

Bedfordshire Police's approach to tackling domestic abuse

HMIC revisit 22-23 October and 10-11 December 2014

May 2015

© HMIC 2015

ISBN: 978-1-78246-789-2

www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic

Contents

Introduction	3
Summary of revisit findings	3
HMIC domestic abuse inspection (November 2013) and revisit (February 2014) published March 2014.....	4
Identifying victims	5
Keeping victims safe.....	6
Management of risk	6
Bedfordshire Police domestic abuse revisit October and December 2014.....	8
Introduction	8
Revisit findings set against the original recommendations from the 2014 report	9
Summary.....	19
Next steps	20
Glossary.....	21

Introduction

This report sets out Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's (HMIC's) findings following our revisit to Bedfordshire Police in October and December 2014 to assess progress made against the 17 recommendations in the report *Bedfordshire Police's approach to tackling domestic abuse* published on 27 March 2014.

Summary of revisit findings

Bedfordshire Police has invested time and additional resources to improve its response to victims of domestic abuse and their families following the publication of HMIC's original report. The chief constable has made it clear that tackling domestic abuse is a priority for the force. Evidence of this commitment is seen in senior leaders' briefings to frontline staff, training for all officers and staff, leaflets and messages prioritising the force's response to domestic abuse on the force intranet. The force has also invested in additional staff in the force control room and the newly formed domestic abuse investigation support unit (DAISU).

The force has improved its understanding of areas of risk and has put measures in place to improve the service received by victims in order to make people in Bedfordshire feel safer. Identifying victims, particularly those who are vulnerable and repeat victims, is improving, and there is a greater understanding of the need to safeguard victims; most noticeably among frontline officers and staff who provide the initial response to victims of domestic abuse. There is an improved understanding throughout the force about who is responsible for managing the safety of victims at each stage of an investigation. We found very early signs of progress and areas that the force is developing which are intended to deliver improvements. There is a commitment from the chief officer team to ensure that the improvements put in place will provide sustainable and lasting benefits for victims of domestic abuse and their families. While the force faces many challenges, it is important that momentum is maintained and that these promising early signs quickly translate into improved services.

Our findings in response to each of the 17 recommendations from the revisits in October and December 2014 are set out beginning on page 9.

HMIC domestic abuse inspection (November 2013) and revisit (February 2014) published March 2014

In September 2013, the Home Secretary commissioned HMIC to inspect the police response to domestic violence and abuse. Our report, *Everyone's business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse*, found that while most forces and police and crime commissioners said that domestic abuse is a priority for their areas, this was not being translated into an operational reality. HMIC was concerned to find that, despite the progress made in this area over the last decade, not all police leaders were ensuring that domestic abuse was a priority in their forces – it is often a poor relation to other policing activity.

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. Also, we 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 partner organisations, 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 including public protection experts from over 15 forces and those working with victims of domestic abuse in voluntary and community sector organisations.

HMIC inspected Bedfordshire Police in November 2013 and a revisit was conducted in February 2014. The report was published on 27 March 2014.

HMIC's initial inspection of Bedfordshire Police raised significant concerns about the ability of the force to deal consistently and appropriately with victims of domestic abuse and to reduce the risk of harm to them. There were weaknesses at the first point of contact and concerns about its ability to provide consistently an effective response to help safeguard victims. We found the systems in place to be incoherent and confusing which meant the service received by victims was fragmented.

Specialist resources were stretched and the strong commitment to tackling domestic abuse within the force public protection unit (PPU) was not replicated across the force leadership as a whole. Given the scale of the improvements needed, HMIC concluded that swift action by the force was necessary to address the risks identified in the original inspection. The force provided a more detailed plan which HMIC considered, and immediate steps were taken to address the principal issues. A revisit in February 2014 concluded that not all the original concerns raised by HMIC had been sufficiently addressed so further follow up inspection work was planned for later in the year.

