is clear that victims are not confined to one gender or ethnic group.

## 2. Risk assessment in domestic abuse cases

Most police forces in England and Wales use the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour-based Violence (DASH) risk assessment<sup>8</sup> to help assess and manage the risk faced by victims of domestic abuse. This comprises a series of questions around physical abuse; whether the victim is frightened; isolation; feelings of depression or suicide; separation; conflict over child contact; stalking and harassment; pregnancy; escalation of abuse (either frequency or severity); control; honour-based violence; use of weapons; threats to kill; sexual assault; strangulation, choking, suffocation, drowning; whether the abuser has hurt other people; mistreatment of pets; finances; drug and alcohol misuse; injunction history; and criminal history.

Academic studies have shown that while risk assessment in this context is not a precise science, when used effectively it can significantly help to manage the risk to victims.<sup>9</sup> Some researchers have also commented on the need for further work to understand better the relative importance of and relationships between each of the factors within DASH. They suggest that there has not been a consistent degree of scrutiny around the correlation between each of the DASH indicators, and the level of risk. Most also agree that any risk assessment model should be reviewed and revised on a continuing basis as knowledge and understanding develops.<sup>10</sup>

There is currently some debate about whether applying the DASH risk assessment in full to every case of domestic abuse may be unnecessarily bureaucratic. One specific concern is that this approach can lead to a 'tick-box' mentality among officers that may actually make it more difficult to identify risk effectively. A number of pilot studies are currently underway, supported by ACPO and the College of Policing, to assess whether it is feasible to allow a greater degree of officer discretion in applying the DASH model, while still affording effective protection to victims of domestic abuse.

<sup>8</sup> DASH was developed in 2009 by a consultant on behalf of ACPO, and in partnership with the charity, Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse For more information, see [www.dashriskchecklist.co.uk](http://www.dashriskchecklist.co.uk).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Hoyle, C. (2008) 'Will she be safe? A critical analysis of risk assessment in domestic violence cases.' *Children and Youth Services Review* 30: 323–37.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Robinson, A.L. (2010) 'Risk and intimate partner violence', in K. Kemshall and B. Wilkinson (eds) *Good Practice in Assessing Risk: Current knowledge, issues and approaches*. London: Jessica Kingsley, pp.119–38; Robinson, A.L. and Howarth, E. (2012) 'Judging risk: Key determinants in British domestic violence cases.' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 27(8): 1489–1518.

### 3. Inspection methodology

At the request of the Chief Constable (and subsequently with the agreement of the Police and Crime Commissioner), HMIC conducted an inspection of whether risks to victims of domestic abuse are now being adequately managed in Essex. The inspection also aimed either to prove or to allay HMIC's concerns that the significant resource Essex Police has invested in tackling domestic abuse has had a detrimental impact on the force's effectiveness in tackling other types of crime.<sup>11</sup>

The terms of reference as agreed with the force included:

- to conduct a high-level assessment of Essex Police's approach to managing cases of domestic abuse, focusing particularly on the outcomes for victims; and
- to assess whether recent changes made by the force mean that the risks to victims of domestic abuse in Essex are now adequately managed.

We developed a bespoke inspection methodology, in consultation with a number of key stakeholders. This was shared with the force in advance of the inspection.

We reviewed a number of documents relating to how the force deals with domestic abuse. A team of four HMIC inspectors also spent a week in force. During this time we spoke to a number of senior members of staff with responsibilities in relation to domestic abuse. We also visited the force control room, operational police stations and specialist units. We asked staff about their experiences of dealing with domestic abuse cases. Finally, we met with representatives from charities for victims in order to gain a victim perspective. This included meeting a small group of victims.

The HMIC team included staff with recent, senior-level experience in the field of public protection, and specifically domestic abuse.

<sup>11</sup> These concerns were raised through HMIC's regular monitoring of force performance. See HMIC (2012) *HMIC's Approach to Monitoring Forces in England and Wales*. Available from [www.hmic.gov.uk](http://www.hmic.gov.uk). HMIC has a statutory duty to inspect and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales (Section 54(2) Police Act 1996).



