



Inspecting policing
in the public interest

Thames Valley Police's approach to tackling domestic abuse

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Introduction

The extent and nature of domestic abuse remains shocking. A core part of the policing mission is to prevent crime and disorder. Domestic abuse causes both serious harm and constitutes a considerable proportion of overall crime. It costs society an estimated £15.7 billion a year.¹ 77 women were killed by their partners or ex-partners in 2012/13.² In the UK, one in four young people aged 10 to 24 reported that they experienced domestic violence and abuse during their childhood.³ Forces told us that crime relating to domestic abuse constitutes some 8 percent of all recorded crime in their area, and one third of their recorded assaults with injury. On average the police receive an emergency call relating to domestic abuse every 30 seconds.

People may experience domestic abuse regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class, age or disability. Domestic abuse may also occur in a range of different relationships including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender, as well as within families.

While both men and women can be victims of domestic abuse, women are much more likely to be victims than men.

The cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse is:

“any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, 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. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:⁴

- *psychological*
- *physical*
- *sexual*
- *financial*
- *emotional”.*

¹ Walby, S. (2009). *The cost of domestic violence*. Retrieved from: www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/doc.../Cost_of_domestic_violence_update.doc

² Office for National Statistics (2013). *Focus on violent crime and sexual offences 2012/13 – Chapter 4: Intimate Personal Violence and Partner Abuse*. Retrieved from: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_352362.pdf

³ Radford L, Corral S, Bradley C et al (2011) *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. London: NSPCC.

⁴ All definitions are taken from www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse

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.

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.

Tackling domestic abuse and keeping its victims safe is both vitally important, and incredibly complicated. The police service needs to have the right tools, resources, training and partnerships in place to help it identify victims and keep them safe. It also needs to investigate and bring to justice offenders, when no two domestic abuse environments are the same, and some victims have suffered in silence for years or even decades.

In September 2013, the Home Secretary commissioned HMIC to conduct an inspection.⁵ We were asked to consider:

- the effectiveness of the police approach to domestic violence and abuse, focusing on the outcomes for victims;
- whether risks to victims of domestic violence and abuse are adequately managed;
- identifying lessons learnt from how the police approach domestic violence and abuse; and
- making any necessary recommendations in relation to these findings when considered alongside current practice.

To answer these questions, HMIC collected data and reviewed files from the 43 Home Office funded forces. We spoke to 70 victims of domestic abuse in focus groups throughout England and Wales and surveyed over 100 victims online. We also surveyed 200 professionals working with victims of domestic abuse.

We inspected all police forces in England and Wales, interviewing senior and operational leads in forces, holding focus groups with frontline staff and partners, and carrying out visits to police stations (which were unannounced) to test the reality of each force's approach with frontline officers. Our inspection teams were supplemented by expert peers, which included public protection

⁵ www.gov.uk/government/news/major-review-of-police-response-to-domestic-violence

experts from over 15 forces and those working with victims of domestic abuse in voluntary and community sector organisations.

This report details what HMIC found in Thames Valley Police and at the end of the report we set out some recommendations. These recommendations should be considered in conjunction with the recommendations for all forces made in the national report.⁶ A glossary of frequently used terms also appears at the end of the report.

⁶ There is a requirement under section 55(5) and section 55(6) of the Police Act 1996 for the police and crime commissioner to publish a copy of their comments on this report and the recommendations for all forces in the national report and forward these to the Home Secretary.

Domestic abuse in Thames Valley⁷

Calls for assistance



In Thames Valley, domestic abuse accounts for 5% of calls to the police for assistance. Of these calls, 43% were from repeat victims.

Crime

7%

Domestic abuse accounts for 7% of all recorded crime.

Assault with intent

12%

Thames Valley recorded 258 assaults with intent to cause serious harm, of these 30 were domestic abuse related. This is 12% of all assaults with intent to cause serious harm recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

Assault with injury

33%

The force also recorded 8,119 assaults with injury, of these 2,686 were domestic abuse related. This is 33% of all assaults with injury recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

⁷ Data in this section is based upon forces' own definition of calls for assistance and domestic abuse, and forces' use of domestic abuse markers on IT systems.

Source: HMIC data collection. Crime figures were changed following resubmission from Thames Valley Police.

Harassment

57%

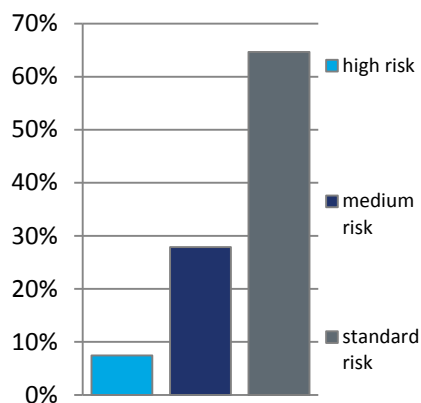
The force recorded 1,796 harassment offences, of these 1,019 were domestic abuse related. This is 57% of all harassment offences recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

Sexual offences

10%

The force also recorded 2,398 sexual offences, of these 237 were domestic abuse related. This is 10% of all sexual offences recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

Risk levels



On 31 August 2013 Thames Valley had 2,038 active domestic abuse cases; 7% were high risk, 28% were medium risk, and 65% were standard risk.

Arrests



For every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded, there were 77 arrests in Thames Valley. For most forces the number is between 45 and 90.

Outcomes



Thames Valley recorded 9,728 domestic abuse related crimes for the 12 months to the end of August 2013. Of these crimes, 25% resulted in a charge, 13% resulted in a caution and, 1% had an out of court disposal, for example, a fixed penalty notice for disorderly conduct.

Executive summary

The public in the Thames Valley Police area can have confidence that generally the police provide a good service to victims of domestic abuse and help keep them safe.

Tackling domestic abuse is a priority for the force and the police and crime commissioner (PCC). Staff have a good understanding of what they need to do to provide a good service to victims.

Victims who are at greatest risk of harm receive a more bespoke service from specialist domestic abuse officers. However, there is more the force could do for victims assessed to be medium or standard risk.

There are good examples of partnership working at force and local levels, but this still needs to be developed further. When multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs) are introduced later in 2014, these should help deliver improvements in joint working and information sharing.

Identifying victims

Thames Valley Police has a strong focus on identifying victims of domestic abuse. Members of staff who receive initial reports understand the importance of getting accurate information from the caller, and that staff need the right background information when responding to these incidents. Staff are confident and empathetic when dealing with callers. They also understand that being a repeat victim, or in some way vulnerable, places a victim at greater risk, and this will influence their decision as to the urgency of the police response. However, the system for identifying any previous history of abuse or vulnerability is not efficient.

Some information is automatically made available to call handlers, but the complete picture is only accessible through time-consuming research on a number of databases. This is carried out by the information research bureau, and on occasion, will not be completed in time to relay the information to the attending officer. This means that officers can attend the scene of a domestic abuse incident without knowing the full background, which may make their risk assessment less accurate.