Identifying victims

There were risks and significant room for improvement in the way Bedfordshire Police identified victims of domestic abuse. Most calls for police help were received in the force control room, and in some cases call-handlers were not getting the full picture of risk from the victim, taking only sufficient detail from a caller to enable an officer to be sent. There were inconsistent and sometimes limited approaches to establishing risk, safeguarding needs and vulnerability of the victim at this first point of contact. Following HMIC's revisit of the force in February 2014, training has been given to the control room staff to address this issue. The force recognises the importance of minimising the risk to victims and has a policy of attending all domestic abuse incidents. A review of domestic abuse processes has also been initiated to focus on the needs of the victim.

In order to give the officer attending enough information to make a proper risk assessment at the scene, the police information systems should be checked by the control room staff to relay any previous history or special details such as a vulnerable victim or children present at the address. The force's information is held on a number of different systems which take time to research thoroughly; consequently this is still not done consistently. Responding officers may not have all the information that they need in order to have a reasonable picture of the caller's history when they arrive at the scene.

Keeping victims safe

There were weaknesses in leadership, ownership, and overall governance of domestic abuse at a strategic level. This limited the effectiveness of the force's response to victims. There were gaps and inherent risks in the processes for tackling domestic abuse. Senior officers were aware of this, and since the revisit in February 2014 there had been an increased focus by them on domestic abuse and the need to keep victims safe.

The force did not have an overarching strategy with an effective action plan to develop and improve services to victims of domestic abuse. Since our revisit in February 2014 an improved action plan has been developed which is now being put in place.

Bedfordshire Police officers and staff recognise the importance of dealing with domestic abuse effectively and they take seriously their role in responding. We found evidence that there is a strong commitment from most officers and staff to achieving the best outcome for the victims. However, the principal weakness is that when dealing with domestic abuse, the focus of the officers is on the perpetrator and the crime rather than on the victim and the risk they face.

Since HMIC's original inspection the force had delivered some domestic abuse training focused on victim care and safeguarding; however staff that we spoke to had not received this.

Management of risk

Bedfordshire Police was not providing consistent services to make victims of domestic abuse safer. There was a lack of clarity about the roles and functions of different teams, units and departments (all of which had some responsibility for domestic abuse) across the organisation. This had caused considerable confusion. Responsibility for domestic abuse cases moved through the organisation with different officers, staff and departments being responsible for the investigation and the victims' safety at different stages. This can mean that victims get a disjointed response from the police, particularly when it comes to knowing who is responsible for reviewing safeguarding arrangements and keeping in touch with them.

High-risk victims (those at risk of serious harm) received support from specialist officers although their capacity was extremely limited. The force had initiated changes to increase the resilience and capacity to support high-risk victims. Victims who were assessed as medium risk or standard risk received no specialist support and had a poor service, with little attention paid to their safeguarding. They are now referred to Victim Support who can provide some help and advice, but more needs to be done to ensure their safety.

The force did not have a consistent approach to risk assessment that was understood by staff. The criteria that differentiate between the levels of risk had not been communicated across the organisation. In particular, the force had adopted the classification of 'high risk plus' for the highest risk cases. This approach was contrary to national practice and staff were not clear what the difference was between 'high risk plus' and 'high risk'. Our revisit in February 2014 noted that the force had recognised this and the practice had been discontinued. There was little evidence of in-depth working with other organisations to help keep victims safe.

Organisational effectiveness for keeping people safe

There were significant weaknesses in the force's systems and processes which could mean that it fails to safeguard victims adequately. As a result of the fragmented approach to victim safeguarding, lack of effective leadership and management, the limited capacity of the specialist officers and the capability of other officers outside the specialist units there was a gap in the level of safeguarding that was provided to victims of domestic abuse. Measures put in place since the revisit in February 2014 should help to improve this with revised processes and reviews.

Where the abuse resulted in a violent crime, it was more likely that a victim would receive a better standard of service; however for all other victims, even those who were repeat victims, there was less certainty that the systems and processes in place would adequately address their future safety.

The risk to the victim in most cases was not reassessed and therefore their future safeguarding needs were not understood or met. The force recognised that there were a number of areas where improvements were needed. The police and crime commissioner (PCC) and force are keen to improve services for domestic abuse victims and they were working with other organisations to do this.

