

## **Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic 2021**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published a review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic. This review looks at how the police responded to the unique challenges the COVID-19 pandemic placed on preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

Reports of domestic abuse have been growing and make up a significant proportion of demand on West Midlands Police. In the year ending September 2020, domestic abuse flagged crimes made up around 23% of all crime. In 2021, WMP commissioned Crest Advisory to research the higher than normal increase in reporting for WMP throughout 2020 and an outlier in terms of domestic abuse demand. The findings however show; the West Midlands does not appear to be an outlier in terms of the rate of domestic abuse per population. Between the year ending March 2016 and the year ending March 2020 the West Midlands was in line with the national average and below that of its MSF's.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, domestic abuse has risen faster in the West Midlands than nationally, but it is likely Covid has exposed, rather than created the problem. Initial findings from London City University and the University of Durham suggest that the pandemic exposed, rather than created the domestic abuse crisis' i.e. it may be that these areas were particularly good at encouraging reporting during this time. There is broad consensus on the drivers of rising demand, though it has not been possible to evidence this from the available data. West Midlands Police focus group participants identified that the increase in demand was driven by three key factors: (i) broader interpretations of the definition of domestic abuse, (ii) increase in available reporting methods (web chat) and (iii) failure demand from other public services. As well as an increase in the *volumes* of cases, staff reported an increase in the demand stemming from individual cases. This is as a result of increased use of technology, safeguarding demands and the time-intensive nature of investigating incremental offences (e.g. harassment/coercive control).

Within the West Midlands, domestic abuse victims and their families were identified as a priority early on in the initial lockdown. The force were particularly keen to ensure the voice of the child was captured during the pandemic and response officers trained in DA matters were issued 5 wellbeing questions to pursue with children when they went out to domestic calls. This allowed an additional avenue to assess risk and support safeguarding children who were further hidden from professionals and public view due to the lockdown.

During the pandemic, changes were made to the processes for managing domestic abuse cases. A review, planned for later in the year, will assess the effectiveness of those changes to ensure processes for managing domestic abuse cases are robust and the proposed benefits are being delivered. This will include areas such as response times, outcome rates, capacity monitoring, staff well-being and supporting victims

### **Victim Services Overview**

From the outset of the first lockdown the PCC established regular contact with all commissioned domestic abuse services. This was to understand what impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on victims and service providers and how we could best assist. Grant variation letters were sent out to

providers enabling them to flex their service provision to adapt their working practices to suit the emerging needs. Quarterly payments to all commissioned victim support services were made shortly after the initial announcement for a nation-wide lockdown was made. We also sought business continuity plans from all providers to understand how services would respond. All services were able to work from in the immediate aftermath of the first lockdown, however this did result in significant cost implications. The West Midlands secured a significant uplift from the MoJ in respect of the first Covid contingency funding which enabled services to recover these costs.

### **#Noexcuseforabuse Campaign**

In April 2020, in response to the acknowledgement by providers the PCC also launched a region wide awareness campaign targeted at victims encouraging them to reach out should they need support. The campaign was called #noexcuseforabuse. The PCC worked with regional partners including the VRU, Local authorities and Community Safety Partnerships and voluntary sector providers to ensure consistent region wide messaging.

### **Impact on victims and families**

The increases in domestic abuse during the pandemic have had a profound impact on victims and their families. Commissioned services providers shared concerns highlighted by victims they supported, these included;

- financial hardship to most families especially those with low income, this would undoubtedly be more challenging in households where the children and female partner rely on the income of the male who may or may not have a history of being a perpetrator;
- for those women living with perpetrators, abuse was likely to escalate which was attributed to financial hardship 'faced' by perpetrators if they were sole earners in the household;
- throughout the pandemic, providers had reported a significant rise in women seeking refuge accommodation, homelessness among women trapped in abusive relationships, and offenders breaching orders i.e. non-molestation and restraining orders;
- single women especially those on Universal Credit were struggling to manage financially, often having to depend on food banks-loans
- schools working closely with providers reported seeing an increase in children going without regular meals. The long term impacts of the aforementioned include higher household, energy and food bills; families unable to pay their rent; families threatened with eviction; and being separated from their support circles. This will ultimately have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of victims, parents that are victims and their children.