The force prioritises the response to domestic abuse incidents and a police officer will attend in every case. Officers are sent either immediately, where there is believed to be a risk to life or safety, or, if there is no immediate threat or risk to the victim, then officers will attend within an hour.

Supervision is good in the control room. Any incident where there is an imminent risk of harm must be notified to a supervisor as soon as it is received. They will then monitor the incident. Supervisors are made aware of domestic abuse incidents and complete dip sampling of records to ensure service delivery standards are maintained.

Keeping victims safe

Domestic abuse is a priority for Thames Valley Police and the PCC and this is recognised by staff. Chief officer oversight is good, and they provide clear direction and leadership. The PCC has set a priority to cut crimes that are of most concern to the public, and to protect the most vulnerable members of the communities in Thames Valley. He has committed to work with partners to tackle domestic and other interpersonal abuse by identifying and supporting those at risk and bringing to justice the perpetrators.

Comprehensive and effective training has been provided to frontline staff in identifying and dealing with the full spectrum of domestic abuse and in undertaking risk assessments. Supervisors have been trained, they are also clear about their role and responsibilities and supervision is robust.

For cases assessed as high-risk, specialist domestic abuse officers take responsibility for the investigation and for making sure the victim is safe. All staff understand the need to refer cases to partner agencies when children are identified as being at risk, to allow action to be taken to better protect them.

The initial response to calls for assistance is good, but too many cases are being lost further down the prosecution process. Thames Valley Police has one of the worst records in the country for the number of domestic abuse prosecutions that fail to result in a conviction. The reasons for this are multiple, and often outside the control of the police. However, the poor quality of police investigations and evidence gathering by responding officers is an important factor. The force is aware of this and is taking active steps to improve the quality of evidence being gathered.

Management of risk

There are good and robust re-assessment and quality assurance systems in place to ensure appropriate action has been taken to safeguard those victims who are assessed as facing the greatest risk of harm (high-risk and medium-risk). These victims have their initial assessments of risk reviewed by the specialist domestic abuse officers. Those who are identified as standard-risk are still reviewed by the officer's supervisor, and small samples of these are routinely checked by the risk assessors in the referral centres to provide assurance of quality. This is good practice.

The force has also put in place a process which flags up in the referral centre any case where three or more domestic abuse incidents in a 12 month period have been reported and assessed as standard. They are reviewed to determine whether there is a pattern of escalating risk to the victim, and whether further action needs to be taken to manage the risk. When a victim suffers seven incidents, two of which have resulted in crimes being committed in any 12 month period, the victim is automatically referred to a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) regardless of the risk level.

The daily tasking and briefing processes keep local officers informed of high-risk domestic abuse victims and perpetrators, including those offenders facing arrest, once found by officers. Neighbourhood officers could provide a better service, if they were given more information about victims or offenders who live or regularly visit their areas.

Partnership arrangements are complex with 16 local authorities in the Thames Valley area. This presents a challenge to the police and leads to inconsistency of working practices, and variations in the services available to victims across local areas. The police and partners are working to introduce multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs) across the force area, which should improve the information sharing problems currently being encountered.

Organisational effectiveness for keeping people safe

Domestic abuse prevention and investigation are priorities for the force and the PCC. There is a coherent and co-ordinated governance structure to oversee delivery, both within the force and across its complex partnerships.

The force has a good process in place to learn lessons from domestic homicides that have happened in the Thames Valley area or nationally, however, the process needs to be strengthened to ensure that improvements needed have been systematically implemented and evaluated.

Processes to ensure that contact is maintained with victims when their abusers have been in prison need to be improved. There is a lack of clarity among officers as to whose responsibility it is, victims are not consistently updated before the offenders are released, and the risks posed are not routinely re-assessed in all cases.

There is a strong focus on performance management with clear and visible involvement of chief officers in scrutinising domestic abuse performance. However, the force does not have a clear understanding of what good performance looks like for domestic abuse, and there has been limited work to date in developing qualitative measures of outcomes for victims.

Findings

How does the force identify victims of domestic abuse, and in particular repeat and vulnerable victims?

Thames Valley Police has a strong focus on identifying victims of domestic abuse. Members of staff who receive initial reports understand the importance of getting accurate information from the caller, and that staff need the right background information when responding to these incidents. Staff are confident and empathetic when dealing with callers. They also understand that being a repeat victim, or in some way vulnerable, places a victim at greater risk, and this will influence their decision as to the urgency of the police response. However, the system for identifying any previous history of abuse or vulnerability is not efficient.

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Supervision is good in the control room. Any incident where there is an imminent risk of harm must be notified to a supervisor as soon as it is received. They will then monitor the incident. Supervisors are made aware of domestic abuse incidents and complete dip sampling of records to ensure service delivery standards are maintained.

People who want to report incidents of domestic abuse generally contact Thames Valley Police by phone. Some reports come from victims attending the enquiry counters at police stations or less often through a third party such as health providers or social care. Members of staff receiving the initial reports, recognise the importance of identifying domestic abuse victims and dealing with them appropriately. The call takers have responsibility for assessing the risk posed to victims and their immediate needs. Initial checks on the victim; others who may be at risk; and the perpetrator, are completed by control room operators and some background information is provided to officers who are

responding. All domestic abuse calls are considered to be a priority for the force and an officer will always attend.

Staff taking the calls have access to question sets which prompt them to ask key questions to better understand the circumstances of the incident and assess the risk to the victim. They use their professional judgement to determine the most appropriate police response based on what they are being told by the caller, as well as information about previous police involvement that is already recorded and available through the police IT systems. They will decide how urgent the police response needs to be and which officers should attend. Officers are sent either immediately, where there is believed to be a risk to life or safety, or, if there is not an immediate threat or risk to the victim, then officers will attend within an hour.

The force uses a flagging system to record whether a victim has previously reported that they have been the subject of domestic abuse, or if they have been identified as being vulnerable (for example if they have a disability or are elderly). Call takers understand that previous history of abuse and any particular vulnerability places the victim at greater risk. This informs their assessment of the risk to the victim and decision as to whether a more urgent police response is required.

Retrieval of some information about the people involved; previous incidents; and the risk the perpetrator may pose to police; is automated. As soon as the call taker opens a new incident record and adds the call details, this information is immediately flagged up to them. But other intelligence requires staff to go into other systems, which can slow down access to some important background details. To overcome this issue, the force has a dedicated team – the information research bureau (IRB) - who have responsibility for researching information about the victim and the perpetrator. They should then pass this information to the attending officers, but this can take time and does not always happen consistently. This means that officers can sometimes attend a domestic abuse incident without having the full picture, which may make their risk assessment at the scene less accurate. The force will introduce new IT software in April 2014, which should make information stored across all systems more readily available.

Staff understand that anyone previously reporting domestic abuse is considered a repeat victim, although the force does not have a definition for repeat or vulnerable domestic abuse victims. Nor is there a robust system for identifying repeat victims. In some cases there is a marker placed on the command and control system, but for others, it relies on the initial call taker searching for previous incidents, or previous history being identified through subsequent checks.

