

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR THE HOME OFFICE ABOUT THE DOMESTIC ABUSE STRATEGY

NOVEMBER 2021

From the alliance of organisations listed on the final page

INTRODUCTION

This paper responds to the recent call from the Home Office for contributions to the development of the Domestic Abuse Strategy (the Strategy). Our comments build on those submitted during the summer by the Drive Partnership on behalf of the Perpetrator Call to Action Network.¹

The organisations authoring the paper are an informal alliance of colleagues from different agencies and with a wide range of experience and expertise around domestic abuse policy and practice. Our perspectives arise from our work as judge/lawyers, domestic abuse clinicians and practitioners, social workers, researchers, charitable trust funders, family advisers/advocates, and voluntary sector senior managers. We have experience of working in and evaluating services in children’s social care, adult social care, the family justice system, the criminal justice system, and the youth justice system. This paper reflects our combined learning about – and from – those who have been abused and those responsible for abuse in their intimate relationships, and the services and systems that impinge on the life of children and adults affected by abuse.

We welcome the commitment from the Home Office Directorate to consult widely about the experiences of providing and/or using domestic abuse services and we appreciate the interest in shifting the narrative from “why doesn’t she leave?” to “why doesn’t he stop?”²

Our starting point is two-fold:

- that the safety and well-being of those who are abused, and of children and others close to them, is paramount at all stages, and
- that those who are responsible for abuse must be challenged, held to account for their actions and – wherever possible – supported to change their behaviour. We are

¹ <http://driveproject.org.uk/news/building-a-robust-response-to-perpetrators>. Some of us are members of the Call to Action Network and met Aaron Walton, HO Perpetrator Policy Lead, at Network meetings in the summer. Others have joined recent VAWG meetings with Director Joanne West and the DA Strategy Team.

² Statistics show that in the majority of domestic abuse cases the person responsible for the abuse is male and the adult who is abused is female, and the language in this paper reflects that. This is not to disregard males who are abused and females who are responsible for abuse, nor to minimise the importance that fathers can play in protecting their children.

committed to this approach because domestic abuse will not stop until those who act abusively cease to do so.

Our comments are about:

1. Attending to the social and cultural context in which domestic abuse occurs (p3)
2. Achieving a balanced expression of needs and short and longer-term responses: a public health approach (p4)
3. Strengthening appropriate responses in children and family work, both in and out of court (p6)
4. Having a discrete section about the Family Justice System (p10)
5. Expanding the evidence base (p12), and
6. Policy implementation matters (p15).

Our overriding messages are about the need to promote:

- A **public health approach** to ending domestic abuse
- **Sufficient funding** for every corner of the work, and
- A commitment to seeing domestic abuse as **everyone's business**.

Our contact details are at the end of the paper. We would welcome a discussion and can provide further references to evidence if that would be useful.

1. ATTENDING TO THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH DOMESTIC ABUSE OCCURS

Summary points

- Domestic abuse is harmful.
- For many, it is experienced alongside other discrimination and disadvantage.
- A Strategy that is broad in its scope will enhance the prospect of change.

The challenges for those who have been harmed by domestic abuse are enormous. For many, too many, these difficulties are compounded by other pressures. The impact of poverty, disadvantage and discrimination, including problems around housing and the benefits system, are all critical aspects of the context here, limiting or removing choices and options for people to be free of abuse. These pressures have been compounded by years of resource constraints and, more recently and simultaneously, by the Covid-19 pandemic and its repercussions.

It will be invaluable to have a Strategy that takes full account of all these factors and is broad in its scope. It merits being backed by a determination to respond with approaches that name and acknowledge abuse and its impact, that explore the individual circumstances and wishes and aspirations of those affected by abuse, and that offer the sort of support that people want.

It follows that the Strategy will need to contend with a wide spectrum of individual and family circumstances and have in mind each person affected. Here, too, the spectrum is wide, including those who are abused and those responsible for the abuse and, within the latter, those who wish to change their behaviour and those who may never develop the insight to do so.