## 4. Background and context in Essex

In December 2008, Maria Stubbings was strangled and murdered by her ex-boyfriend Marc Chivers. Because the force had been in contact with Ms Stubbings prior to her murder, the matter was referred to the IPCC. An initial investigation was carried out by the IPCC, and their subsequent report made a number of criticisms of Essex Police's handling of the case. However, the report was then withdrawn, following concerns raised by Ms Stubbings' family about some aspects of the investigation. The case has since been re-investigated and the publication of the new IPCC report was pending at the time of the fieldwork for this inspection.<sup>12</sup>

On 6 June 2011, Christine Chambers and her two-year-old daughter Shania were murdered by Shania's father, David Oakes. On 24 July 2011, Jeanette Goodwin was murdered by her ex-partner, Martin Bunch. Both cases were subject to investigations by the IPCC, whose reports were again critical of a number of aspects of the force's response to domestic abuse.<sup>13</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the investigations into the murders of Christine and Shania Chambers and Jeanette Goodwin, and following an internal review, the force put in place a series of measures to address the concerns raised by the IPCC. These were acknowledged in the IPCC's report into the deaths of Christine and Shania Chambers, and included:

- an independent review by another force of public protection arrangements in Essex;
- a review of current and completed domestic abuse investigations;
- the introduction of a new domestic abuse policy;
- the establishment of a weekly domestic abuse conference call to review high-risk cases;
- the establishment of a domestic abuse intelligence team (DAIT) in the force control room, to improve the information and intelligence provided to officers attending domestic abuse incidents;
- a significant increase in staffing levels within public protection roles (including domestic abuse); and
- staff training in the DASH risk assessment process.

<sup>12</sup> The report was subsequently published on 21 May 2013. IPCC (2013) *Maria Stubbings: Investigation Concerning the Activities of Essex Police in 2008*. Available from [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk).

<sup>13</sup> IPCC (2012) *Christine and Shania Chambers: Independent Investigation Summary Report*; IPCC (2012) *Mrs Jeanette Goodwin: Investigation into Essex Police's Contact with Mrs Jeanette Goodwin Prior to Her Death*. Both available from [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk).

The force's revised domestic abuse policy was introduced in September 2011. The most significant changes were enhanced supervision and oversight. The increased focus on domestic abuse coincided with a substantial increase in the number of domestic abuse incidents recorded by the force. This is likely to have been as a result of more robust recording processes, rather than an actual increase in the number of such incidents. The force now deals with an average of around 80 domestic incidents per day.

In common with all forces, Essex Police has had to manage the challenge of reduced funding, following the Government's 2010 spending review. Part of the force's response to this was to introduce a new policing model, referred to as the 'blueprint'. This is based on the local delivery of neighbourhood policing through district-based policing commands. All other functions (including investigation, response and patrol) are managed centrally on a force-wide basis.

The analysis used to determine staffing levels in the new policing model was based on historical data. However, the increase in recorded domestic abuse incidents led to a significantly greater level of demand on response and patrol resources. This was not only as a result of a greater number of incidents, but also because the nature of domestic abuse incidents is such that they typically take much longer to deal with than the average time for other incidents. These additional demands put significant pressure on response and patrol resources, until a number of adjustments were made to the model in January 2013.

For example: when the blueprint was implemented, all crime investigations, including those related to domestic abuse, were handled by a centrally managed investigations command. Following the review of the model in January 2013, local investigations are now managed by neighbourhood crime teams, based on local policing districts. In some districts, dedicated prisoner processing teams have been established. Neighbourhood crime teams and prisoner processing teams investigate standard and medium-risk domestic abuse cases, while the force criminal investigations department (CID) handles high-risk cases.

Staff spoken to during the inspection generally felt that the January 2013 changes had made a positive difference to the availability of resources to meet demand.

Previously, the force had a number of dedicated domestic violence and hate crime units (DVHCUs), which investigated these types of crime and provided support to victims. More recently, the force has taken a different approach. Investigations are now managed by investigators who also deal with other types of crime, with victim support provided by specialist domestic abuse and safeguarding teams (DASTs).