Control room supervisors monitor some domestic abuse incidents. Where the victim is at risk of imminent harm, then this must be referred to a supervisor. If an incident is downgraded from an immediate or urgent response, then this requires a review and authorisation from a supervisor. Supervisors listen in to a sample of their team's calls to ensure they are asking the right questions. They carry out some dip-sampling of different calls, to ensure that recording processes are taking place, as well as ensuring that callers are given a suitable level of service.

Call takers have a clear understanding of their role and they are confident and empathetic when dealing with domestic abuse victims. They consider risk factors as a matter of course when obtaining information about the incident (for example if the victim is pregnant, alcohol is involved, children are at risk, weapons have been used or are available) and have access to guidance and questions if needed. Call takers give available information to officers attending domestic abuse incidents, but there is a view, that when the incident is forwarded to the IRB for further checks, the delay means that officers attending may not have the most relevant and up-to-date information.

How does the force respond to victims of domestic abuse? This includes initial action, including risk assessment

Domestic abuse is a priority for Thames Valley Police and the PCC and this is recognised by staff. Chief officer oversight is good, and they provide clear direction and leadership. The PCC has set a priority to cut crimes that are of most concern to the public, and to protect the most vulnerable members of the communities in Thames Valley. He has committed to work with partners to tackle domestic and other interpersonal abuse by identifying and supporting those at risk and bringing to justice the perpetrators.

Comprehensive and effective training has been provided to frontline staff in identifying and dealing with the full spectrum of domestic abuse and in undertaking risk assessments. Supervisors have been trained, they are also clear about their role and responsibilities and supervision is robust.

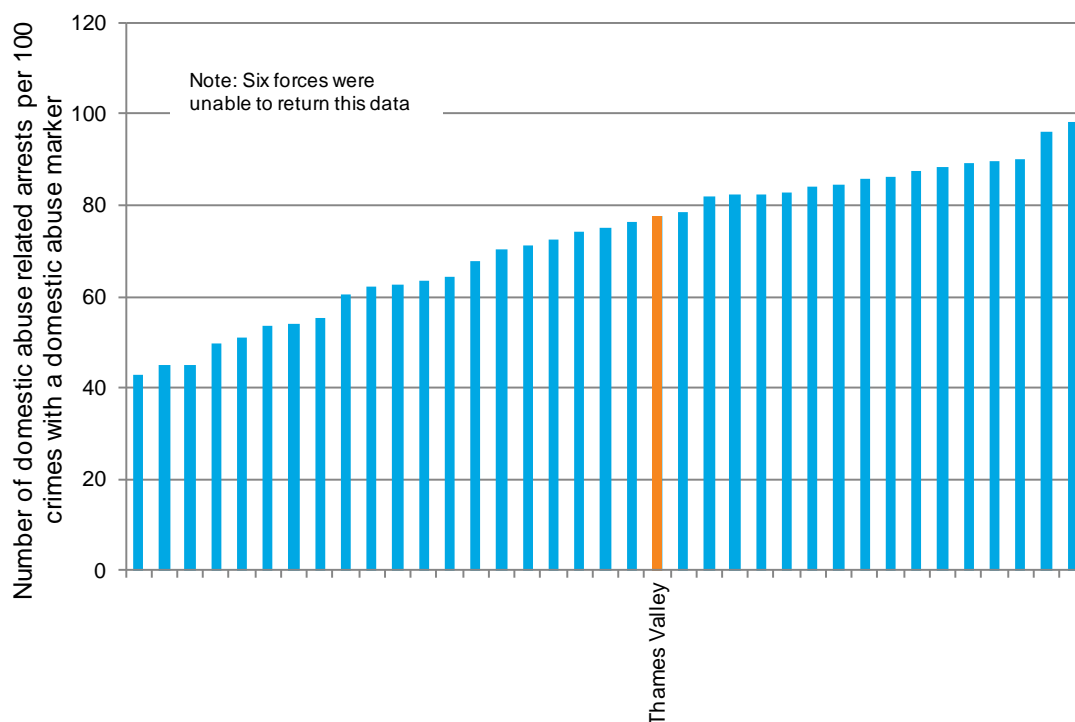
For cases assessed as high-risk, specialist domestic abuse officers take responsibility for the investigation and for making sure the victim is safe. All staff understand the need to refer cases to partner agencies when children are identified as being at risk, to allow action to be taken to better protect them.

The initial response to calls for assistance is good, but too many cases are being lost further down the prosecution process. Thames Valley Police has one of the worst records in the country for the number of domestic abuse

prosecutions that fail to result in a conviction. The reasons for this are multiple, and often outside the control of the police. However, the poor quality of police investigations and evidence gathering by responding officers is an important factor. The force is aware of this and is taking active steps to improve the quality of evidence being gathered.

For every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded there were 77⁸ arrests in Thames Valley for the 12 months to 31 August 2013. For most forces the number is between 45 and 90.

Figure 1: Number of domestic abuse related arrests per 100 crimes with a domestic abuse marker for the 12 months to 31 August 2013



Source: HMIC data collection

Domestic abuse is a priority for the PCC and for the force. This is supported by the clear leadership and direction provided by the chief officers and managers. There are well defined strategic aims to protect the communities, including the vulnerable, from serious harm and to work with partners to ensure that those most at risk are identified and the risk reduced.

⁸ Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and use of a domestic abuse marker on IT systems.

There is clear commitment to tackling domestic abuse, despite severe financial constraints, where many parts of the force have seen their budgets cut and number of staff reduced, the force has protected the numbers of specialist domestic abuse staff and retained their budgets. Staff throughout the organisation, including call takers, response officers and specialist teams, understand that tackling domestic abuse is important. They know how to identify and assess risk to victims, and how they can support victims as well as steps they can take to help them be safer.

Training for frontline officers is comprehensive. It covers risk assessment and understanding of the full spectrum of domestic abuse and how to deal with it. Student police officers receive domestic abuse training when they first join the force, during their initial training programme. Over the last two years, officers and staff dealing with victims have received training in risk assessment, so-called honour-based violence, stalking, harassment and coercive control. The training was comprehensive with detail on the history of domestic abuse, issues around children of relationships, practical examples and guidance for discussion and feedback. This is good practice.

Response officers stated that they regularly receive training or updates on elements of domestic abuse. Some domestic abuse training has been provided within the last 12 months, most recently on what coercive control is, and how to identify it when dealing with a call from the public. Other training on evidence gathering for files (known as 'file build') has been provided to some frontline officers, but this does not take into account the quality of initial investigation by call takers. It will support officers compiling files for court purposes, but this will not gain best evidence from a call taking perspective.

The force has also concentrated efforts on making sure supervisors and managers understand how the force should respond to domestic abuse and what is expected of them in terms of oversight and supervision. This has included specific training for sergeants and senior constables. More recently, inspectors and more senior managers received a presentation from a domestic abuse survivor, as well as partner agencies, outlining how the police could deliver an improved service to victims.