It is against this background that we have explored the issues that we hope will have a central position in the development of future domestic abuse policy and practice at national and local level.

2. ACHIEVING A BALANCED EXPRESSION OF NEEDS AND RESPONSES: A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

Summary points

- Undue focus on criminality deflects attention from most domestic abuse.
- The lived experience of those affected must be heeded.
- Addressing the disjointed service response is long overdue.
- An explicit public health response offers the best prospect of tackling inequalities.

To maximise impact, it will be important for the Strategy to avoid giving disproportionate attention to the most serious offending and to the highest end of criminal court responses to those who use abusive behaviour.

This view is driven by our concern that a Strategy that uses criminality as the major lens through which to see abuse will, inevitably, result in a Strategy that underplays the vast majority of domestic abuse experience. Whilst a narrow ‘crime and punishment’ approach will give much-needed attention to 3% of domestic abuse in our society, it will miss the other 97% of abuse that does not reach the high threshold of male-perpetrated abuse.

In addition, an overfocus on seeing those responsible for abuse as individuated persons involved in the criminal justice system will deflect due attention from stopping domestic abuse where it occurs most frequently. What happens at home, in families, is the key perspective to focus on. So, too, is the support that might be needed over time, as circumstances change and stresses reappear, rather than a sole focus on emergency and short-term intensive support.

A further consideration is the way in which professional responses to domestic abuse are described as existing on separate planets, and with limited communication between them, producing a confusing, fragmented response for the families involved.³ It means disproportionate emphasis on criminal justice responses to abuse (one of the planets) and insufficient attention to child protection responses and family justice responses (the other two planets). This exacerbates rather than addresses the disjointed service response to domestic abuse that has been well known in the sector for nearly 20 years.

³ Hester M (2011) The Three Planet Model: Towards an understanding of contradictions in approaches to women and children’s safety in contexts of domestic violence. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5), 837–853.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr095>

The Strategy offers a vital opportunity to listen to and hear the complex, nuanced reflections of those involved in domestic abuse, to enable us to shape meaningful responses based on the lived experience of those who are harmed and those whose behaviour is harmful. The Strategy can highlight what we know about the inequalities sustained within the sector, including for example the disadvantages experienced by Black and minoritised women, and by parents confronted by the stigma, negative assumptions and judgemental approaches towards those involved in state intervention in their life. These and other inequalities shape different people's access to safety, support and justice.

The Strategy can also highlight the progress being made in challenging prevailing negative practices and policies. For example, it can usefully draw the attention of organisations to the anti-racist charter developed by the VAWG sector and to the mutual expectations charter developed by Family Rights Group.⁴

Our hope is for a Strategy that demonstrates commitment to being national in the sense of paying equal attention to needs and responses that will make a lasting difference to everyone affected. In essence, this is an explicit public health approach⁵ to the problem, underpinned by the growing knowledge of the benefits that accrue from looking at problems and causes through the lens of restorative and trauma-informed practice and a social model that explores what is expected of different groups of men in our society and what different groups of women want or expect from their lives.⁶

⁴ For the anti-racism charter, launched by Ending Racism in VAWG: <https://www.respect.uk.net/articles/respect-commits-to-the-vawg-anti-racism-charter>). And <https://frg.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/families-voices/mutual-expectations> for the charter to promote effective, mutually respectful partnership working between practitioners and families when children are subject to statutory intervention.

⁵ As in, for example, "defining and measuring the problem, determining the causes or risk factors, determining how to prevent or ameliorate the problem, and implementing effective strategies on a larger scale and evaluating their impact on everyone involved." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2253560/>

⁶ Ferguson G, Featherstone B, Morris K (2019) *Framed to fit? Challenging the domestic abuse 'story' in child protection, Critical and Radical Social Work*. For definitions that emphasise equalities and co-production, see also <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/publications/2021/july/a-public-health-approach-to-violence-reduction-strategic-briefing-2021/>

3. STRENGTHENING APPROPRIATE RESPONSES IN CHILDREN AND FAMILY WORK, BOTH IN AND OUT OF COURT

Summary points

- A respectful approach will help reduce the stigma of domestic abuse.
- People under stress have strengths to harness as well as needs to address.
- Services benefit from trauma-informed thinking and problem-solving practice.
- The language of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is a helpful approach.