Bedfordshire Police domestic abuse revisit October and December 2014

Introduction

Bedfordshire Police was one of four forces identified by HMIC to be revisited to examine progress against 17 recommendations set out in the domestic abuse report. The force-specific report was called *Bedfordshire Police's approach to tackling domestic abuse*.

During the revisit, we used the same criteria as in the original inspection:

- 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 approaches domestic violence and abuse; and
- making any necessary recommendations in relation to these findings when considered alongside current practice.

To answer these questions HMIC reviewed Bedfordshire Police's domestic abuse-related documents, continuous improvement plan and performance results. We interviewed the chief officer lead for domestic abuse, senior managers for crime, public protection, change programme, force control room, and an independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA). We conducted an unannounced visit on a police station and spoke to frontline response officers, and staff in the newly formed domestic abuse investigation unit (DAIU) to test the reality of the force's response to domestic abuse in promoting understanding of procedures, roles and responsibilities and how this made victims safer.

Revisit findings set against the original recommendations from the 2014 report

- 1. The force should conduct a review of the complete business process for tackling domestic abuse to deal with the current fragmented approach.**

Bedfordshire Police has reviewed its approach to tackling domestic abuse and on 20 October 2014 introduced a new domestic abuse investigations unit (DAIU). The new unit consists of two geographic hubs and improves capacity, doubling the staffing and brings together the safeguarding staff supporting the victim and the enforcement staff who investigate incidents of domestic abuse and deal with the offender. Since the October revisit, the force has revised the name of the unit to emphasise the combined safeguarding and investigation approach and now refers to the unit as the Domestic Abuse Investigation Support Unit (DAISU). The new DAISU is supported by an additional detective inspector and detective chief inspector who report to the detective superintendent head of public protection.

While the staffing numbers have increased and this creates additional capacity, the force recognises the need for additional training and development for all staff, including the new staff in the unit. This will ensure all officers and staff are equipped with the right skills and understand their role in tackling domestic abuse to provide the best service to victims. The force aims to provide the right number of staff with the right skills, and to include a combination of detective constables as well as uniformed officers. This will improve the capability of the new unit and ensure that they will be able to effectively deal with all domestic abuse cases from standard to high risk.

In October 2014, HMIC was concerned at the level of officers on restricted duty within the DAISU as this limits the range of operational tasks that each individual can undertake; for example, a restricted officer is prevented from arresting and interviewing offenders. However, during the revisit in December 2014 HMIC noted that of the 36 staff, only four were on restricted duties and the force was in the process of reviewing staffing numbers to increase further the DAISU.

- 2. There is a need for improved leadership, ownership and overall governance of domestic abuse at a strategic level. There are inherent gaps and risks in business processes. The force does not have an overarching strategy to develop and improve services to victims, either by the police alone or with partner agencies.**

The force has improved ownership and overall governance at both the strategic and tactical level, clarifying accountability for domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse is a priority in the chief constable's and PCC's police and crime plan. Progress is monitored through the force executive board where domestic abuse is a standing agenda item; there are also weekly review meetings between the chief constable and the PCC.

The assistant chief constable (ACC) is the chief officer responsible for the oversight of domestic abuse policing and the force's work with partner organisations in tackling domestic abuse. The ACC oversees the force progress against the domestic abuse action plan through the force performance and operations boards. Domestic abuse is also a priority reviewed through the change and continuous improvement board.

The force has made it clear to staff and organisations working with it that domestic abuse is a high priority for Bedfordshire police. The force has reviewed its priorities, taking into consideration a strategic risk assessment of policing areas such as counter-terrorism, child sexual exploitation and domestic abuse. As a result, domestic abuse is identified as a top priority for the force and this is reflected in the control strategy for this area of policing which prioritises where the force directs and commits resources. The force has also ensured that domestic abuse is included in its communication strategy, staff training and commitment of additional resources in the new DAISU and the force control room.