Most domestic abuse incidents are attended by response officers. The attending officer is required to undertake a formal assessment of the risk faced by the victim at every domestic abuse incident. The force introduced a revised domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH) risk assessment tool in July 2013 to support the officers' professional judgement when assessing risk. (Known as Incident DASH, the form is based on the national DASH risk assessment tool but is slightly shorter with questions that are more direct).

Staff in the referral centre check the assessment to ensure that the risk has been accurately defined.

The force has provided training to all frontline officers to assist them in understanding the DASH process and to give the context for them to apply professional judgement to the incidents they deal with. The domestic abuse policy contains a great deal of detail on DASH, including points for wider consideration for each of the questions within the DASH booklet. All DASH booklets and victim safety plans are checked to ensure they have been completed correctly, and are then signed off by a supervisor. However, supervisors are not able to monitor or attend every domestic abuse incident, so it may be at this point that direct supervision occurs for the first time, particularly if it was assessed as a standard-risk by the attending officer.

Response officers are also responsible for investigating alleged offences and for the initial safeguarding of the victim. The safety of the victim is a priority and staff recognise that steps should be taken to reduce the risk of harm to the victim and others who may be vulnerable, including children. This includes making a referral to the independent domestic violence advisers (IDVA).

Attending officers complete their own statement at the outset of an investigation, and body-worn video cameras are being used more frequently, which provide good evidence to support victims' statements. Frontline officers were positive about the use of body-worn video and its value in gathering evidence.

The force has a positive intervention policy for dealing with domestic abuse. Positive intervention is included within domestic abuse training, and staff who attend an incident, know they are expected to take positive action to help the victim. However, there was some confusion about positive intervention and whether it meant making an arrest. Officers described positive intervention as being focused on arrest of the person who was identified as being responsible for the domestic abuse. Some officers explained to HMIC that if they did not arrest someone, they would have to justify to their supervisor why no arrest was made.

Where the person responsible has left the scene, steps are taken to arrest them, with the case being allocated to the next team coming on duty, so that they can continue making enquiries to locate and arrest the perpetrator. Outstanding cases are also monitored at the local area daily management meetings, which ensure that officers are continuing to make enquiries to arrest the person responsible. Force guidance clearly states that it is the responsibility of the investigating officer to keep the victim updated with how the case is

progressing, for example if the offender is bailed. However, when this is a response officer, the victim does not always get updated.

All standard and most medium-risk cases are the responsibility of the first officers responding, and there is guidance that details what investigative actions are expected from those attending domestic abuse incidents. Victims in high risk cases and some medium-risk cases are managed by specialist domestic abuse officers, who have had enhanced domestic abuse training and have good investigative skills. There is confidence in the longer term management of high-risk victims, but more needs to be done to ensure the ongoing management and safety reviews for medium and standard risk victims.

The force introduced a new DASH risk assessment process (known as Incident DASH) in July 2013. The form is slightly shorter than that being used by other forces and the questions are considered by the force to be more direct. Frontline staff understand risk management and the reasons for undertaking the DASH process; they do not treat the risk assessment as a tick-box exercise. They also understand what coercive control is and how to identify it.

Officers record details of children present at the address where a domestic abuse incident has taken place, and this includes any unborn child where the victim is pregnant. They understand the importance of checking on the welfare of children in the address and that, if they need to, police protection powers can be used. Where the level of risk is assessed as high and where there are children at the address, specialist domestic abuse officers will contact the local social care team and ensure a joint meeting takes place to agree how risk can be managed and reduced, and to ensure the children are protected.

The rate of attrition for domestic abuse court cases is one of the highest in the country; the force is aware of this and is also concerned. (Attrition means the number of the cases initially reported to police that do not proceed, perhaps because the victim decides not to take the case any further; the police or CPS decide that there is not enough evidence to proceed; or the case is taken to court and the suspect is acquitted). Building a case for prosecution needs to achieve best evidence at every stage in the process, from the first telephone call from the victim to the police, through to the end of the investigation. Supervisors reviewing files need to be clear what they are looking for, allowing them to intervene much earlier in the prosecution process so that better quality evidence can be gathered.

The quality of files being produced by officers in Thames Valley Police is of concern to the force and a tutor-led 'file build' training package is being delivered to officers to help them improve. HMIC reviewed a small number of files and found in general the file content was good. There was evidence of

quality assurance by supervisors which may be helping to improve the file quality.

In Buckinghamshire, the force and partners are trying to reduce the time from when someone is charged with an offence, to when they go to court. The average period is currently 12 weeks, and the aim is to reduce this to four weeks. The team with responsibility for progressing prosecutions hold joint performance meetings with the CPS to review failed prosecutions and feedback any concerns so that learning can be addressed and shared.

How are victims of domestic abuse made safer as a result of the police response and subsequent action?

There are good and robust re-assessment and quality assurance systems in place to ensure appropriate action has been taken to safeguard those victims who are assessed as facing the greatest risk of harm (high-risk and medium-risk). These victims have their initial assessments of risk reviewed by the specialist domestic abuse officers. Those who are identified as standard-risk are still reviewed by the officer's supervisor, and small samples of these are routinely checked by the risk assessors in the referral centres to provide assurance of quality. This is good practice.

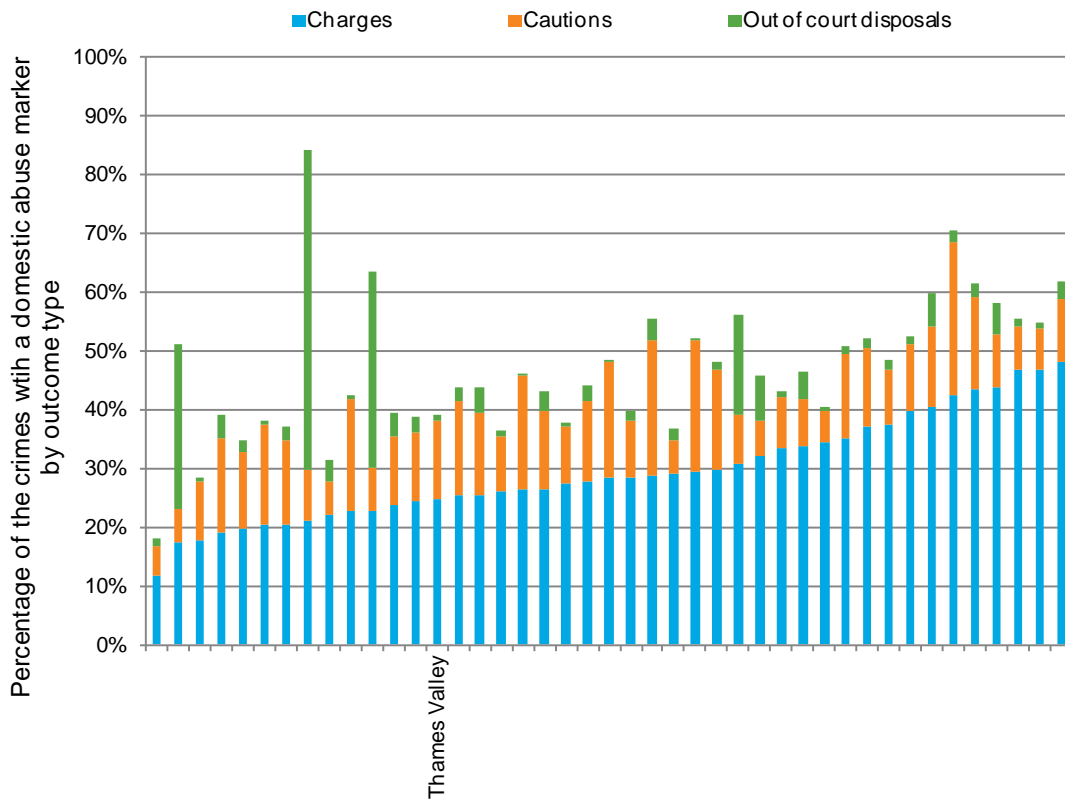
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Figure 2: Percentage of different outcome types used for crimes with a domestic abuse marker for the 12 months to 31 August 2013