## 5. Governance and leadership

*The force has established good governance arrangements in relation to the domestic abuse process. However, more needs to be done to ensure that staff fully understand how taking a victim-focused approach to cases of domestic abuse is a critical aspect of homicide prevention.*

Tackling domestic abuse is a clear priority for Essex Police, and it is the only specific type of crime that has been identified as a key area of focus by the Police and Crime Commissioner in his Police and Crime Plan. The force has established an executive 'gold' group to oversee the strategic development of the force's approach to managing domestic abuse. This group is chaired by the deputy chief constable (DCC) and has met regularly since the summer of 2011. Prior to the establishment of this group, recommendations from a number of internal and external reviews were managed in an uncoordinated and ad-hoc way. A consolidated domestic abuse action plan has now been established, and is used to ensure that actions are progressed and those responsible are held to account.

While it is clear that the executive gold group has strengthened the overall governance and oversight of the force's response to domestic abuse, there is no clear and consistent vision of what success in this area means. This is reflected in the views of staff at all levels of the organisation, who see success primarily as ensuring that whichever part of the process that they are responsible for is tightly managed.

At a tactical level, an assistant chief constable chairs the public protection programme board. A weekly risk assessment conference call also takes place, chaired by the head of public protection. At this forum, high-risk cases are reviewed; but the major focus of the meeting is on ensuring that there are no bottlenecks in the system. Many people interviewed during the inspection described the process of managing domestic abuse cases as a "production line" or "conveyor belt", and the main focus of the weekly conference call as being to make sure that this conveyor belt keeps moving, rather than ensuring that the risk to victims are managed.

The force has made a significant investment in training staff on domestic abuse. It has also undertaken a substantial amount of internal communication on the issue, using the force intranet and emails to all staff. This has been effective in ensuring that staff understand what is expected of them and in making clear the priority that the force places on managing cases of domestic abuse. **However, most staff were not able to demonstrate a broad understanding of the wider response to domestic abuse, and of how dealing with it effectively can enhance the confidence of victims and ultimately prevent homicides. Developing this understanding among staff remains a challenge for the force, and will require strong and visible leadership.**

The force recognises the importance of adopting a coherent and comprehensive approach to domestic abuse with other agencies. Essex is one of the pilot areas for the Government's community budget initiative. This programme seeks to pool and align resources across the county, and involves a wide range of partner organisations, including the police, probation, health, all of

the local authorities, and the voluntary sector. Reducing domestic abuse is one element of the programme.

The force has been working hard to secure the commitment of partners to establishing a multi-agency safeguarding hub, which would bring partners together to provide a more coherent and comprehensive approach to victims. This is an important step in improving the service provided to victims of domestic abuse. **The force needs to intensify its work with other agencies across Essex to develop a more co-ordinated approach to domestic abuse.**

## 6. Call-handling

***The force has good systems in place to identify calls from high-risk victims and to provide background intelligence to attending officers. However, by treating every case of domestic abuse as a priority, there is a risk of the more urgent cases not being properly prioritised. As a result, victims could be put at unnecessary risk.***

When calls about domestic abuse incidents are received in the force control room, call-takers make an assessment of the urgency of the response and grade the call accordingly. The force policy on domestic abuse states that the starting point for incidents of this nature should be a priority response, which means attendance within 60 minutes. Cases where there is an immediate threat should receive an emergency response, i.e. attendance within 15 minutes (in urban areas) or 20 minutes (in rural areas).

The policy does allow domestic abuse cases to be graded for a less urgent response, or to be deferred. However, call-takers are very reluctant to do this, for fear that they will be criticised at a later date. This is the case even when such a less urgent response is clearly appropriate: examples provided to the inspection team included threats being made by text message or on social media websites when the alleged perpetrator was overseas, and likely to be so for several days.

