

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Members

- **Children and Young People – Councillor Clare Besford**
- **Access, Communities & Community Safety – Councillor Norma Stephenson OBE**

Scrutiny Review of Children affected by Domestic Abuse

Summary

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Community Safety Select Committee's review of Children affected by Domestic Abuse.

Reasons for Recommendation(s) / Decision(s)

This topic was included on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2025-2026. The review is now complete, and the recommendations have been endorsed by the Community Safety Select Committee for submission to Cabinet.

Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) The Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP) undertake a communications campaign (reflecting the 'keeping your child in mind' principle) around the impact of domestic abuse on children.
- 2) In collaboration with local schools, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) and Harbour introduce a school staff training programme on domestic abuse, its impact on children, and the support services available (including a plan to increase the uptake of domestic abuse training in primary schools).
- 3) Options be explored in order to secure funding for the continuation / enhancement of Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) services within local health settings (hospitals and primary care).
- 4) All organisations improve their recording of details (including a child's age) of domestic abuse-related referrals made to the Stockton-on-Tees Children's Hub (CHUB) (note: to be known as the 'Family Help Point' from 1 April 2026) and local support service, Harbour (even when domestic abuse is only one of several reasons for a referral being submitted).

- 5) In terms of domestic abuse-related training:
 - a) SBC introduces a mandatory course for all staff (and Elected Members) which includes content on identifying this form of abuse and how / where to report it.
 - b) Relevant partnerships with oversight of domestic abuse / safeguarding matters encourage organisations represented within these multi-agency arrangements to introduce mandatory courses for all staff, the content of which should reflect a tiered approach based on individual roles / responsibilities.
 - c) The Stockton-on-Tees Domestic Abuse Steering Group (DASG) seek greater assurance around the uptake of such training within individual organisations (including early years providers) and how this is impacting upon practice.
- 6) Harbour strengthens the promotion of its existing offer within local primary care services (across all Primary Care Networks (PCNs) and the individual practices themselves).
- 7) Where appropriate, the Stockton-on-Tees DASG oversee a drive to increase awareness and utilisation of Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) by frontline professionals across the local 'system' when domestic abuse is identified within a household.
- 8) SBC provides assurance to key partners and all Elected Members around the changes to its 'front door' to services for children and their families (*note: to be known as the 'Family Help Point' from 1 April 2026*), including how existing partnership arrangements will be maintained / enhanced.
- 9) The Stockton-on-Tees DASG seek assurance that key local partners have 'voice of the child' strategies / mechanisms in place and that best practice principles in relation to capturing the child's voice are shared and continually reinforced (particularly with frontline officers attending households).
- 10) The Stockton-on-Tees DASG provide updates on the progress of actions associated with the local Domestic Abuse Strategy, highlighting any areas which are proving challenging and the reasons for this.
- 11) Suggested areas of future focus identified by contributors to this review be shared with, and subsequently considered by, the Stockton-on-Tees DASG and the HSSCP.
- 12) The findings and recommendations from the recently published thematic joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) report on '*the multi-agency response to children who are victims of domestic abuse*' be shared with all relevant local organisations.

Detail

1. The impact of domestic abuse is felt by children regardless of their age, and this is now recognised in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Children exposed to domestic abuse or experiencing domestic abuse in their own relationships are regarded as victim-survivors in their own right. Statutory Guidance supporting the understanding of the definitions of 'domestic abuse' and 'personally connected' as set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was released in 2022.

2. Domestic abuse can seriously affect families and the physical, mental and emotional health, wellbeing and development of children and young people. Children and young people can develop emotional, behavioural and developmental issues such as anxiety, challenging and aggressive behaviour or withdrawal, delayed speech, language and communication and low self-esteem, affecting their ability to form healthy relationships and educational attainment. In 2020-2021, the local domestic abuse service found that children were exposed to three-quarters of domestic abuse incidents, whilst a third of referrals to Children's Services were related to domestic abuse.
3. Domestic abuse can be experienced by anyone and disproportionately affects children and young people. Domestic abuse can be one of the factors resulting in child exploitation and can contribute and exacerbate multiple disadvantage. A variety of research and commentaries on this scrutiny topic have been previously published, including by renowned organisations such as Barnardo's, The Children's Society, and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).
4. In December 2023, Foundations (the national 'What Works Centre for Children & Families') reported figures which revealed that at least 827,000 children in England and Wales may have suffered domestic abuse by the end of 2023. Amid concerns that the numbers of children affected by domestic abuse had escalated, the organisation called for an urgent focus on testing the most promising approaches to strengthen support for children.
5. April 2025 saw the publication of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales's vision for transformation in the response to babies, children and young people subject to domestic abuse. 'Victims in their own right?' examined the current reaction to those who experienced domestic abuse at home or in their family across both the statutory and non-statutory response. Evidencing current gaps in provision, examples of good practice, and providing constructive solutions for a co-ordinated approach that made the improvements needed, the report drew on extensive engagement and comprehensive insights to support recommendations across seven key themes.
6. The main aims for this review were to understand the impact of domestic abuse on children, the extent of the issue across the Borough, and the ways in which those who experience this were identified (with specific attention on exploring how domestic abuse impacted children in their early years, and the extent of the lasting impact as they grew older). Furthermore, the review sought to articulate the current local offer for children and young people affected by domestic abuse (providing clarity for frontline professionals, families and children / young people), as well as explore opportunities for early intervention (focusing on services engaging with children / families with children in their early years) to protect children from the enduring impacts of domestic abuse.
7. The Committee took evidence from the SBC Adults, Health and Wellbeing and SBC Children's Services directorates, the local Domestic Abuse Steering Group, Harbour, local NHS Trusts (regarding maternity, health visiting and CAMHS considerations), the NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, Primary Care Networks, Cleveland Police, the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP), and housing services (Thirteen and SBC Housing). A survey for the Borough's early years providers was also issued.

Community Impact and Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment

8. The recently published Stockton-on-Tees Community Safety Strategy stated that *'Domestic abuse overall is showing a downward trend; however, incidents involving children present in the household are beginning to rise'* (a claim which was supported by data published within HSSCP annual reports). From an early years perspective, Cleveland Police statistics demonstrated that there were 763 cases recorded of children aged 0-5 being present during a domestic abuse incident in Stockton in 2025. The Committee's recommendations aim to support efforts to raise awareness of domestic abuse and its impact on children, strengthen the identification, reporting and recording of related incidents, and make a positive difference to how young victims are supported in the future.

The Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment (EPIA) was introduced after the design and commissioning of the current service / contract – an assessment will need to be carried out ahead of any agreed changes to the existing offer being implemented.

Corporate Parenting Implications

9. There are no direct implications in the report.

Financial Implications

10. Committee recommendations on the introduction of a school staff training programme on domestic abuse and a mandatory course for all SBC staff (and Elected Members) may have resource implications, whilst provision of roles to maintain capacity across the system (e.g. hospital IDVA) would require funding. Progression of any suggested areas of future focus identified by contributors to this review, as well as responses to the recently published thematic joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) report on *'the multi-agency response to children who are victims of domestic abuse'* may also require financial considerations.

Legal Implications

11. There are no direct implications in the report.

Risk Assessment

12. The review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

Wards Affected and Consultation with Ward / Councillors

13. This review is relevant to children (including those in their early years) / young people within all Wards across the Borough.

Background Papers

14. None.

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