- 3. The force should review call handling standards and the advice given to victims, as well as ensuring that systems are researched for relevant information to help assess risk and inform attending officers.**

The force control room has two domestic abuse tactical advisers in place who are responsible for reviewing incidents and ensuring the right response is provided to victims by assessing the level of threat, harm and risk. HMIC is encouraged to see this specialist support in place, and the resulting positive effect on decision making and improving the service to victims of domestic abuse. As the advisers work day shifts, the force should consider conducting analysis on the optimum shift pattern for the advisers to reflect domestic abuse reporting.

Staff have received additional training and support in the application of the National Decision Model (NDM) and have a better understanding of their responsibilities to tackle domestic abuse and support vulnerable victims.

In October 2014, Bedfordshire Police set up a public service desk to provide a more robust risk assessment for all domestic abuse incidents that did not require immediate attendance by the police. However, this has developed to include risk assessment and early intervention on cases of child sexual exploitation, child protection and other cases of vulnerability. The unit is staffed by a combination of 12 police staff that have previous investigative or policing experience and police officers. This also includes two domestic abuse tactical advisers to ensure the force responds quickly, sending the right people to support the victim. The unit is managed by a detective sergeant who provides tactical advice for incident management and early investigative plans.

The increased investment in training, additional staffing and supervision levels in the force control room provides additional capability and capacity for the scrutiny of risk assessments and safety planning. This has begun to improve the force's response to victims of domestic abuse and those with other vulnerabilities.

4. There is an inconsistent approach to quality assurance and incident closure by the control room supervisor and inspector which should be reviewed.

Control room staff have been given additional domestic abuse training and the revisit inspection found that there is greater understanding of the risks to the victim and greater clarity about responsibilities of supervisors. This included the inspectors and control room managers who are applying greater scrutiny before closing domestic abuse incidents, ensuring that the risk to the victim is thoroughly assessed and the right action is taken by the force to keep the victim and their family safe.

Control room staff have access to enhanced prompt lists (to ensure all the correct questions are asked of the victim) specifically relating to domestic abuse, and it is evident that officers are devising safety plans and that these are being reviewed by the supervisor, domestic abuse tactical adviser (DATA) and the service desk supervisor. The enhanced closure screen prompts staff to ensure that safety planning is completed, a crime number added where appropriate and a domestic abuse, stalking and harassment and honour based violence (DASH) risk assessment completed. CARE leaflets are given and, where appropriate, emailed to victims. CARE provides victims with a handy check-list and ensures that officers know that they must:

- Contact you throughout our enquiries.
- Agree with you how we are going to do this.
- Refer you to other agencies who can help.
- Empathise with your needs.

The force has enhanced its overall response to victims and this means that the quality of service to victims of domestic abuse and their families should improve.

Three domestic abuse incidents were reviewed by the inspection team, two of which were of concern due to the quality of decision making, suggesting that the force still has work to do to ensure effective decision making is consistently taking place at the first point of contact. However, HMIC did witness one domestic abuse incident being dealt with particularly well with clear NDM principles applied and prioritisation of the victim's needs.

During a further revisit in December 2014, HMIC noted that the force had taken a decision to make the two domestic abuse tactical adviser posts permanent, providing more comprehensive cover in the force control room. This should provide greater specialist scrutiny of the force response to domestic abuse incidents, improving the response to the victim.

- 5. There is a focus by officers on the perpetrator and crime when dealing with domestic abuse as opposed to the safety of the victim. The force needs to ensure that there is focus on the risk posed to the victim, as well as on the perpetrator and the crime.**

The chief constable and her team are beginning to change the culture of the force to focus on protection of the vulnerable. Although this will take time, domestic abuse is a priority and it is reflected both in the chief constable's five-year and annual delivery plans.

The force ambition to deal with all domestic abuse cases within the newly formed DAISU provides an impetus to improve the quality of service to victims across Bedfordshire. Staff and officers have received a presentation by senior officers describing how the new DAISU will operate and what changes will take place to improve the service to victims of domestic abuse.

HMIC notes that improved safety plans are being put in place at the first point of contact with the victim. The FCR and the attending officer complete the plan and officers are able to make direct referrals out of office hours to support the victim and provide additional safeguarding measures.