The force receives an average of 80 calls about domestic abuse incidents each day. The fact that the vast majority of these incidents are assessed as needing a priority response makes it difficult for control room staff to differentiate risk amongst what can be a long list of incidents. By treating every case as a priority, there is a risk of the more urgent cases not being properly prioritised. As a result, victims could be put at unnecessary risk. **The force should review and improve the way in which its graded response policy is applied to domestic abuse incidents.**

When a domestic abuse incident is logged into the force's command and control system (STORM), a standard operating procedure (SOP) template is presented to the call-taker. This includes a set of structured questions which the call-taker is expected to ask (unless the need for an urgent response makes this unrealistic). While the final part of the SOP requires the call-taker to make an assessment of the caller's "demeanour", the caller is not specifically asked a question to establish how frightened he or she feels. This is of concern, given the conclusions of the IPCC investigation into the murder of Jeanette Goodwin, which criticised the call-taker's over-reliance on the apparently calm demeanour of the victim and for failing to record her repeated assertion that she was "scared".<sup>14</sup> **The force should review its SOP, to include a question to establish how frightened the caller feels,** and ensure call-takers respond to this appropriately.

<sup>14</sup> IPCC (2012) *Mrs Jeanette Goodwin: Investigation into Essex Police's Contact with Mrs Jeanette Goodwin Prior to Her Death*. Available from [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk).

If an address or telephone number associated with a high-risk victim of domestic abuse is identified, it is flagged on the STORM command and control system. This alerts the call-taker to the relevant information and assists in determining the appropriate initial response and risk assessment.

The two IPCC investigation reports into the murders of Christine Chambers, Shania Chambers and Jeanette Goodwin both criticised the lack of effective background intelligence checks to help ensure that attending officers had as complete a picture as possible of the relevant history. In response to this criticism, the force has established a domestic abuse intelligence team (DAIT), based permanently in the force control room. The team comprises ten police constables and cover is provided at all times except between 0400 and 0600, Sundays to Thursdays. From the reality testing conducted during the inspection, it would seem that the team has the capacity to undertake prompt and detailed research into domestic abuse incidents, and to complete an initial assessment of risk. This is undoubtedly of value to attending officers, but it is a costly means of addressing the issue, particularly given the current financial climate. **In the longer term, the force should establish whether investments in improved technology could be a cost-effective means of providing attending officers with necessary background intelligence and information.**

Each week, supervisors in the force control room review 15 domestic abuse calls. These are assessed against a number of criteria, including whether the call was appropriately classified, if the SOP questions were asked, and the attitude of the call-taker. Supervisors also examine a sample of three calls per month handled by each operator. Although not specific to domestic abuse, this process identifies development issues for individual operators. More recently, the results of this quality assurance process have started to be used to identify wider trends and to improve organisational learning.

## 7. Responding to incidents

*Officers who attend reports of domestic abuse generally complete accurate risk assessments and carry out appropriate actions to protect victims. However, more could be done to ensure that repeat victims do not need to repeat the same basic information every time they call the police.*

The vast majority of domestic abuse incidents are initially attended by response and patrol officers, who have county-wide responsibility for responding to emergency and priority-graded incidents. The response and patrol command also includes specialist roads policing officers and dog handlers. These officers, (particularly roads policing) also attend domestic abuse incidents on a regular basis. All officers in the response and patrol command have received training in the DASH risk assessment process.

When attending domestic abuse incidents, force policy requires officers to complete a 'DV1' form on every occasion. This form includes the DASH risk assessment questions, but also contains numerous other pages, covering information such as the personal details of everyone in the household, and of any third-party witnesses.

We found that officers generally carry out accurate risk assessments and undertake appropriate safeguarding actions when they attend domestic abuse incidents. They are, however, frustrated about the need to complete a full DV1 form in relation to every incident they attend. This policy also means that victims often repeatedly have to provide the same personal information to both call-takers and attending officers

The force recognises that more could be done to streamline the way in which this information is gathered from victims. Future improvements in technology, including the introduction of mobile data terminals, will make this easier to achieve, but are still some way off. **The force should take immediate steps to make the process of gathering information from victims more straightforward.**

The College of Policing is currently conducting research into the possibility of allowing further officer discretion in completion of the DASH risk assessment. Until this work is completed (and subject, of course, to its findings), officers should continue to complete a DASH risk assessment in all cases.

After the attending officer has completed the DV1 form, it is sent to force headquarters, where the details are recorded on the PROTECT computer system. High-risk cases are sent immediately, normally by email; while standard and medium-risk forms are sent by internal mail, which creates some delay.