Providers were also impacted, the greatest challenges being heightened anxiety levels; sickness absence levels being much higher than usual; and vulnerable staff requesting to work from home.

### **COVID-19 Contingency Funding**

The OPCC were responsible for the bidding and distribution of funding to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence during the pandemic, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) COVID contingency funding (2020-2021) enabled providers to address the increased demand on services nationally and delays faced by all support agencies due to remote working and less staffing in place due to isolation, sickness etc. The funding also enable their services to move towards online and remote working. The West Midlands were awarded funding through the first and second round of the contingency funding, the total was £911,065.64, of that funding, £634,772.81 was issued to commissioned and non-commissioned DA support services across the region. Concerns raised by providers which highlighted the minimal impact as a result of the initial funding being in place for just six months was recognised by the MoJ which enabled grants to be extended until the end of the financial year, thus enabling providers to take on more referrals and support victims for longer periods.

The report outlined three recommendations to police forces, the remainder of the response will focus on these.

**Recommendation 1:**

- We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should immediately introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework. The framework should assess the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.
- We recommend that forces immediately review their use of a telephone-based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing.

Force Contact are well versed on the use of THRIVE+ with audits supporting the correct identification of threat, risk and harm. For victims of domestic abuse contacting West Midlands Police via on-line platforms, all contacts are screened against the THRIVE+ framework in order to judge the risk and to determine the appropriate response. Force Contact have well established supervisory functions who assess risk and escalate where required.

Force Response introduced domestic abuse telephone response in March 2020 in response to the first lockdown, with defined tactical parameters to ensure telephone was risk appropriate. There have been 3 x audits which have offered reassurance the parameters are being adhered to.

Domestic Abuser Matters training programme has been rolled out further to wider response staff in wake of the covid-19 pandemic.

**Recommendation 2:**

- We recommend that forces immediately review their capacity to provide ongoing support and safeguarding to victims of domestic abuse whose case is awaiting trial at court. This should:
  - ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims to keep them up to date with the progress of their case; and
  - enable the offer of access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays.

Delays within the Criminal Justice System remain a concern for West Midlands, especially in regards to both domestic abuse victims and victims of rape and serious sexual offences.

The Witness Care Unit (WCU) quickly recognised the risk of delays in regards to domestic abuse case attrition and re-victimisation and have contacted all victims to assure them their case is still listed and referred them to the no excuse for abuse website. Victims of high risk domestic abuse crimes pending trial are supported through the MARAC process and IDVA's. The OPCC recognised a gap in IDVA provisions and have commissioned additional services to support victims of domestic abuse.

West Midlands Police, in consultation with the OPCC, made an application for WCU funding made available by the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office in June 2021, requesting funding for: retention of temporary staff and trauma aware training and accreditation within the WCU; expansion of the gatekeeper role and NAPAC victim trauma training for all police investigators involved in non-recent abuse or any serious sexual offence/exploitation investigations; Qwell therapeutic support for victims.

### **Recommendation 3:**

- We recommend that all forces immediately review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This is to ensure that:
  - domestic abuse investigations guarantee all attempts to engage victims are explored, and that all possible lines of evidence are considered so that in all cases the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved;
  - there is regular and effective supervision of investigations that supports the above point to be achieved;
  - and the use of outcomes 15 and 16 is appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, are clearly recorded.

In February 2021, the Domestic Abuse Lead conducted a series of meetings with Adult Abuse Investigation Sergeants to go through the requirements for OC15, OC16 and evidence led prosecution considerations (based on the HMICFRS assessment criteria). 2 x audits have been conducted on OC15/OC16 which provides assurance that their correct application is being applied.

PPU and CPS conduct bi-monthly audits of DA cases which both the police and CPS have NFA'd in order to identify if there are missed opportunities. To date, police decisions have been supported and 2 x evidence led CPS NFA cases which should have been prosecuted.

An evidence led prosecution tool kit has been developed for investigators which will be launch within the next month.

The audit for domestic abuse case management, planned for later in the year, will assess the effectiveness of those changes to ensure processes for managing domestic abuse cases are robust and the proposed benefits are being delivered. This will include areas such as response times, outcome rates, capacity monitoring, staff well-being and supporting victims.