6. A review of the training and awareness provision for domestic abuse needs to be undertaken to ensure that all staff are able to identify, understand and deal effectively with domestic abuse.

Since the original inspection, the chief constable has increased the number of police officers and special constables within the force. She has ensured that all new staff joining the force take part in domestic abuse training which includes a presentation from an experienced IDVA. The investment in providing this specialist training to new staff will have a positive impact on the culture of the organisation and, in turn, deliver a better service for victims of domestic abuse.

Specialist safeguarding staff have provided training to the front line and this had been supplemented by online training about domestic abuse protection orders (DAPOs); as a result there has been a rise in the number of orders thereby increasing the protection of domestic abuse victims. The use of body worn video for frontline officers has supported applications for the orders and charging decisions. HMIC found that referrals for safeguarding relating to high-risk cases are now well understood by frontline staff. However, the force is still developing its understanding of safeguarding referrals for medium-risk cases. Staff on the DAISU commented that domestic abuse is a clear priority for the force and this has been well communicated.

7. The force should consider improving the provision and access to information material for victims of domestic abuse. The available material was limited and in some cases, information contained within the material was out of date.

The force has revised and improved the provision and access to information material that is available for victims of domestic abuse.

The force's intranet provides officers and staff with up-to-date and relevant information about domestic abuse safety planning. This includes details of support agencies with contact numbers that can be offered to victims.

The new Code of Practice for Victims of Crime has been summarised and is now featured within the CARE campaign and on victims' leaflets.

- 8. There is little evidence of in-depth partnership working. Partners are committed to improving services for victims of domestic abuse. They need the support from police at all levels to be able to achieve this. The force needs to ensure that partner relationships are improved and maintained.**

Bedfordshire Police is building upon relationships with other agencies at every level and works closely with specialist independent domestic advisers (IDVA) and members of a national charity Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA).

Both the IDVA and CAADA are assisting the force to review its domestic abuse action plan and to put in place the changes. HMIC is encouraged to hear partners and officers speak of their ambition to put in place a force wide multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). However, there is still much work to be done to achieve this ambition.

The force is positive about developing relationships with other organisations and this is reflected in the joint work on developing the force-wide MASH; this was reinforced by the IDVA's positive involvement in force meetings.

- 9. The inspection found that all high-risk cases were referred to the domestic abuse adviser (police constable) for review and or case management. The role and capacity of the domestic abuse adviser should be reviewed as a matter of urgency due to the unacceptable demand placed on one individual.**

HMIC previously had concerns about the capacity and resilience of the high-risk case manager. The role is now part of the larger DAISU and this should improve staff resilience and performance. However, during the revisit there were still some concerns over the backlog of risk assessments standing at one week for high-risk cases and two weeks for medium-risk cases. This should improve rapidly as the DAISU had only been in place for three days when the revisit took place and the benefits of the additional staff had not yet made a noticeable difference.

10. The role of the MARAC team was not clear during the inspection. This should be reviewed and clarification of the role of this unit should be communicated to all staff.

The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference team (MARAC) staff are integrated into the DAISU to ensure that their expertise and skills are retained and shared across the larger unit and force-wide. The link to the three MARAC meetings across the force has been retained through the same staff providing continuity within the DAISU. This approach maintains the partnership and IDVA relationship, and ensures that high-risk victims of domestic violence are can be kept safer through sharing information. The development of the DAISU has been explained to staff across the force via senior officer briefings, 'Streetwise Max' training sessions and articles on the force intranet.

11. The force should ensure a consistent approach to the risk-assessment process and that all staff understand it. The criteria that differentiate between the levels of risk should be communicated – in particular, the difference between very high risk ('high risk plus') compared to high risk.

HMIC observed that domestic abuse risk levels are being assessed in line with the national standard, medium and high risk. The category of 'high risk plus' has been removed to ensure a consistent approach in defining how the service should respond to each victim of domestic abuse according to the level of risk posed. The revised approach has been explained to all staff through the new communication plan.