The high volume of domestic abuse work in children's social care, and in private and public law cases in family courts, prompts us to encourage greater attention in the Strategy to both these systems, as well as to the need for more, and for more appropriate, responses to domestic abuse. There is value in the Strategy giving more attention to child and family social services, including community and out-of-home care services. There would be merit, too, in the Strategy having a discrete section about the family justice system (see section 4, below) and we note and welcome the recommendations from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office (DACO) about firming up this aspect of the Strategy.

We envisage that the Strategy could be vital in emphasising and implementing good practice, including the following:

- **Countering the negative way in which families can feel treated when seeking or needing help.** You will be aware of the need to avoid parents who are victims of domestic abuse becoming the primary focus of work around change, with the unhelpful expectation that they are the ones to bear responsibility for bringing about the change that is needed, and with their failure to do so holding punishing consequences for them. These consequences can be as devastating as the risk of losing their children through state intervention or having to uproot themselves and their children from their community and support network. Such pressures on parents experiencing abuse can then be compounded by the minimal attention or resources in place to enable any change work to be done with the parent who is using abusive behaviour and is responsible for the abuse that occurs. From the child's perspective, the needs are for support and treatment within the family, to end abuse but not lose a parent.

- **Making better use of the strengths within individuals and their networks**, rather than only viewing those in difficulties as people ‘in need’. A good example of the preferred, strengths-based, approach is that of Family Group Conferencing (FGC).⁷ This model engages family members to protect and help children and parents to be safe from abuse, and to address the abusive behaviour, by being open about it. Importantly, it helps address the secrecy and shame that those who use abuse can turn to their advantage.

FGCs are structured to ensure protection against further harm and to allow family members to think what they each can do to address the concerns that have been identified. They hold the abusive person to account for their behaviour and in doing so they share the burden to protect that otherwise tends to settle unhelpfully on mothers alone. The approach can protect mothers and children from being victimised twice over, first by the abusive behaviour and second by the response of the professional safeguarding system. FGCs can play a vital role in helping children maintain positive links with both sides of their family if parents live apart.

- **Reinforcing the importance of professionals working together, as opposed to working in silos.** Evidence suggests that at every level in the child and family care system, from early help through to child protection and then escalating to the family court, an essential – arguably THE essential – ingredient of success is the multi-disciplinary skill set, with its joined-up thinking and service delivery.⁸
- **Speeding up the development and availability of holistic, whole-system approaches to tackling domestic abuse.** These approaches are characterised by high support for those experiencing abuse from someone personally connected, combined with high challenge to those who use abusive behaviour and high support for those who want/need to change their behaviour. They are underpinned by trauma-informed thinking and practice and by a problem-solving approach to parental difficulties.

One such example is the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) model,⁹ delivered at present in 14 local authority and family court areas in England and to be launched this month in Wales. Whilst the main trigger for local authority referrals to FDAC is the parental substance misuse that puts the children at risk of significant harm, there is a very high incidence of domestic abuse difficulties in families using FDAC. In the second quarter of 2021, 95% of parents entering FDAC were identified as having been involved in domestic abuse in the past and 47% of them were currently experiencing abuse or using abusive behaviour.

⁷ Mason P, Ferguson H, Morris K, Munton T, Sen R (2017) *Leeds Family Valued, Evaluation Report*. Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme Evaluation Report 43.

