



Understanding domestic abuse in Suffolk

A study of the experiences of survivors –
Executive Summary

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by the Police and Crime Commissioner	4
Executive Summary	5
Our methodological approach	5
Survivors' experiences of domestic violence and abuse	6
Survivors' experiences of the Police and the Criminal Justice System	6
Perceptions of services for survivors of domestic violence and abuse in Suffolk	7
Barriers to reporting domestic abuse and accessing support	8
Summary of recommendations.....	9

FOREWORD BY THE POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER

Since being elected as Suffolk's Police and Crime Commissioner, I have placed great emphasis on the need to keep victims at the heart of our services. This is especially relevant to dealing with domestic abuse; it is an integral part of my Police and Crime Plan and one of our top priorities.

One thing that became clear to me very quickly when engaging with victims across the county is that we need to look for ways to understand and deal with domestic abuse better to ensure we fully support survivors of this terrible crime. I know that the Constabulary, in partnership with other agencies, is committed to dealing with domestic abuse, but it is difficult to deal with an issue unless you really understand the extent of the problem. This is the reason why I commissioned this research.

It is a very sad reflection on our society that on average victims live with domestic abuse for five years before they have the courage to report the offences, so what we hear about is possibly only the tip of the iceberg. It is also the case that this appalling crime affects people at all levels of society. There are often unforeseen consequences for friends, relations and children who can be subjected to unbearable suffering and the victims need help and assistance to come to terms with what has happened to them and rebuild their lives.

If we are really to get to grips with the magnitude of the problem, we really need to understand it from the victim's perspective. I believe this research will help us to understand the extent of the problem better. It should help us to formulate a multi-agency action plan so that we can greatly reduce this terrible crime as a matter of urgency.

The focus of the project was to examine the perceptions and experiences of a particularly vulnerable and marginalised group during their journey through the criminal justice process. I realised that the research by UCS would be a sobering lesson to us all, but it will really help us to understand what we are dealing with here in Suffolk.

I would like to make it absolutely clear that domestic abuse is never acceptable under any circumstance. There cannot, and must not, be any hiding place for the perpetrators of such brutal crimes.

There is work to be done, and I am confident we can make difference.

Victims are, and must always be, at the centre of everything we do, and I would encourage anyone who is experiencing the terror of domestic abuse to speak up and report it.

Tim Passmore
Police Crime and Commissioner for Suffolk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whilst this report draws on wider national research and empirical evidence from other studies relating to domestic violence and abuse, it concentrates on the verbatim data drawn from individual interviews and focus groups based on the experiences of 69 Suffolk survivors (63 females and 6 males) who volunteered to take part in this study. Additionally, the views of 16 police officers and 24 professionals working directly with people affected by domestic violence and abuse in Suffolk, who also volunteered to be interviewed, are also considered in the report.

The research, commissioned by Tim Passmore, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Suffolk, was undertaken across Suffolk between May and December 2014. It was based on four main objectives:

- ◆ To provide a detailed understanding of the perceptions and experiences of survivors of domestic violence and abuse relating to their journey through the criminal justice system.
- ◆ To identify survivors' perceptions of current support and service provision currently available.
- ◆ To identify barriers to engaging with current support and services, and consider how these may be overcome.
- ◆ To consider what types and levels of support and services survivors of domestic violence and abuse would like to be able to access in order to shape an innovative approach to providing appropriate support.

OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

There are many different research strategies based on interrelated epistemological, ontological and practical foundations, and it is essential in devising a robust research strategy that the research methods effectively meet the aims and objectives of the study. This research set out to examine the experiences of survivors of domestic abuse and adopted the use of interviews to produce qualitative data as more quantitative approaches would not have been appropriate to address the aims of the research effectively. Our methodological approach was appropriate to meet the objectives of the study and other methods may not have provided the rich insights into the survivors' experiences which are presented in this report. Throughout the research we were keen to address the traditional imbalances of power and strived to ensure that the survivors' voices remained at the centre of the research strategy and in the way that the findings of the study are reported.

Whilst opportunity sampling is sometimes viewed as a less robust form of sample selection (than, for example, a random sample strategy more commonly used in surveys), it is widely accepted in the research community as being employed by social researchers studying hard-to-access groups. Although concerns may be raised from a positivist perspective over the small sample size, and the difficulty in replicating and generalising from the study, these are common disadvantages associated with qualitative research. The limitations of the study are acknowledged but many of the findings of this study closely reflect findings of wider research on domestic abuse

elsewhere including the recently published SafeLives¹ analysis of the largest national database of domestic abuse detailing 35,000 unique cases of adults experiencing domestic abuse and a further 1,500 unique cases of children in domestic abuse households.

SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Survivors' individualised experiences of domestic violence and abuse are fundamental to understanding their perceptions of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), their views on the support available, and the barriers to reporting abuse. The participants also considered the types and levels of support needed by survivors in Suffolk. Whilst there are known risk factors in relation to domestic violence and abuse, it is important to recognise that these should not be understood as a 'tick list' as it is the complex interrelationships between the risk factors that need to be understood. Two-thirds of the survivors in the study had experienced physical abuse; threats to kill had been experienced by 34 participants; and all the survivors had experienced emotional and psychological abuse.

Controlling behaviour often goes unrecognised by survivors themselves and can be difficult to identify for professionals. All the survivors in the study had experienced abusive behaviour directly via social media and mobile technologies, and this included threats, humiliation and insults, racial and sexually abusive content and revenge pornography. Thirty-three participants had experienced sexual abuse and 20 had been raped. Threats to kill, actually killing, or abusing animals were also common in the accounts, as was forcing survivors to view pornography.

Male survivors similarly experienced a range of domestic violence and abuse behaviours. In 23 of the survivors' accounts, their children had been physically abused and in 15 accounts sexually abused.

Domestic violence and abuse often goes unreported, or is under-reported, and this is well known to both the professionals and police officers who took part in the Suffolk study. The abuse often continues or increases after separation, and frequently worsens during pregnancy. Mental health problems are often associated with domestic violence and abuse for both the survivor (depression and self-harming), and for the perpetrator (violent and psychotic episodes). The impacts of domestic violence and abuse are serious, long-term and highly damaging, and the long-term consequences for children witnessing domestic violence and abuse have been well documented.

SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES OF THE POLICE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

There is considerable inconsistency in the survivors' experiences of police attitudes, responses, assessment procedures and actions. Call-handlers and many police officers are viewed positively by survivors. Some survivors and professionals in the study, however, reported police officers as being rude, lacking an understanding of domestic violence and abuse, and unhelpful. They identified a clear need to improve police training on domestic violence and abuse, and acceptable modes of conduct when

¹ SafeLives (2015) *Getting it Right First Time* available online from <http://www.safelives.org.uk/policy-evidence/policy-and-research-library>

responding to reports of domestic violence and abuse, especially with regard to male survivors. The police assessment of a reported case, categorised as '*high*', '*medium*' or '*standard*' risk, influences subsequent levels of support and access to other services. The assessment process currently adopted requires evaluation, and improved quality control mechanisms.

Examples of poor communication between the police and survivors, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), between different police forces, and between police officers themselves, had a negative impact on how survivors perceived the police service generally. Poor communication practices had serious safety implications in some instances for survivors and their families, and this undermined their confidence in the police to keep them safe.

There are differences of opinion over what constitutes positive police action in responding to cases of domestic violence and abuse, even between the police officers themselves in the participants' accounts. The lack of perceived positive action by survivors is an influential factor with regard to whether or not abuse is reported. There is uncertainty in many cases as far as evidence gathering is concerned, the value of victim impact statements, and decisions made in relation to the charges brought. Poor communication between the police and CPS further undermines survivors' confidence in the CJS.

The court process often takes considerable time, and during that time survivors often withdraw charges, experience considerable stress and anxiety, or return to the perpetrator, especially if unsupported. Court hearings are viewed by many survivors and professionals as intimidating, humiliating and frightening, with poor sentencing outcomes. Judges and magistrates were often viewed as having a poor understanding of domestic violence and abuse, especially of emotional and psychological abuse. In many cases judges and magistrates failed to understand, or take seriously, examples of online abuse, and did not understand how social media worked. The family court was also viewed by survivors and professionals as highly problematic, and the pro-contact ideology (for the perpetrator) as potentially harmful for survivors and children.

PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN SUFFOLK

Overall, the participants in the study felt that support for survivors of domestic violence and abuse in Suffolk is fragmented and confused with some areas of overlap but considerable gaps in service provision. From the participants' accounts there are marked geographic differences in support available, with little or no support in rural areas. According to the professionals and the police officers who took part in the study the triage approach to risk assessment predetermines the level of support potentially available, and this leaves many survivors, who are at '*medium*' or '*standard*' risk, with little or no support at all. They also felt that the availability of short-term funding as opposed to longer-term, sustainable funding mechanisms has generated a plethora of short-term support programmes and time-limited support services. The majority of the participants perceived there to be a lack of clear information about what services are available in Suffolk, poor information-sharing between organisations, and a lack of partnership working. Male survivors do not feel they have equal access to the support and services available to female survivors.

The survivors we spoke to who received support from the Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) service felt that it had provided an excellent level of support to those who are able to access it. Although the service was severely under-resourced at the time of the study, the feedback from survivors who had the support of an IDVA was overwhelmingly positive. The new investment in the IDVA service has been welcomed, but there is a need, many professionals suggested, for improved clinical supervision and workload monitoring.

Moving location and the refuge system is a significant factor in providing safety for survivors and their families, but this can lead to an erosion of social capital and, therefore, increase the vulnerability of survivors. Support for survivors of domestic violence and abuse needs to be appropriate and available to those who need it. The participants felt that more long-term, sustainable and responsive strategies are needed.

54 of the 69 survivors had children and 49 of those survivors, and most of the professionals who contributed to the study, felt that there is a dearth of supportive services available for children and young people in Suffolk, in spite of the well-documented long-term serious psychological consequences for children experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Individual school and children's centres have provided much welcomed support for families. All the participants felt that schools have a vital role to play in raising awareness of domestic violence and abuse, and providing a catalyst for a generational change in better education for young people in relation to understanding and challenging abusive behaviours and that this should be a priority for Suffolk.

BARRIERS TO REPORTING DOMESTIC ABUSE AND ACCESSING SUPPORT

Knowledge and understanding of the types and characteristics of domestic violence and abuse, and the factors associated with it, are essential to understanding the barriers to reporting domestic violence and abuse. Fear of the perpetrator and the abuse escalating are the main barriers to reporting. Low self-esteem and a lack of awareness that the relationship has been abuse, especially in relation to psychological and emotional abuse, are also barriers to disclosure. Other factors included the stigma associated with abuse (especially for male survivors and those that had experienced sexual abuse), and concerns that the participants would not be believed or have their children taken away.

The concept of social capital is important to understanding reporting and disclosure behaviours. Participants often spoke of a 'tipping point' in their relationship, which changed their attitude towards reporting and seeking help. Negative attitudes from some police officers prevented reporting or the further reporting of abusive behaviours in some accounts.

Cultural barriers to reporting and seeking help need to be better understood in order to overcome them. The participants felt that considerable confusion over the support services available in Suffolk prevents survivors from seeking help and support. In their view the lack of clear information about where to go for help and how support can be accessed prevents many survivors from reporting abuse. Overall funding shortages and small-scale, short-term funding opportunities compromise the extent and sustainability of support programmes.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The report has identified many areas of good practice in relation to the support victims and survivors of domestic violence have received. Many agencies in Suffolk acknowledge the importance of partnership working, inter-professional practice, and that domestic violence must be addressed in ways that recognise that solutions must be as much proactive and preventative as reactive.

While the report found a number of examples of best practice that deserve commendation, the participants' accounts nevertheless point to failure at many levels in the way survivors are treated by the agencies who should be supporting them. The report recommends that the findings of this report be included as part of an independent county-wide strategic review of service delivery, conducted with all relevant stakeholders including survivors and their families. This independent review should be mandated to establish a common strategic direction for the provision of domestic violence services across Suffolk, based on a systematic assessment of need and a clear action plan with time scales for delivery. Whilst the importance of effective communication between agencies, and between agencies and survivors, is clearly acknowledged, the participants' accounts illustrate how in reality communication can be inadequate. We therefore recommend that a fundamental review be conducted into how agencies communicate effectively between each other and with victim.

Given the mixed and often negative experience of the CJS participants described in the study the report recommends that the police and those involved with the CJS in Suffolk have frequent up-to-date training on domestic violence and abuse, including emotional and psychological abuse and the impact this can have on survivors and their families. Magistrates and judges also need training especially with regard to the impact it can have on survivors and their children, and with regard to the importance of considering the history of domestic violence and abuse in child contact and access arrangements. It is also recommended that the police review the domestic abuse assessment process in their area and consider how they can work more effectively with police forces from other counties to ensure the safety of survivors in Suffolk.

Organisations providing support for those affected by domestic violence and abuse need to clearly identify the services they are providing. They need to ensure that they provide equal access to safe and confidential advice and support, and work more collaboratively with other agencies. They should systematically review the services they are providing to ensure that they dovetail and minimise duplication. The report recommends that services are based on evidence-based practice and be user-centred in both their design and delivery to meet the needs of those that require them. Consideration needs to be given to providing one named point of contact for survivors to co-ordinate other services and support mechanisms and all those working for them or volunteering with survivors and their families should have up-to-date and appropriate training.

Every child in Suffolk who has been affected by domestic violence and abuse should be able to access high quality intervention and appropriate supportive services. It was the perspective of 49 survivors who took part in the study and many of the professionals we interviewed, that support services for children of victims of domestic abuse were inadequate to meet their or their parents' needs. The report recommends that as part of an independent systematic review of provision, the geographical distribution and

adequacy of support services for children of survivors of domestic violence is examined with a view to ensuring that every child has access to the services required to protect them and that these are appropriate to their needs. The report also recommends that a comprehensive programme of education is developed in order to ensure that children and young people are given information and advice on all types of domestic abuse and that children are the space to talk about their feelings, their worries and their hopes about relationships that provide opportunities to challenge unhelpful stereotypes and reinforce positive relationship characteristics.