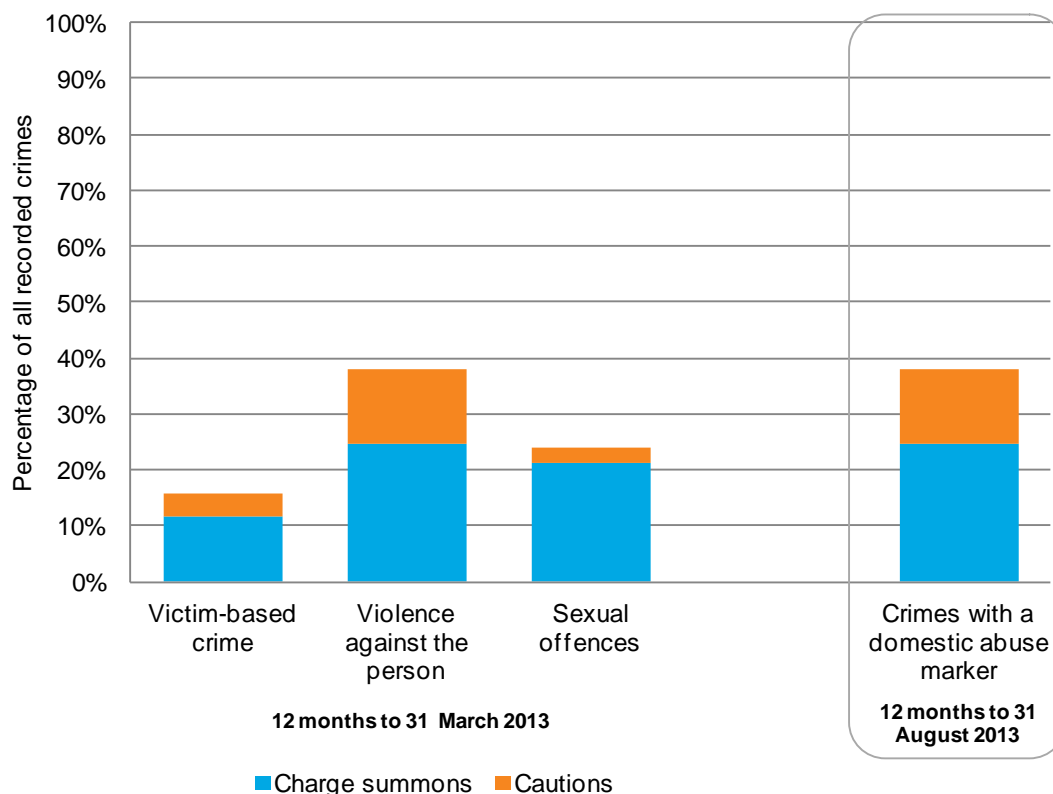


Source: HMIC data collection

Thames Valley Police charges a higher proportion of crimes with a domestic abuse marker than recorded victim-based crime. This may indicate that the force has a different approach to domestic abuse outcomes than other crimes.

⁹ Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and the use of a domestic abuse marker on the IT recording systems.

Figure 3: Percentage of charge summons and cautions used for victim-based crime, violence against the person, sexual offences and all crimes with a domestic abuse marker¹⁰



Sources: HMIC data collection, Home Office Crimes detected in England and Wales, ONS Crime in England and Wales.

The initial risk assessments carried out by the attending officers are subject to further review, particularly for cases assessed as high or medium risk, which are reviewed and re-assessed by specialist domestic abuse officers. The specialist officers do not routinely review those cases assessed as standard risk, although staff in the referral centre dip-sample 10 percent of standard-risk cases to ensure that risk is being assessed correctly and appropriate actions completed.

The force carried out a review of DASH risk assessments and was concerned that there had been an increase in the number of cases being re-graded. Steps were being taken to identify why this was the happening; whether at initial assessment, or at re-assessment. The force was able to show HMIC that when

¹⁰ Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and the use of a domestic abuse marker on the IT recording systems.

re-assessment has taken place 6 percent of standard-risk cases had been upgraded to medium, and 33 percent of medium-risk cases had been downgraded to standard. There was no downgrading in those identified as high risk.

There is clear guidance which outlines the actions for those cases being dealt with by the domestic abuse investigation unit (DAIU) which includes contact and information sharing with partner agencies. There are guidelines for case reviews after set periods of time by the detective sergeants and their managers.

In order to identify victims and offenders who regularly come to the notice of police, but whose cases are not considered to pose a greater risk at the time of reporting, staff in the referral centres review cases where three standard risk incidents occur within a 12 month period. They re-assess each case and consider whether the repeated incidents show an escalation of risk to the victim and whether the risk level should be upgraded. The force systems identify where people come to the notice of police, either as a victim or an offender, for any offence, not only domestic abuse related incidents. This system is still being developed.

When a victim suffers seven domestic abuse incidents, of which at least two are crimes within 12 months, they are automatically referred to the local MARAC. This means that the information held by police will be shared with partner agencies and MARAC partners can then search their own systems and bring relevant information to the next meeting for discussion. This ensures that the meeting members have a more complete picture of the risk a victim is facing, and it means measures can be put in place to better protect the victim. However, despite the MARAC process being well established, there is some tension between what the police and partners consider to be high-risk cases and this would benefit from more guidance being provided to ensure there is consistency of risk assessment and referral.

Specialist domestic abuse officers are skilled and well-trained, they have received enhanced domestic abuse training and they are all accredited detectives. They provide a more dedicated and tailored service to victims who are assessed as being at the greatest risk of harm. This service includes more regular victim contact and ensures that they are better protected by the police and partners, who can help them put measures in place that will make them safer. Specialist officers also provide guidance to response colleagues; for example response officers at Abingdon Police Station receive support from domestic abuse specialists at a weekly clinic where issues in relation to particular investigations can be discussed. This gives officers confidence in being able to raise concerns or to seek advice on how to manage their domestic abuse cases. However this is not the case throughout the force. There are

some response officers who do not understand the role of the specialist officers. It would be useful if the force were to provide more information about the domestic abuse investigation team's role in managing domestic abuse investigations and how they support victims.

There were various examples of how different local policing areas are innovatively tackling domestic abuse. This includes projects in Milton Keynes where schools are being engaged; domestic abuse champions being introduced into numerous organisations across the area; and multi-agency telephone conferences to discuss all domestic abuse incidents that have occurred within the previous 24 hours.

The force guidance provides clarity to staff about who deals with victims of domestic abuse throughout the investigation and criminal justice process, and officers generally had a good understanding. However, staff are less clear when it comes to updating victims, particularly medium and standard risk victims. For example, if a domestic abuse perpetrator is released on bail from court, then the guidance states it should be the officer who is dealing with the case who is responsible for updating the victim. Officers are not always aware that this is their responsibility; they assume that this is the role of witness care officers. This means that victims may not consistently be updated and their safety plans may not be reviewed when their abuser is released on bail. This potentially places them at greater risk and is also likely to lead to them losing confidence in the police's handling of their case. This may mean that they are reluctant to continue supporting the prosecution; or they may be less likely to report a future incident of abuse to the police.

The force provides guidance to officers as to how they should support victims and what safety options there are to better protect them. This includes the provision of mobile phones which can place a call directly through to the control room and be automatically identified – the force has 400 in circulation. This allows victims to quickly and easily contact the police in an emergency.

Officers attending incidents produce a fast action response plan to reduce risk to victims, this might include ensuring that any call to an address is treated as an emergency by marking police systems to show this. Safety plans for high and medium risk cases are reviewed and updated by the domestic abuse team.

In addition to the police; high-risk victims across the Thames Valley area should have access to the independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs). The role of IDVAs is invaluable; they support victims, help them rebuild their lives and assist them through any court proceedings. They are not managed or controlled by the police. How IDVAs are funded varies across the force area, and funding can be obtained through core statutory funding, charitable trusts and community

safety funding. The level of funding is less than recommended for the number of high risk cases across the force area and the IDVA coverage is sporadic. This means that IDVA support is inconsistent across the force area resulting in different levels of service and engagement with victims, impacting on outcomes for police, and a widely varied service for victims. The PCC is aware of the low numbers of IDVAs and is considering how funding can be provided to improve the numbers in 2014.

Thames Valley Police covers a large and diverse geographical area with complex partnership arrangements in place. There are 16 local authorities across the force area, and there are inconsistencies between how the force works with partners in each of the areas in terms of sharing information and accessing services. This is a real challenge for the police and could be improved if there was an over-arching multi-agency strategy providing direction and seeking to achieve a more consistent approach across all the partners in the Thames Valley area.

Despite the challenges (and variations), partnership working is constructive, and information sharing is effective, enabling a more complete and better understanding of the risk posed to victims.

The MARAC process works well, and is highly regarded, with good partner engagement. MARACs enable the police and partner agencies, including local authority social care, health services, housing, probation and IDVAs to meet together, share information and agree a co-ordinated and joined-up response to minimise the risk to high-risk victims and their families.

The partners attending the MARAC meetings assess every high risk case put before them. Partners were engaged in the process, actions were followed up, recorded and were then brought back to the next meeting so that the risks posed to victims could be re-assessed. There were examples of good dynamic information sharing outside of the MARAC process, which allowed partners to respond more quickly to the needs of victims if needed.

There is currently no fully developed MASH within the force area, but it is a priority for the force to ensure that they are established across the force area. A MASH co-locates a whole range of agencies, including police, local authority children's social care, education, probation and health staff, to share information and take action to protect adults and children, who are vulnerable or at risk, including those subject to domestic abuse. The assistant chief constable chairs the multi-agency project board which is overseeing the MASH implementation. The complex arrangement of local authorities across the area presents a challenge to the formation of MASHs. The force remains confident that during

2014, 70 to 80 percent of the force will have MASH coverage, with the first one due to start in Oxfordshire.

The force and the CPS work together on the Thames Valley domestic abuse group. Some of the issues that the group has looked at include: reducing the time taken from when someone is charged with a domestic abuse related offence; and developing training to improve the quality of files for court. In addition the force is working with CPS to agree measures which focus on conviction rates rather than those that do not make it to court or where the person is found not guilty (known as attrition rates).

When a domestic abuse investigation is completed, the officer who is leading the investigation will speak with a CPS lawyer to decide whether a person should be charged or not. Ultimately it is the CPS lawyer who decides whether or not to prosecute. The force has challenged when they disagreed with the decision made by the CPS.

Thames Valley police officers and staff understand the need to assess threat, harm and risk to make domestic abuse victims safer. There were some good examples of neighbourhood officers making themselves aware of incidents in their area; taking steps to build relationships with victims; and providing support to them. Although some areas have taken steps to improve local officers' knowledge of high-risk victims and perpetrators, they are not always automatically informed of cases coming to police notice. This could be improved if neighbourhood teams were consistently made aware of repeat victims or perpetrators in their area.

The force is developing its repeat victim and offender information process, this will automatically flag up domestic abuse cases where the victim or offender have previously come to police notice, and in particular when they report further incidents. It will identify victims who might need to be reviewed, even if the latest report is not assessed as being high-risk, or if the victim does not inform attending officers of previous incidents, for example four incidents assessed as standard risk with the same victim but different offenders.

Does the force have appropriate systems, processes and understanding to manage domestic abuse and risk to victims in the future?

Domestic abuse prevention and investigation are priorities for the force and the PCC. There is a coherent and co-ordinated governance structure to oversee delivery, both within the force and across its complex partnerships.

The force has a good process in place to learn lessons from domestic homicides that have happened in the Thames Valley area or nationally, however, the process needs to be strengthened to ensure that improvements needed have been systematically implemented and evaluated.

Processes to ensure that contact is maintained with victims when their abusers have been in prison need to be improved. There is a lack of clarity among officers as to whose responsibility it is, victims are not consistently updated before the offenders are released, and the risks posed are not routinely re-assessed in all cases.

There is a strong focus on performance management with clear and visible involvement of chief officers in scrutinising domestic abuse performance. However, the force does not have a clear understanding of what good performance looks like for domestic abuse, and there has been limited work to date in developing qualitative measures of outcomes for victims.

Domestic abuse prevention and investigation is a priority for Thames Valley Police. The force has a co-ordinated meeting structure to develop its response including a panel which reviews how the force deals with specific domestic abuse incidents.

The force recognises the importance of maintaining contact with victims when the person responsible has been put in prison or is released from court on bail. There are some systems in place; however, there was some confusion over whether the police or the witness care team should update the victim. IDVAs will also update victims when they are notified of court results, but there is an issue with them not receiving the information quickly enough to be able to act on it. This could be improved if it was made clear who is responsible for updating the victim, and confirm the process for ensuring that relevant information is provided in a timely fashion to the person responsible for updating them.

It is essential that a victim is informed when an offender is due to be released from prison and for safety planning to take place. In high risk cases it was clear that the specialist officers and IDVAs take responsibility for ensuring that this happens, however there was less clarity in standard and medium risk cases, when it is generally the responsibility of the officer in the case to carry out the

safety planning and notifying the victim. Some staff are not sure if they would be notified that a domestic abuse perpetrator was going to be released, which means that a victim might not be told and their safety might not be reviewed.

The force does not currently have a definition of a serial perpetrator. The absence of such a definition limits how the force can use intelligence to inform the response to both identify and manage risks presented by such perpetrators. As highlighted earlier, the force is developing how it can identify repeat victims and perpetrators. This will allow them to target activity to reduce and prevent reoffending.

Local officers are made aware of who the high-risk victims and perpetrators are through the force briefing system. The daily management meetings provide relevant and up-to-date information each day on high risk domestic abuse incidents, including plans to arrest outstanding offenders and any safety plans for victims such as whether threats are being made to them. There is a good example of how local police areas manage high risk perpetrators and victims at High Wycombe, where officers are allocated to target repeat perpetrators and victims. The process provides clarity of ownership, support to the victim and targeted activity towards the perpetrator.

The force has a good process in place to ensure that it learns the lessons from domestic homicide reviews and other serious case reviews. The assistant chief constable chairs an investigation review panel which examines recommendations from serious cases that have occurred in the Thames Valley area and nationally. These include domestic homicide reviews, serious case reviews and investigations by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). This panel ensures there is a process which brings together learning opportunities from across different areas of policing, as well as informing and supporting learning across the organisation. However, it is not clear how the force checks that any improvements needed have been systematically implemented throughout the force and evaluated.

The PCC has set a priority to cut crimes that are of most concern to the public and to protect the most vulnerable members of the communities in Thames Valley. He has committed to work with partners to tackle domestic and other interpersonal abuse by identifying and supporting those at risk, and bringing to justice the perpetrators. The force measures how it is performing against the PCC's priority as well as through other measures. The force publishes performance information on its website and includes both the number of offences, and the number of prosecutions and cautions. The force does not have a domestic abuse reduction target, and reports of domestic abuse have been rising. The level of repeat domestic abuse cases has been raised

as a concern and the force is taking action to both understand and address this increase.

To ensure that staff are delivering the required service to victims and are identifying those most at risk of harm, the assistant chief constable holds monthly performance meetings with the force lead for protecting vulnerable people. Managers are held accountable for how their teams respond to calls for police assistance and how they are tackling reports of domestic abuse, including through regular performance meetings where the deputy chief constable meets with senior managers from the local policing areas. Themed meetings also take place during which managers assess how the local areas and the force are addressing specific crime issues. These have included violence and domestic abuse, and identify what is working and where actions are needed to improve.

The force has a strong performance focus and carries out regular local policing area performance reviews led by the deputy chief constable. This provides chief officers with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of what is working or where there are challenges at a local level. Domestic abuse incidents which result in a crime being recorded, for example: damage to property, verbal abuse or causing injury, are monitored. Although there is a focus on the wider violence detection rate, the force is less clear as to what 'good' performance in tackling domestic abuse looks like. More needs to be done to consider how to measure the quality of service it delivers to domestic abuse victims, for example through qualitative feedback by seeking their comments.

Recommendations

As a result of this inspection, HMIC has developed recommendations which are designed to tackle any risks identified in the service to victims of domestic abuse. These force-specific recommendations should be considered in conjunction with recommendations to all forces set out in HMIC's national report on domestic abuse.

1. The force should review the longer term management (risk and safeguarding) of standard and medium risk victims to include the arrests of outstanding offenders and the ongoing review of victim safety.
2. The force should develop further the investigative process for domestic abuse, to ensure that officers collect all available evidence, to help build strong cases against perpetrators.
3. The force should review how victims are contacted and kept updated if a perpetrator is released from custody and ensure that risk assessments and safety plans are reviewed at this stage.
4. The force should work with partner agencies to establish a consistent approach to assessment and referral of high risk cases to MARACs.
5. The force should work with the PCC and partner agencies to increase the numbers of IDVAs available to work with victims in the Thames Valley Police area.
6. The force should publicise the role of the specialist team in order that all staff understand what they do and how they can help make victims safer.
7. The force should develop an overarching multi-agency strategy for domestic abuse covering the force area to provide a more consistent approach to tackling domestic abuse.

Glossary

Bail conditions

A court can remand a defendant in custody or grant bail, with or without conditions attached. Before the first court hearing, the police can also retain a defendant in custody or grant bail, with or without conditions attached, but their powers to do so are more limited than the court's. Conditions can only be imposed to ensure that the defendant attends the next court hearing, commits no new offences in the meantime, and does not interfere with any witnesses or obstruct the course of justice.

Body worn camera

A video camera, worn on the helmet or upper body of an officer, which records visual and audio footage of an incident.

CAADA (Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse)

CAADA is a national charity supporting a strong multi-agency response to domestic abuse. Its work focuses on saving lives and public money.

CAADA provides practical help to support professionals and organisations working with domestic abuse victims. The aim is to protect the highest risk victims and their children – those at risk of murder or serious harm.

CCTV

Evidence from Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) can be used to support police investigations. It is primarily used for corroborating what is already known in investigating incidents and to trigger further opportunities to carry out investigation, such as the identification of witnesses and suspects.

Clare's Law

Clare's Law – the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme – is designed to provide victims with information that may protect them from an abusive situation before it ends in tragedy. The scheme allows the police to disclose information about a partner's previous history of domestic violence or violent acts. The

Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme is named after Clare Wood who was brutally murdered in 2009 by her former partner George Appleton, who had a record of violence against women.

Code of Practice for Victims of Crime

The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code) places a statutory obligation on criminal justice agencies to provide a standard of service to victims of crime or, where the victim died as a result of the criminal conduct, their relatives. The obligations the Victims' Code places on the agencies concerned include that:

- They provide victims, or their relatives, with information about the crime, including about arrests, prosecutions and court decisions;
- They provide information about eligibility for compensation under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme;
- Victims be told about Victim Support and either be referred on to them or offered their service;
- Bereaved relatives be assigned a family liaison police officer; and
- Victims of an offender who receives a sentence of 12 months or more after being convicted of a sexual or violent offence have the opportunity to make representations about what licence conditions or supervision requirements the offender should be subject to on release from prison.

There are enhanced entitlements for victims of the most serious crime which includes domestic violence.

Coercive control

This is term and concept developed by Evan Stark which seeks to explain the range of tactics used by perpetrators and the impact of those on victims. It highlights the on-going nature of the behaviour and the extent to which the actions of the perpetrator control the victim through isolation, intimidation, degradation and micro-regulation of everyday life. Crucially it sets out such abuse can be psychological as well as physical. Coercive control is explicitly covered by the definition of domestic abuse.

Control room

A police control or communications room manages emergency (999) and non-emergency (101) calls, and sending police officers to these calls.