⁸ http://driveproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/childrens_summary_report_domestic_violence_final.pdf

⁹ <https://fdac.org.uk/how-does-fdac-work/>

The FDAC model is used at the high end of child protection, where referral to court in care proceedings is prompted by concern about actual or future significant harm to the child. But similar whole-family approaches to parental difficulties, including domestic abuse, have been developed for lower levels of need. They include *Making a Change*, *For Baby's Sake*, *Safe Together*, and *Opening Closed Doors* (Barnardo's Cymru). All these, and other, interventions along the safeguarding spectrum merit being showcased in the Strategy.

The common thread is an acknowledgement of a very high prevalence of complex and developmental trauma in those who experience domestic abuse and/or use abusive behaviour in close relationships. The trauma has often arisen in childhood and often continues as adults. It can and does have a fundamental impact on their regulation, processing and interactions with others, including services designed to help them resolve their difficulties and parent their children safely.¹⁰

A similar point has been made in relation to specific interventions delivered in non-community settings for those who have used abusive behaviour. For example, *Building Better Relationships* has been deemed to be unresponsive to a diverse perpetrator population and as not necessarily redressing reasons for violent behaviour. Focusing on teaching men to **manage** their **reactions** to conflicts was found to be pursued as the central treatment aim, irrespective of the many complex needs, personal and emotional vulnerabilities, and neuro-diverse barriers that many of the men faced.¹¹

- **Reflecting on the possible risks that arise from the language we use when referring to those involved in and affected by domestic abuse.** We have in mind in particular the terms 'perpetrator' and 'victim'. We wonder if it is time to invite an open discussion about whether our current language is labelling people in unhelpful ways and, if so, how it might be possible to counter that. Of note here is the recent presentation by the President of the Family Law Division in which he reflects on the importance of the careful use of language in private law proceedings involving disputes between parents and in the work that precedes involvement of the justice system.¹²

¹⁰ Webb S (2021) The toxic trio, adverse childhood experiences and the family court. In *Seen and Heard*, Volume 31 (2).

¹¹ Renehan N (2021) *Building Better Relationships? Interrogating the 'black box' of a statutory domestic violence perpetrator programme*. Summary of thesis and key findings report.

¹² *Supporting Families in Conflict: There is a better way*. An address by Sir Andrew McFarlane to the Jersey International Family Law Conference 2021.

It will be important to avoid the implication that domestic abuse is a binary construct (an issue of victim versus villain, or of perpetrator versus victim). Such a perspective can serve as a barrier to change, because it risks viewing the person inflicting abuse as someone whose sole attribute is abusive behaviour. This chimes with similar welcome shifts in language over time in other spheres, such as the move from ‘juvenile offender’ to ‘young person who offends’. Without minimising the harmful impact of their behaviour or the seriousness of their actions, and without condoning or excusing them, the shift in language succeeds in implying that their behaviour is not necessarily so entrenched that they cannot or will not change.

We welcome the approach to language in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The new legislation uses the terms person ‘**affected by domestic abuse**’ and person ‘**responsible for the abuse**’ (Section 7). We acknowledge that these terms may not trip off the tongue as easily as ‘victim-survivor’ or ‘perpetrator’, but they are factually correct and are already in use.¹³

We suggest, therefore, that the Strategy adopts and promotes the language of the governing legislation.

¹³ See, for example, Callaghan J, Morran D, Alexander J, Bellussi L, Beetham T, Hooper J (2020) *Make a Change: An evaluation of the implementation of an early response intervention for those who have used abusive behaviours in their intimate relationships*. Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, University of Stirling.

4. HAVING A DISCRETE SECTION ABOUT THE FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM

Summary points

- Many more citizens are linked to the Family Justice System than the Criminal Justice System.
- Expertise from the FJS has a key role in shaping domestic abuse policy and practice.
- Enhanced support and training for the judiciary will bring a range of benefits.
- Funding and some specific practice issues need to be addressed.

Highlighting the involvement and role of the family justice system, through including it as a separate section in the Strategy, would give due attention to the experiences of the huge group of children and parents who are affected by domestic abuse. For many of them, there is substantial cross-over over time between public and private law.¹⁴

In addition, a separate section would help to highlight clearly the practice and funding concerns that need to be addressed. These include:

- The need for **greater clarity in pre-sentence reports**, to help in non-criminal court cases about children and families. Reports by the probation service could be clearer about the degree of risk (low, medium, high) that someone poses, and to whom, and reports by the police could be clearer about this in relation to the risk assessments they conduct.
- The need for enhanced **support and training needs of members of the judiciary** working in the family court. This will be particularly important if the family court is to take on a more investigative role. It can also be a way of ensuring that the family court avoids becoming, or being perceived as, an additional site or source of coercive control.
- The **central funding** needed to enable a family judge in either private or public law Children Act proceedings to be able to issue a requirement to attend a service/programme on a person responsible for abusive behaviour.
- In private law cases, most parties are now unrepresented and without access to funds. Whilst Cafcass have access to some funds, the threshold for places and the shortage of spaces makes it extremely difficult to ensure that an appropriate referral can be made within the child's timescale. In public law care proceedings, brought by the local authority, there is only patchy provision of services/programmes to support

¹⁴ See, for instance, Philip G, Clifton J, Brandon M (2019) *The Trouble With Fathers: The Impact of Time and Gendered-Thinking on Working Relationships Between Fathers and Social Workers in Child Protection Practice in England*. In *Journal of Family Issues*. 40, 16, pp 2288-2309.

a parent who is abused and to challenge and support change by a parent who uses abuse.

The Strategy presents a powerful opportunity to ensure that these services are funded as one part of the range of essential public services needed for tackling domestic abuse.

- To strengthen **the role of the DA Commissioner in advising the government** about the need for, and provision of, domestic abuse services, there would be merit in extending the duty of the Commissioner so that the Commissioner is required to report on services that offer high challenge/high support for those responsible for abuse, as well as – as included at present in Section 20 of the Act – reporting on services for those who have been abused and their children. Extending the duty in this way would help avoid the risk of DACO reporting on one aspect of service provision lagging behind the other.
- Attention to the difficulty for the court/judge in **undertaking a court data base search of family court domestic abuse cases** linked to a person alleged to be using abusive behaviour. Whilst there is a protocol between agencies for cooperation around safeguarding, there is a continuing block between different parts of the court system itself. A potential solution could be for Cafcass to have access to the court database in order to conduct cross-court checks on parties to a case.
- A final point about the family justice system is to ensure that policy discussions **incorporate the experience and expertise of the judiciary** working in the FJS. We note the requirement in Section 12 of the DA Act 2021 for the DACO Board to include at least one person representing those concerned with functions relating to policing and criminal justice, and the similar requirement in Section 58 in relation to domestic abuse local authority partnerships boards. In each case, we think it would be valuable for the requirement to be extended to persons concerned with functions relating to public and private family justice.

5. EXPANDING THE EVIDENCE BASE

Summary points

- The Strategy can enhance and promote the domestic abuse knowledge base.
- It can encourage the testing of emerging trends and promising practice.
- It can showcase services and approaches seeking to reduce entrenched inequalities.

The Strategy has the potential to be a valuable vehicle for promoting the messages from relevant research studies and other sources of evidence about the impact of domestic abuse and about ways of responding to it effectively. This needs to include tackling the barriers that impede progress in bringing about the change that is needed. The Strategy should highlight the research questions being explored at present and the timescale for their completion, as well as flagging up newly emerging areas of interest and explaining how these will be responded to. Both these aims could foster fruitful discussion and knowledge exchange across the broad spectrum of perspectives and service approaches in the sector.

The Strategy presents a tremendous opportunity to enhance the knowledge base:

- By establishing, or making explicit the need for, an **overarching research strategy for domestic abuse**. This research strategy should include the range of services needed, child and parent outcomes over time, and the causes and impacts of case recurrence through court.
- By addressing the need to understand, promote and disseminate the learning from **practice and development in the social care and court systems** around domestic abuse.

This could usefully include:

- Interrogating **the link between domestic abuse and parental substance misuse**.
- Knowing and acting on **the specific practical and emotional support around domestic abuse that parents value** from agencies. This is needed at all stages: early help when difficulties arise, support in response to child protection concerns, and in later work before, during and after care proceedings, including when children are returned home from care under a Supervision Order (or less frequently, a Care Order). The latter issue is being explored in a current study for the Department for Education and the Public Law Working Group.¹⁵

¹⁵ Harwin, J. and Golding, L (forthcoming early 2022) *Parental perspectives on care proceedings, supervision orders and care orders at home: a report to the Department for Education*.

- Exploring **the potential of the problem-solving court approach** in cases where domestic abuse is the main trigger for care proceedings. This would test the potential of extending access to the FDAC model of care proceedings where, whilst the main focus is substance misuse, the work of the specialist team and family court judge with parents almost always involves attention to the past and current experience of being harmed by experiencing, or by using, abusive behaviour.

The approach to substance misuse has been found more successful than ordinary proceedings in bringing about sustained behaviour change. Investigating its potential in relation to domestic abuse is currently under discussion by the Centre for Justice Innovation (the national support umbrella for FDACs) and research colleagues at the University of Lancaster. Whilst the evidence base is hampered by lack of prevalence data about domestic abuse in care proceedings, and about trends over time, the involvement of Cafcass and the Ministry of Justice could be a helpful way of creating opportunities for data linkage between the criminal and family courts, and for helping unravel who holds what data at national and local level.

- Paying **close attention to the particular circumstances and vulnerabilities of each person** involved in abuse or affected by it. We must attend to the needs of each child and each parent. This requires us to go beyond the instinct to blame people for their behaviour. It requires a nuanced approach that is responsive to individual needs, providing for example, opportunities for children to have access to a supervised and supported contact service when parents are living apart. These services provide a longer-term, transition service when private family court proceedings end or when no proceedings are involved. They can also be valuable when kinship carers are caring for children who have been affected by domestic abuse.

This requires that we learn from and promote the emerging evidence. For instance, about the paradoxical situation whereby we take domestic abuse seriously but not seriously enough: over-reacting but under-responding, as when women are told to separate from their partner but are offered few resources to help them do so or to stay together safely; or outsourcing the protection task but leaving women struggling with multiple disadvantages and leaving men unchallenged and unsupported to change; or failing to tap the potential of family and community networks to tackle secrecy and offer parents support.¹⁶

- Being open to seeing **domestic abuse as presenting behaviour that is underpinned and shaped by social, family and peer experiences**. We cannot ignore this if we are serious about wanting to make a difference and end the domestic abuse that inflicts so much harm in so many ways to so many people.

¹⁶ Featherstone B, Inglis S, Morris K, Wild J (2021) Domestic abuse and child protection Change Project resources. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/content-pages/change-projects/>

This is about taking on board the policy and practice implications of research messages about poverty, gender inequalities, and how combined experiences of disadvantage can shape one's experience of the world (intersectionality). In a recent study of data from a Scottish longitudinal survey, young mothers and the poorest mothers were more likely than others to have experienced abuse; the findings are but one example of the importance of a nuanced response to individual circumstances and needs.¹⁷

This is also about understanding the evidence that some perpetrator programmes, as well as generic anger management courses and psycho-educational approaches, fail to get to the root of what drives abusive behaviour. Achieving this aim means helping those who wish and are able to change their behaviour to do so, whilst ensuring that their partner and children stay fully informed, safe and supported before, during and after this time.

And there is learning here about the relevance of the mental health needs of those who use abusive behaviour. A review of the recent evidence base highlights the lack of engagement with mental health issues by interventions working with people who use abusive behaviour.¹⁸ It supports, too, the knowledge that risk can be reduced if people can be encouraged to access mental health services and the value of developing close inter-agency working, including between mental health services, the police, social services, and domestic abuse services.

¹⁷ Skafida V, Morrison F, Devaney J (2021) Prevalence and Social Inequality in Experiences of Domestic Abuse Among Mothers of Young Children: A Study Using National Survey Data from Scotland; *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* [DOI Link](#).

¹⁸ Bhavsar V, Kirkpatrick K, Calcia M, Howard L M (2020) Lockdown, domestic abuse perpetration and mental health care: gaps in training, research and policy. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2020. Published Online September 28. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30397-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30397-7)

6. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION MATTERS

Summary points

- Ending domestic abuse is everyone's business.
- Champions at national and local level are drivers for changes in policy and for the mindset that will support corresponding changes in practice.
- We must measure what matters, not just what we know how to measure.
- Sufficient funding is needed for every corner of the work.

We list below some of the key messages about implementation that we believe should be woven throughout the Strategy and its supporting materials.

- Emphasising that ending domestic abuse is the **business of everyone**.
- The scale of the problem is of grave concern and the damage arising from it can be long lasting. It would be useful to frame this as a **public health issue for society** to tackle. This will mitigate the risk of undue focus on criminalisation, in favour of a broader narrative that places responsibility for abuse firmly on those who abuse and supports those wanting to change their behaviour whilst all the time giving priority attention to the safety and well-being of those who have or may have been abused.
- Responsibility to end domestic abuse must be taken seriously, at **national and local level**. This requires a strong, cross-departmental steer from government and, at local level, a determination by local leaders to adopt and promote a planned agenda for change. This must be in line with the duties on agencies under the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2000 to ensure that there are services to meet the needs of children caught up in domestic abuse, of those who have been abused, and of those who wish to change their abusive behaviour.

We commend the way in which the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has created a time-limited task-and-finish Strategic Reference Group to bring together leaders from a range of services and public bodies to discuss how they can work together to address those who use abusive behaviour.

- Action needs to be underpinned by **close attention to the existing evidence base** around domestic abuse and by a plan for building on current knowledge. Plans regarding research need to focus on interventions and outcomes, a shared understanding of effectiveness and of how we evaluate and measure success, and clarity about the thinking that informs our understanding. Evidence comes in different forms, each with a contribution to the overall aim of increasing knowledge and understanding about what works, for whom, and in what circumstances. It would be helpful for the Strategy to guard against implying a hierarchy of evidence, in favour of a definition of evidence that explicitly respects qualitative and quantitative data, professional knowledge and the expertise of those with lived experience.

This was the approach taken in developing resources for the Drive Partnership/Research in Practice project that focused on domestic abuse and children's social care. These materials include a rapid literature review and a Strategic Briefing for local leaders; they combine research messages with insights from professionals and from people with lived experience of domestic abuse.¹⁹

Mixed methods research is more likely to combine the lived experience and details of the nature and quality of services received (as opposed to those offered). Aiming for longitudinal mixed-methods studies, to increase our knowledge of outcomes, and that incorporate the voice of service users, is likely to be most fruitful. This would build on the earlier evidence base, including the Mirabal study on community-based domestic abuse programmes for those who use abusive behaviour and the measures of success that were developed in consultation with victim-survivors, practitioners and men who used violence in their relationships. The children's voice is also captured here.²⁰

- Of relevance here is the need to **think critically about any unintended consequences** of the Strategy. If it comes with a proliferation of KPIs and/or blunt measurement tools, we will likely see the system adapt quickly to these by prioritising 'what can be measured' over 'what matters'. Linked to this is the development of likely metrics. For example, a number of those proposed are perhaps overly police focused: for example, counting the number of DA charges rather than the number of convictions. In addition, victim satisfaction should not be judged only by what is collected in police crime surveys; it is essential to gather feedback about satisfaction from all available services and from all those who use them.
- Given the relative overall paucity of evidence of effectiveness of domestic abuse interventions (for those abused, as well as those responsible for abuse), it would be extremely useful for the Strategy to **showcase practice and policy initiatives to draw on**, including interventions across the spectrum of need and risk, the nature of the available evidence, and practice lessons about successful implementation.
- In relation to the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Strategy, the greatest chance of success will be boosted by clarity about the **standards for implementation, the mechanism for evaluating adherence to the standards, and the intended alignment with inspection** arrangements (recognising that single agency and joint inspections are a powerful lever for change and improvement). It will be important to give assurance that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner Board, and any themed group established alongside it, reflect the full range of experience and expertise needed to work towards the shared goal of understanding and ending domestic abuse. In addition to the point made earlier about including those with specific knowledge of the family justice system, we commend the practice of the new Strategic Reference Group for action on perpetrators whereby Group members canvas the views of the sector they represent about agenda items for upcoming meetings.

¹⁹ [Http://driveproject.org.uk/drivecsc/](http://driveproject.org.uk/drivecsc/)

²⁰ See <https://projectmirabal.co.uk/publications-research-tools/> for final report and other project publications.

- The **culture of implementation** is of crucial importance. This is about capturing hearts and minds, building confidence and creating a learning system. Even the most ambitious and well-conceived reforms can struggle to achieve impact if implementation becomes mired in process, and obscures or unintentionally undermines the moral drive of professionals and policy makers to improve lives. Harnessing and leveraging the widespread professional appetite for reform and ensuring that mechanisms for capturing implementation progress are proportionate and purposeful, will go some way to maintaining momentum.

A broad approach to learning and development is likely to be more effective than, and thus preferable to, a narrow focus on traditional methods of one-off training which evidence suggests can have limited impact on practice.²¹ There is a crucial role for social work educators at both qualifying and post-qualifying level and for in-house training. Importantly, support and reflective supervision must be available for those who are delivering challenge and support interventions, including those mentioned earlier: specialist holistic approaches like FDAC and facilitators of BBR programmes.

In relation to the latter, recommendations for practitioners include, but are not limited to, the need to attract and retain highly skilled and experienced facilitators; a significant improvement in domestic abuse and neuro-diverse awareness training, going beyond that delivered inhouse in the secure estate; and supportive and/or clinical supervision to counter the potential for collusive practice and promote wellbeing.²²

A final point here is to ask about the **learning from other countries and jurisdictions** that has and/or might help shape the Strategy. For example, we wonder whether the learning from the Royal Commission held in Victoria State, Australia, holds some clues to implementation that would help encourage and embed the cultural and social shift needed to end domestic abuse.

- Clear presentation of **opportunities for funding work to tackle domestic abuse** would be welcome to those working in the sector. This is relevant for commissioners, including Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). Current website descriptions of the PCC service commissioning aim tend to refer only to their support for services for those who have been abused. It would be extremely helpful to also include their current or intended provision of services that offer high challenge/high support to those who want/need to change their abusive behaviour.

²¹ Research in Practice (2012) Training transfer: Getting learning into practice. Dartington: Research in Practice.

²² Renehan N (2021) Building better relationships? Interrogating the 'black box' of a statutory domestic violence perpetrator programme. Summary of thesis and key findings report.

Finally, the substantial point about funding is that a **committed public health approach to endemic social issues requires investment.**

Sufficient funding is needed for every corner of domestic abuse work, for those who are abused, for those responsible for the abuse, and for children and others affected by the abuse. Funding formulas should be based on local need and should actively avoid competition for funds by statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders. The funding should protect the provision of specialist services to discrete disadvantaged groups and provide for robust monitoring and evaluation.

In addition, funding must not drain resources from services for those who have been abused. As promoted by the sector: “It is essential that funding for work with perpetrators is not viewed as a substitute for investment in victim support services, and that each be funded sustainably, independently of each other. **It is not either/or.**”²³

²³ See the Perpetrator Call to Action Strategy, Section 4: A Sustainable, Predictable Source of Funding, [Call-to-action.pdf \(driveproject.org.uk\)](#). And *The Observer* leader article 7 November 2021 “Prevention should be a priority in halting violence against women”.

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