12. A formal reassessment of risk should be undertaken throughout the process, particularly at trigger points, for example, release from custody. At present there is an inconsistent approach to this and very little reassessment takes place.

The force recognises the importance of reassessment of risk to the victim at crucial points during an investigation process such as release of the offender from custody following police interview, or a prison sentence (described as trigger points). The trigger points present opportunities to ensure that appropriate safety measures are in place according to the level of risk presented by the offender. Currently the investigator reassesses the risk to the victim. The development of the DAISU has meant that more investigations are being conducted and managed within the unit and therefore a more consistent approach is expected.

At the time of the revisit a more robust approach was under development with the aim of putting in place further improvements in January 2015. This has yet to be tested by HMIC.

13. The force does not have a minimum standard for the management of domestic abuse victims at a neighbourhood level. This should be reviewed, and force expectations communicated clearly to staff.

Neighbourhood management of domestic abuse is now reviewed at the daily management meeting and is an integral part of the force and local tasking process. Support from the neighbourhood teams to arrest the ten highest risk domestic abuse offenders and gather intelligence are part of daily management meetings. A supervisor reviews every domestic abuse crime report involving a repeat domestic abuse victim to ensure that the right level of support is being given. It is also clear that neighbourhood staff have received additional training and that they understand the priority given to domestic abuse. This means that staff are more involved in safety planning and safeguarding referrals, positive action arrests for outstanding offenders and robust supervision of incidents, and investigation plans.

14. It was felt that where victims did not wish to pursue a complaint or support a prosecution, less impetus is given to the investigative process. The force needs to ensure that it provides a consistent approach to all domestic abuse incidents.

The head of crime has been leading staff development to pursue prosecutions where the victim is either unable or unwilling to give evidence. The aim is to ensure that staff seize every evidential opportunity at the first point of contact with the victim. This has included the use of body worn video to obtain evidence at the scene. The force acknowledges that this development will take time and it is committed to continue the staff development as domestic abuse investigation is a priority.

15. The force should have an agreed criterion or process for dealing with non-crime domestic abuse incidents that are repeat cases.

The process and criteria for dealing with non-crime domestic abuse incidents that are repeat cases has been revised. Upon receiving a call from a victim of domestic abuse the control room operator will ask ten questions to assist in assessing the risk to the victim or victims and identifying the appropriate police response. Whether a victim has been a repeat victim is a key consideration in identifying risk and determining the initial response. Once the incident has been attended, it cannot be closed without a review by a force control room supervisor. The force control room supervisor will ensure a DASH risk assessment is completed, Case Administration Tracking System (CATS) has been checked and that appropriate measures have been put in place to mitigate the risk and safeguard the victim or victims.

DAISU will quality assure every DA incident, review the DASH form and ensure at least four other core systems are checked; crime recording, force control room incidents, CATS and police national computer (PNC) with the intention of identifying the victim history and any repeat victimisation (other systems are checked depending on the circumstances). The DAISU officer will contact the victim and ensure enhanced safety planning and safeguarding advice has been given, and will make any necessary referrals to partner agencies. If the DAISU officer believes that the case history makes out a 'course of conduct' that may be an offence of harassment, they will refer and instigate further investigation, ensure the matter is recorded as a crime and inform the force control room supervisor. Otherwise tasks will be given to local policing officers if it is believed they could offer additional protection and support beyond the enhanced safety planning/safeguarding already implemented. Local police are made aware of their repeat victims in their area and given actions in the safety planning where appropriate.

Any victim reporting three or more domestic abuse incidents within a rolling 12-month period will be referred to MARAC so that police and partners together manage the risk, offer protection to the victim and their family and identify opportunities to target the perpetrator.

16. In non-violent cases, custody officers are not charging to the specialist domestic violence court. This is due to a lack of understanding about what these courts are designed to do. The force should make clear that charges for all domestic abuse related offending should be bailed to the local special domestic violence court.

The new DAISU management team has made some progress through training events to ensure that the level of risk drives decision making, and non violent cases are approached in a consistent way. DAISU managers scrutinise performance data to ensure that appropriate cases are being bailed to the special domestic abuse courts. There is still more for the force to do to ensure that staff fully understand the purpose of the specialist domestic violence courts and that every use is made of these courts.