Counter-allegation

Where someone initially identified as the perpetrator makes an allegation against the victim. If counter-allegations are not identified and resolved agencies may be providing services to the perpetrator and inadvertently helping them isolate and control the victim. The victim may not get access to the services they need because they are labelled 'the perpetrator'.

Crime Scene Investigator

Police staff who work alongside uniformed and plain clothed police officers during the investigation of a crime to locate, record and recover evidence from crime scenes.

DASH – domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH 2009)

DASH is a risk identification, assessment and management model adopted by UK police forces and partner agencies in 2009. The aim of the DASH assessment is to help front-line practitioners identify high risk cases of domestic abuse, stalking and so-called honour-based violence.

Domestic Homicide Review

Local areas are expected to undertake a multi-agency review following a domestic homicide. The process aims to assist all those involved, to identify the lessons that can be learned from homicides where a person is killed as a result of domestic violence, with a view to preventing future homicides and violence.

Domestic Violence Prevention Notices (DVPN)

A DVPN is the initial notice issued by the police to provide emergency protection to an individual believed to be the victim of domestic violence.

This notice, which must be authorised by a police superintendent, contains prohibitions that effectively bar the suspected perpetrator from returning to the victim's home or otherwise contacting the victim.

A DVPN may be issued to a person aged 18 years and over if the police superintendent has reasonable grounds for believing that:

- the individual has been violent towards, or
- has threatened violence towards an associated person, and
- the DVPN is necessary to protect that person from violence or a threat of violence by the intended recipient of the DVPN

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation (sometimes referred to as female circumcision) refers to procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The practice is illegal in the UK.

Frontline

These are police officers or police staff who are in everyday contact with the public and who directly intervene to keep people safe and enforce the law. The HMIC publication, *Policing in Austerity: Rising to the Challenge* (2013) sets this out in more detail.

Golden hour

Commonly used to refer to the time after a crime has been committed during which there is maximum potential for recovery of forensic evidence

Harassment

The term harassment is used to cover the 'causing alarm or distress' offences under section 2 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 as amended (PHA), and 'putting people in fear of violence' offences under section 4 of the PHA.

House-to- house

House-to-house enquiries are likely to feature in many investigations to: identify suspects and canvas for witnesses in areas connected to an incident, establish who lives or works in a particular location, and obtain an account of their movements during relevant times.

High risk

Term used when, following a DASH risk assessment, there are identifiable indicators of risk of serious harm. The potential event could happen at any time and the impact would be serious. Risk of serious harm (Home Office 2002 and OASys 2006): 'A risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible'.

IDVA – independent domestic violence adviser

Independent domestic violence advisers or advocates (IDVAs) are trained specialists who provide a service to victims at high risk of harm from intimate partners, ex-partners or family members, with the aim of securing their safety and the safety of their children. Serving as a victim's primary point of contact, IDVAs normally work with their clients from the point of crisis, to assess the level of risk, discuss the range of suitable options and develop safety plans.

Incident

When a member of the public calls for police assistance, or a police officer observes or discovers a crime the police usually create an incident record. This is the first step, the police will then decide whether a crime has been committed and, if it is appropriate, create a crime record.

Intimate Partner Violence

This describes physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy.

MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference)

MARACs are regular local meetings where information about high risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies. By bringing all agencies together at a MARAC, and ensuring that whenever possible the voice of the victim is represented by the IDVA, a risk focused, co-ordinated safety plan can be drawn up to support the victim. There are currently over 270 MARACs operating across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland managing more than 64,000 cases a year.

MASH – Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub

A Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) brings together staff from police and partner agencies who work from the same location, sharing information and ensuring a timely and joined-up response to protect children and vulnerable adults.

Medium risk

Term used when following a DASH risk assessment there are identifiable indicators of risk of serious harm. The offender has the potential to cause serious harm but is unlikely to do so unless there is a change in circumstances, for example, failure to take medication, loss of accommodation, relationship breakdown, drug or alcohol misuse.

National Domestic Abuse helpline

A Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge, is a national service for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

The Helpline can give support, help and information over the telephone, wherever the caller might be in the country. The Helpline is staffed 24 hours a day by fully trained female helpline support workers and volunteers. All calls are completely confidential. Translation facilities for callers whose first language is not English, and a service for callers who are deaf or hard of hearing are available.

Partnership

A term used where collaborative working is established between the police and other public, private or voluntary organisations.

Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE)

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the PACE codes of practice provide the core framework of police powers and safeguards around stop and search, arrest, detention, investigation, identification and interviewing detainees.

www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-and-criminal-evidence-act-1984-pace-current-versions

Positive action

The term refers to the steps and action taken at all stages of the police response to ensure effective protection of victims and children, while allowing the criminal justice system to hold the offender to account. It is often used in the context of arrest policy, police guidance states that “arrest will normally be ‘necessary’ under the terms of PACE to protect a child or vulnerable person, prevent the suspect causing injury and/or to allow for the prompt and effective investigation of the offence”.

Problem-solving

Problem-solving is a term used in policing where forces systematically identify and analyse crime and disorder problems, develop specific responses to individual problems and subsequently assess whether the response has been successful.

Refuge

A refuge is a safe house where women and children who are experiencing domestic violence can stay free from abuse. Refuge addresses (and sometimes telephone numbers) are confidential. According to Women’s Aid on a typical day, **over 7000 women and children** are resident in refuge accommodation in England

Risk assessment

A risk assessment is based on structured professional judgment. It provides structure and informs decisions that are already being made. It is only a guide/checklist and should not be seen as a scientific predictive solution. Its completion is intended to assist officers in the decision-making process on appropriate levels of intervention for victims of domestic violence.

Safeguarding

The term safeguarding is applied when protecting children and other vulnerable people. The UK Government has defined the term 'safeguarding children' as: *"The process of protecting children from abuse or neglect, preventing impairment of their health and development, and ensuring they are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care that enables children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully."*

Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)

SARCs are specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted.

They aim to be a one-stop service, providing the following under one roof: medical care and forensic examination following assault/rape and, in some locations, sexual health services.

Standard Risk

Term used following a DASH risk assessment where current evidence does not indicate likelihood of causing serious harm.

Victim Personal Statement

The Victim Personal Statement (VPS) gives victims an opportunity to describe the wider effects of the crime upon them, express their concerns and indicate whether or not they require any support.

Provisions relating to the making of a VPS and its use in criminal proceedings are included in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims' Code), which was published on 29 October 2013 and came into force on 10 December 2013.

Vulnerable

A term used to describe a person who is in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.

What Works Centre for Crime Reduction

The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction is hosted by the College of Policing. The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction will: review research on practices and interventions to reduce crime, label the evidence base in terms of quality, cost and impact, and provide police and crime commissioners and other crime reduction partners with the knowledge, tools and guidance to help them target their resources more effectively.

It will be led by a core team from the College of Policing, and supported by a "commissioned partnership programme" which has been jointly funded by the College and the Economic and Social Research Council.