Forms that have been assessed as medium or high-risk are input by domestic abuse safeguarding officers (DASOs). Standard-risk forms are input by staff who have been trained in the DASH risk assessment process and who are expected to challenge officers if they think the assessment of risk is incorrect.

## 8. Investigation and managing offenders

*Investigations are well managed, with a strong focus on arresting the alleged perpetrator at the earliest opportunity. However, more could be done to adopt a problem-solving approach in relation to repeat perpetrators. The force should develop, in consultation with the Crown Prosecution Service and Courts and Tribunals Service, a clear policy in relation to pursuing cases where the victim is unwilling to support the prosecution (because she or he is too frightened to do so, for instance), but there is other evidence available.*

High-risk domestic abuse cases are investigated by the force criminal investigation department (CID). Standard and medium-risk cases are investigated by dedicated prisoner processing teams (where they exist), or by neighbourhood crime teams. Overall, we found the quality of individual investigations was high. There was clear evidence that investigations were closely supervised, and a strong emphasis on arresting alleged perpetrators at the earliest opportunity. However, **more should be done to adopt a problem-solving approach<sup>15</sup> in relation to repeat perpetrators**. Generally there was a poor level of awareness among local officers of the identity of the most prolific domestic abuse perpetrators in their area. There was also little in the way of analysis carried out in relation to repeat perpetrators to support targeted activity through the force's intelligence processes.

In particular, we found little evidence of prosecutions being actively pursued if the victim is not willing to support proceedings (because she or he is too frightened, for instance), but there is evidence of the offence from other sources. We reviewed a small sample of case files that had been discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and found examples where such a prosecution should have been considered. However, there was no evidence from the case file of any dialogue between the CPS and the officer in the case to discuss this option.

**The force should engage at a strategic level with the CPS and Courts and Tribunals Service to develop and implement a clearer, stronger and more victim-focused policy on how and when this kind of case should be progressed.** This would help to strengthen the evidential mindset amongst call-takers and attending officers, and to improve awareness among call-takers of the value of evidence from the first account given by victims when they call the police. It would also encourage wider use of photographic evidence of disturbed scenes to help support victims' accounts.

In some forces, serial perpetrators of domestic abuse can be referred to the integrated offender management (IOM) programme. This is a framework that allows local partners (such as local authorities, the probation service and the police) to work together to ensure that those offenders who cause most harm are managed in a co-ordinated way to prevent them from engaging in crime. However, domestic abuse perpetrators fall outside the referral criteria that partners in Essex have chosen to use for referrals to the IOM programme, so

<sup>15</sup> A problem-solving approach is one that involves the police working with other agencies to address the underlying causes of problems.



this option is not pursued. **The force should take the steps necessary to persuade relevant partners to include serial domestic abuse perpetrators in the IOM framework.**

When domestic abuse perpetrators are charged with offences, they are sometimes kept in custody and taken to court the next day. The court is then asked to consider either remanding the individual in custody, or applying bail conditions to their release. In these cases, we found there was often no monitoring by the police of the outcome at court. If the perpetrator is released, this potentially leaves a significant risk to victims that is not being managed. **The force should take immediate steps to ensure that cases such as these are properly monitored to ensure that the risk to victims continues to be soundly understood and comprehensively managed should the perpetrator be released by the court.**

## 9. Supporting victims

***Individual officers undertake appropriate actions to protect and support victims. However, the overall approach to dealing with victims is fragmented. This risks undermining trust among victims and increases the likelihood of victims being unwilling to support prosecutions.***

For medium and high-risk cases, victim support is provided by DASOs, the majority of whom are police officers. DASOs work in domestic abuse and safeguarding teams (DASTs), which are based at three hubs across the county (at Colchester, Laindon and Brentwood). There is also a central referral unit (CRU), which is based in the force's headquarters.

The CRU is staffed between 0800 and midnight every day, and the geographic hubs work between 0800 and 2200, again seven days a week. Police officers work in all three hubs and in the CRU. In the CRU, they are supported by a combination of police staff researchers and temporary agency staff. Supervision is provided by two police sergeants in the CRU; one sergeant managing each of the hubs; and an additional sergeant with responsibility for multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)<sup>16</sup> across the whole county.

If the initial DASH risk assessment is determined to be high, the CRU is notified immediately. The DV1 form is then forwarded as a scanned document or by fax to the DAST. Provided officers at the relevant hub are on duty, they input details of the case into the PROTECT computer system. They then review the risk assessment, and if they agree it is a high risk case they will normally (although not always) telephone the victim and agree a safety plan to protect her or him. If the risk is assessed as medium or standard, the DV1 form is submitted to the CRU by internal mail. Details from medium-risk forms are input and managed by the DASOs at the CRU, while those from standard-risk forms are input by the police staff researchers.

Volunteers from the victim support service (VSS) provide support to some domestic abuse victims. However, there is typically no contact between the VSS volunteers and the police DASOs. As a result, the safety planning conducted by each agency is not co-ordinated. Victims receive independent contact from each agency, which can appear disjointed and involve significant duplication of effort.

DASOs rarely (if ever) have face-to-face contact with victims, instead generally talking to them on the telephone. We do not consider this to be the best approach to providing victim care. Although the DASOs are responsible for developing a safety plan, we found no evidence of these plans being actively managed. Actions are assigned to other departments, but communication between the DASOs and other departments is poor, and we found little

<sup>16</sup> MARACs are multi-agency meetings where statutory and voluntary agency representatives share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse in order to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase victim safety. The agencies that attend MARACs vary, but are likely to include the police, probation, independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs), children's services, health and housing. HMIC's assessment of the effectiveness of MARACs in Essex is given on pages 19–20.

evidence of effective follow-up to ensure that the agreed actions have been carried out. One example related to a safety plan which involved a requirement for high-profile police patrols in the vicinity of the victim's home address. The request for this to be undertaken was sent by email to an inspector who was on annual leave at the time; as a result, no patrols were carried out until after the inspector's return.

The shift arrangements of the DASTs are not victim-focused. On any one day, one of the hubs works days, one works evenings and the third is on a rest day. This means that staff in the hubs are often required to pick up actions in relation to victims living in other areas. Because they effectively cover the whole county, the DASOs feel that they are unable to develop meaningful professional relationships with locally-based agencies. This means that it is not always easy for the DASOs to provide the best possible advice to victims. Furthermore, the case then needs to be passed on to the relevant geographic hub, leading to a more fragmented service to victims.

The situation is made worse by the fact that investigation of domestic abuse cases is managed separately from victim support – even though the majority of DASOs are warranted officers, and therefore could carry out investigations as well (because they have the power of arrest, for instance). We found communication between investigators and DASOs to be poor. It was clear from interviews with investigation staff and DASOs that investigation is not seen as part of safeguarding activity – but it should be regarded in this way. This is because crime prevention through efficient investigation is a very effective way of keeping victims safe. We found communication between DASOs, investigators, response and patrol officers, and voluntary sector support agencies to be poor.

The fragmented nature of the service provided to victims is a significant concern. This is borne out by representatives of charities for victims, who gave a number of examples where victims retracting their complaints had cited as a reason for doing so the multiple and seemingly un-coordinated contact from the police and other agencies. Some individual victims to whom we spoke also commented on the sometimes disjointed nature of their contact with the force, although there were some positive comments about the actions of individual officers.

**Essex Police should urgently and thoroughly review the working arrangements of the DASTs, in order to provide a more effective and victim-focused service. It should also reconsider and report to HMIC the extent to which the investigation function may be combined with victim support.** The force has suggested that this may be difficult to achieve, in the context of current financial challenges. However, investigative workload for domestic abuse cases is largely predictable, so it is possible to match resources effectively to demand and thus ensure efficient use of investigative resources. Without this investigative workload, we would question whether the DASO role as currently constructed requires the warranted powers of a police officer.

Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) operate in each district. Their purpose is to bring relevant agencies together to share information and provide a co-ordinated response to high-risk victims of domestic abuse. Medium

and standard-risk cases are managed through a series of local, police-led risk assessment meetings.

MARACs operate in each local authority in Essex, with 13 meetings take place across the force area each month. Essex Police employs a dedicated MARAC co-ordinator who chairs each of the meetings. She is supported by two full-time and one part-time member of staff. The police input to each of the MARACs is provided by a dedicated sergeant from the DAST.

The MARACs in Essex work well to support victims: information is shared effectively, actions are agreed and those responsible are held to account. However, the caseload is high, with up to 30 cases dealt with at a single MARAC meeting. Information is shared at the meeting rather than in advance, so the time available to consider each individual case is unnecessarily limited. Additional meetings could potentially be scheduled, although this would be beyond the capacity of the existing co-ordinator to manage.

A dedicated DAST sergeant also attends every MARAC meeting. The number of cases considered at these meetings means that the sergeant has very little time to research all those that are due to be considered by each of the MARACs. **The force should reconsider and improve the sustainability of its approach to MARACs, and consider further investment to make them more effective**, particularly given that funding for the current administrative support staff posts is only guaranteed until March 2014.

Further support to some high-risk victims of domestic abuse is provided through the independent domestic violence advocacy (IDVA) service. In Essex, IDVA provision is funded to the amount of £262,000 per annum, which provides six IDVAs and an administrative post. This funding comes from a variety of sources, with each IDVA service in the country undertaking its own fundraising activities. Funding for IDVAs in Essex is low compared to many forces. As a result, the IDVAs only have the capacity to manage high-risk cases where the offender is charged, and at least 18 years of age. A pilot study is planned through the community budget initiative to provide an enhanced IDVA service in certain parts of the county.

## Conclusions and summary of key issues

Since the summer of 2011, Essex Police has taken a number of important steps to improve the way in which domestic abuse cases are managed. Overall governance has been strengthened significantly, and arrangements are in place to ensure that backlogs do not develop in the system. The force has invested significantly in training staff in the DASH risk assessment process. Better intelligence is now provided to officers who attend domestic abuse incidents, and investigations are generally well managed.

However, more remains to be done to ensure that the risks to victims of domestic abuse in Essex are adequately managed. Below is a summary of the main issues that we believe the force needs to address.

- i. Most staff were not able to demonstrate a broad understanding of the wider response to domestic abuse, and of how dealing with it effectively can enhance the confidence of victims and ultimately prevent homicides. Developing this understanding amongst staff remains a challenge for the force, and will require strong and visible leadership.
- ii. The force needs to intensify its work with other agencies across Essex to develop a more co-ordinated approach to domestic abuse.
- iii. The force should review and improve the way in which its graded response policy is applied to domestic abuse incidents.
- iv. The force should review its standard operating procedure for domestic abuse incidents, to include a question to establish how frightened the caller feels.
- v. In the longer term, the force should explore whether investments in improved technology could be a cost-effective means of providing attending officers with necessary background intelligence and information.
- vi. The force should consider what can be done in the short term to make the process of gathering information from victims more straightforward.
- vii. More could be done to adopt a problem-solving approach in relation to repeat perpetrators, including targeted activity supported by better analysis.
- viii. The force must engage at a strategic level with the CPS and Courts and Tribunals Service to develop and implement a clearer, stronger and more victim-focused policy on how and when to progress cases where the victim is unwilling to support the proceedings (for instance,

because she or he is too frightened), but there is other evidence available.

- ix. The force should take the steps necessary to persuade relevant partners to include serial domestic abuse perpetrators in the IOM framework.
- x. The force should take immediate steps to ensure that cases where perpetrators are taken directly from police custody to court are properly monitored. This will help ensure that the risk to victims continues to be managed should the perpetrator be released by the court.
- xi. The force should urgently and thoroughly review the working arrangements of the DASTs, in order to provide a more effective and victim-focused service. It should also reconsider and report to HMIC the extent to which the investigation function may be combined with victim support.
- xii. The force should reconsider and improve the sustainability of the current approach to MARACs, and consider further investment to make them more effective.

HMIC will continue to monitor the force's progress as it works to achieve the vital outcome of ensuring the risks to victims of domestic abuse are adequately managed.