On 1 November 2014, the force implemented Transforming Summary Justice (TSJ) for all domestic abuse offences and as such there is now a requirement to complete a prosecution file within 24 hours of charging an offender, whether it relates to a violent or non violent offence. Suspects must be bailed for their first hearing at the special domestic abuse courts. This happens for every domestic abuse case and has increased the number of defendants who plead guilty on their first appearance, thus reducing the time taken for a case to be concluded. The only exception is if the suspect is detained in custody on an initial remand application when they will appear before the next available court.

17. The force should ensure there is a clear process in place where victims of domestic abuse are notified when a perpetrator is released from prison or custody. This should also instigate a re-assessment of risk.

The force's update states that a domestic abuse safeguarding officer completes the risk assessment question and answer process together with the enhanced safeguarding and victim care questions. This includes agreeing the victim contract and ensuring the investigator reviews the risk at specific trigger points, including the release of the offender from custody. If the offender was sentenced to 12 months or more in custody and released, the victim will be updated by the victim liaison officers (probation). This has yet to be tested by HMIC.

Summary

Bedfordshire Police had initially been slow to improve its response to victims of domestic abuse and their families following the publication of HMIC's original report in March 2014. However, under the leadership of the chief constable, the force has now invested time and additional resources to ensure that tackling domestic abuse is a priority. Evidence of this commitment includes senior leadership briefings to frontline staff, training for all staff and officers, leaflets and promotion through the intranet, additional staff investment in the force control room and in the new domestic abuse investigation support unit.

The force has improved its understanding of areas of risk and put measures in place further to improve service delivery to victims and make people feel safer in Bedfordshire. The identification of victims, particularly vulnerable and repeat victims, has improved. Staff have a greater understanding of how to safeguard victims of domestic abuse at the first point of contact. There is an improved understanding throughout the force about who is responsible for managing the safety of victims at each stage of an investigation.

We found very early signs of progress in the priority areas that the force is working on to make improvements for victims of domestic abuse. There is a commitment to ensure that the improvements put in place will provide sustainable and lasting benefits for victims of domestic abuse and their families. While the force faces many challenges, it is important that the momentum is maintained and that these promising early signs quickly translate into improved services.

HMIC will continue to monitor Bedfordshire Police's progress against the 17 recommendations in HMIC's March 2014 report.

Next steps

HMIC now conducts all-force annual inspections called the PEEL (police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy) assessments. We will continue to consider the extent to which police forces tackle domestic abuse, but will do so in future in the context of an overall inspection of police efficiency and effectiveness.

Glossary

body worn video camera	video camera, worn on the helmet or upper body of an officer, which records visual and audio footage of an incident
control room	police control or communications room manages emergency (999) and non-emergency (101) calls, and sending police officers to these calls
DASH	domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH 2009)
domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH 2009)	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
frontline	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, <i>Policing in Austerity: Rising to the Challenge</i> (2013) sets this out in more detail
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; <i>Risk of</i>

serious harm (Home Office 2002 and OASys 2006) says it is: "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 advisers or advocates

independent domestic violence adviser

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

MARAC

Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference

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, and drug or alcohol misuse

MARAC

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

	<p>victim; there are currently over 270 MARACs are operating across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland managing more than 64,000 cases a year</p>
partnership	<p>term used where collaborative working is established between the police and other public, private or voluntary organisations</p>
repeat victims	<p>if a victim reports an incident of domestic abuse to the police on more than one occasion they will be considered a repeat victim; this is regardless of whether the incidents reported involve the same or different perpetrators; victims who report multiple episodes of abuse for the first time may also be treated as a repeat victim</p>
risk assessment	<p>assessment 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</p>
safeguarding	<p>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"</p>

serious and serial perpetrators

if the police receive reports of at least five incidents to the police involving three different victims the perpetrator will be considered a serial perpetrator

standard risk

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

vulnerable

describes a person who is in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect