

## Community Safety Select Committee: Scrutiny Review of Children affected by Domestic Abuse – Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Community Safety Select Committee's scrutiny review of Children affected by Domestic Abuse.
- 1.2. 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.
- 1.3. 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.
- 1.4. 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 \(NSPCC\)](#).
- 1.5. 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.
- 1.6. 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.
- 1.7. 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.

- 1.8. The Committee found that the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 had heralded a significant change in the law that led to children being recognised as victims in their own right if they saw, heard or were exposed to domestic abuse (defined as psychological, physical, sexual, financial and / or economic, emotional, and controlling and / or coercive behaviour, where the people involved were aged 16 or over and were or had been personally connected to each other (including relatives and intimate relationships)). Other relevant legislation / guidance outlined the expectations on organisations, both individually and in partnership with other agencies, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
- 1.9. Extensive information exists on both the immediate impact and the enduring and chronic effects of domestic abuse on children, and this was reinforced by several of the contributors to this review. The Committee acknowledge the wide range of physical and mental ramifications across different phases of a child's development, factors which underline the severity of the issue and the way in which it causes those experiencing such abuse problems in the present, as well as likely challenges and obstacles for them in the future. Stronger public communication of this impact may play a part in making those over 16 consider the effects of their actions / potential actions when children are in the household.
- 1.10. Councils have a number of obligations around domestic abuse, including the provision of safe accommodation, working with organisations that represent the voice of victim-survivors, and leading on a domestic abuse partnership (involving the development and implementation of an associated strategy). The Local Authority also offers a range of early help support, with children's services undertaking required statutory interventions in relation to safeguarding / child protection and other associated planning which involves, in part, child protection investigations, home visits, observations of the child with parent(s), and referrals to support services. Whilst some of this work is conducted on a multi-agency partnership basis, from a housing perspective, the Committee note that SBC has limited direct working with social housing providers regarding domestic abuse considerations.
- 1.11. Commissioned by SBC as the local domestic abuse support service, Harbour highlighted that, whilst progress had been made, there was work to do around this scrutiny topic, specifically in terms of educating professionals and the public (especially schools). Of particular interest to the Committee was the use of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) within health settings, roles which were reportedly much-valued and had made a significant difference in assisting staff with this challenging issue, as well as facilitating safe disclosure of abuse from victim-survivors and signposting them / enabling access to available support. Although future funding for IDVAs is uncertain, it is clear that these arrangements should be maintained and indeed built upon where possible.
- 1.12. Given the focus on early years, the Committee sought, and was pleased to receive, assurance from several local organisations within the health sector around their role and actions in relation to this scrutiny topic – this included maternity, health visiting, and child mental health services. The Committee also welcomed the importance placed on domestic abuse by the overarching NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB), as well as its involvement in local multi-agency partnerships, though heard that three of the four Primary Care Networks (PCNs) within the Borough were unaware of the local GP IDVA arrangement (with all four requesting better promotion of the Harbour offer within practices). Cleveland Police was a key contributor to this review and highlighted its central role and responsibilities on this issue (including co-location within the Stockton-on-Tees Children's Hub (CHUB) to improve working relationships and the

timeliness of responses). Mindful of the forthcoming changes to the SBC 'front door' arrangements, it is vital that established relationships with partners are maintained to ensure robust safeguarding of children.

- 1.13. Two important partnerships provided evidence of work undertaken on this issue. The local Domestic Abuse Steering Group involves a range of partners and is responsible for delivering 'system' outcomes around domestic abuse – the current Domestic Abuse Strategy 2022-2028 and its associated actions being key to this endeavour. Backing-up Harbour's view that further work was required within schools, the Committee encourage a focus on increasing the uptake of domestic abuse training within primary schools (which in September 2025 had seen only 10% of these settings partake). Separately, the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP) has responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and involves multiple statutory and non-statutory partners. Whilst the Committee expressed concern about the lack of an explicit HSSCP focus on domestic abuse in recent years, it received assurance that this topic was frequently considered as part of the partnership's work (e.g. a recent multi-agency audit on this theme).
- 1.14. The Committee heard that there were 5,225 recorded 'incidents' of domestic abuse across the Borough and 3,907 recorded domestic abuse 'crimes' during 2023-2024. For this same period, 1,010 contacts into SBC Children's Services had domestic abuse listed as the reason for contact, with 25% of referrals made to SBC Children's Services over this period being domestic abuse-related. 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.
- 1.15. This review had a strong emphasis on seeking assurance around identifying and reporting cases where children had experienced domestic abuse, and all contributors provided details on how this was carried out and how staff were supported to recognise signs and act on them. Importantly, individual organisations not only reflected on their own work to raise awareness of this form of abuse and promote reporting routes, but also acknowledged collective efforts around this scrutiny topic through their involvement in multi-agency arrangements. However, whilst the Committee was often given assurance on the provision of training for staff, little data was submitted on training uptake and the extent to which this was being repeated / reinforced. Similarly, the Committee found that some organisations did not appear to record domestic abuse-related referrals that they had made, making it difficult to cross-reference this against the work coming into the Stockton-on-Tees Children's Hub (CHUB) and local support service, Harbour, or establish trends within specific provision.
- 1.16. Again, mindful of this review's emphasis on the 0-5 age-range, the Borough's early years providers (e.g. nurseries / childminders) were asked to provide assurance on the identification and reporting of children who were, or were at risk of, being affected by domestic abuse within their household. Whilst the response rate to the Committee's survey was limited, those providers who did submit views demonstrated a good understanding of this issue, though also noted concerns regarding hidden abuse (particularly involving those who did not fit the stereotype of a family affected) and an absence of guidance / communications from the Council and / or other local organisations to assist in identifying / supporting children who had experienced domestic abuse. There was a clear call for an increased training offer for this sector.

- 1.17. Principally reflected through the ongoing work of Harbour, the Committee praised the involvement of local children and young people in the nationally significant '*Tell Nicole*' (the Domestic Abuse Commissioner) project which captured the voice of individuals affected by domestic abuse. As recognised in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children are victims in their own right if they see or hear domestic abuse, and those charged with supporting them have a duty to understand their experiences and seek their views in order to shape effective service provision.
- 1.18. There was broad positivity around the work of local partnerships when it came to the issue of domestic abuse, a feeling echoed by an annual assurance report from the Domestic Abuse Steering Group in September 2025 which, as stated by HSSCP, provided strong confidence regarding the effectiveness of arrangements, demonstrating that agencies from across the system were working to prevent, intervene early, and respond to domestic abuse. This review indicated sound buy-in and recognition of responsibility from all relevant local agencies, as well as an appreciation that working together was the best way to safeguard children.
- 1.19. Contributors were asked to identify areas for future focus in relation to this scrutiny topic, and a range of subsequent suggestions are included in the findings of this report – these should be considered by the local domestic abuse / safeguarding children partnerships. Additionally, the findings from six joint targeted area inspections (JTAs) carried out between October 2024 and June 2025 (looking at how local partnerships and services responded to children who were at risk of, or who had been victims of, domestic abuse) were published by the Government at the end of the Committee's evidence-gathering phase – key messages from these also need to be disseminated to all relevant local agencies.
- 1.20. This was a complex topic to review about an issue that is multifaceted. Whilst it is not within the gift of the Committee to prevent this type of abuse occurring, the review has allowed a spotlight to be shone on how aware local services are of this issue, how they respond to any cases they identify, and how they work together to raise awareness and react to domestic abuse across the Borough. Addressing the causes of domestic abuse is a deep-rooted challenge for society in general, but it remains incumbent on organisations and their staff to be vigilant, appropriately trained, and suitably responsive to this all too prevalent issue.

### **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.**

*(continued overleaf...)*

**Recommendations (continued)**

The Committee recommend that:

- 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.**

Name of Contact Officer: Gary Woods

Post Title: Senior Scrutiny Officer

Telephone number: 01642 526187

Email address: [gary.woods@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:gary.woods@stockton.gov.uk)