

Scrutiny Review of Domestic Abuse and Its Impact on Children Executive Summary

This report presents the outcomes of the Scrutiny Review of Domestic Abuse and its impact on children. The overall aim of the review was to better understand the impact of domestic abuse on children and the effectiveness of interventions to inform the Domestic Abuse Strategy and future commissioning decisions.

The Committee discussed a potential focus on the following issues:

- What is domestic abuse?
- What is the impact of domestic abuse on children?
- How is the incidence of domestic abuse recorded? What is the prevalence in Stockton? Is this an accurate picture?
- How do referrals operate? How is risk identified and managed? What are the numbers of repeat referrals and what does this tell us?
- What sort of needs assessment underpins our actions on domestic abuse?
- Do we have a clear understanding of the demographics of domestic abuse?
- How was the Domestic Abuse Strategy developed and what are the local priorities?
- How is coercion and control reflected in the Strategy?
- What services are available locally for victims and perpetrators, how are they commissioned and their impact assessed? Do we have a clear picture of what works?
- What specialist support is provided for children and young people (including the management of physical and mental impact)? Do we have a clear picture of what works?
- How are services funded? Have cost-benefit analyses been carried out on interventions?
- What examples are there of innovative practice, locally and nationally?
- How confident are we that professionals are trained to watch out for the signs of domestic violence and abuse?
- What is Operation Encompass and how effective has this been?
- How well do Adults' and Children's Services work together on this issue?
- Who are the key partners, what role do they play and how well are they working together?
- How are the needs of marginalised groups recognised and met?

Given the potentially wide scope of the issues around domestic abuse and in recognition of the complexity of the issues and the limited time frame for a task and finish approach, the review has been focused on those areas which are of most direct relevance to the impact of domestic abuse on children and families, and especially the links to children's social care functions. Therefore a wholesale review of the Domestic Abuse strategy and how it was developed, for example, has not been undertaken in this review, to do so would be beyond the remit of this specific task and finish group. In agreeing this focus the Committee remained mindful of the need to ensure that the wider context of work with victims and perpetrators was taken into account.

Key Findings and Conclusions

- The true extent of domestic abuse is not known. It is estimated that victims are living with domestic abuse for 2-3 years before seeking help. On average, 85% of victims seek help five times from professionals in the year before they get effective help to stop the abuse
- As well as the risk of physical injury, the exposure to abuse has profound negative effects on children's mental health; perpetrators have often had abusive experiences themselves
- Reporting of incidents is on the increase. In Stockton between April 2018 and March 2019 there were 5,883 Domestic Abuse related incidents; an increase of 16.8% from the same period in the previous year. Stockton on Tees has a higher rate of domestic abuse crimes than the national average
- More work is needed to understand the effectiveness of interventions including cost/ benefit analysis

- Greater clarity around the referral data from Harbour would assist further analysis and understanding. Statistical evidence for outcomes as well as subjective opinion/ qualitative data based evidence from clients would allow better insight of the effectiveness of interventions
- Demand for Harbour Services has been increasing and they have introduced new ways of working to cope with increasing demand. Changes to services will be monitored and need to be constantly evaluated to ensure that demands are being met. All partner agencies should be kept informed to ensure that where capacity is reached, a planned approach can be sought. For example, contingency plans need to be in place when refuge space reaches full capacity
- Where Harbour services have been discontinued it has for the most part been due to clients disengaging
- The development within Early Help and the approach taken to respond to domestic abuse continues to evolve. The changes so far enable a more effective and appropriate response that recognises the importance of a multi-agency approach. Domestic abuse is an area of key focus and remains a golden thread within Early Help services
- Joint working between Harbour and Stockton Children's Services has been an example of the benefits of close partnership working and could be used as a model upon which to build
- Consent can be an issue and can become a barrier to services intervening where a child protection plan was not in place
- Domestic abuse is not a recording category as part of the Child Protection Plan process; details would be recorded in the narrative. Other recording systems could be revised to facilitate more accurate recording
- Improved recording would also help to better understand the effectiveness of interventions
- Referrals from schools and the health sector remain low; most referrals come via the Police Early contact through universal services such as Midwives and Health Visitors could be invaluable
- Harbour are contracted to carry out awareness raising in every primary school in Middlesbrough and Hartlepool annually. Often children approached the Harbour workers after these sessions to seek help. They are currently not contracted to provide these services in Stockton
- On an operational level, a clear pathway for engagement when both adults and children's services are involved with a family would be beneficial to ensure communication and information sharing
- From a Police perspective, domestic abuse is challenging from an investigative perspective – victims are often reluctant to press charges
- Operation Encompass was first implemented in 2015 in Hartlepool, and is now fully in place and well embedded across all boroughs in Cleveland. This includes state and independent nurseries, schools, academies, alternative education providers and children's community health support services, such as school nurses and health visitors

Recommendations

- (1) That the following areas be considered as part of the current training mapping exercise being led by the Domestic Abuse Steering Group:
 - (a) Harbour to train the Link Worker in Children's Services in the ALTER programme to assist Children's Services to work with those deeply entrenched perpetrators who will not complete the full perpetrators programme.
 - (b) Relevant Domestic Abuse training for social workers and other professionals, including identifying risk using the most appropriate tools as part of the ongoing training mapping process through the Domestic Abuse Steering Group.
 - (c) Domestic Abuse Awareness Sessions for all Councillors.

- (d) Awareness raising with all key agencies on the need to make referrals into the Children's Hub.
 - (e) Education and awareness raising programmes in schools and that the ongoing work to prepare schools for the statutory duty to provide relationships education should ensure that there is an appropriate focus on coercive and controlling behaviour.
- (2) That, as part of the contract monitoring process for the domestic abuse service:
- (a) There should be an ongoing analysis and reporting of the effectiveness of the early help and children's social care link workers and the impact of Domestic Abuse services.
 - (b) Consideration should be given to the establishment of trigger points requiring Harbour to advise when they have a backlog of assessments and how this is to be managed and that any ongoing issues with unmet demand be addressed during the review of the contract.
- (3) That, where consent is not given and/or clients do not meet the criteria for early help or social care intervention, the referrals by professionals are to go back to the referrer to do some brief intervention/awareness and support work (this will require specific training across key agencies).
- (4) That clear communication pathways be established between adults' and children's services to ensure a joined up approach when working with families.
- (5) That the Domestic Abuse Steering Group be requested to seek further feedback on the effectiveness of Operation Encompass and specifically the length of time between the Police being made aware of a problem and the school being notified.
- (6) That, recognising that domestic abuse is not a recording category as part of the Child Protection Plan process, other recording systems be revised to facilitate more accurate recording of its prevalence which will, in turn, help to better understand the effectiveness of interventions.
- (7) That consideration be given to appropriate forms of collaboration and joint working across the relevant partnerships across the Tees Local Authority areas to identify areas of potential further collaboration.