

Why we need to engage with domestic abuse perpetrators



A call to action for all frontline services

In the UK, millions of violence, abuse and harassment crimes against women and girls are recorded each year. Domestic abuse constitutes 15% of police-recorded crime with 1.6 million estimated female victims in the year ending March 2020. These figures do not accurately represent the enormity of the problem as significantly more offences never come to the attention of any service, remaining unreported and under the radar.

For every victim and survivor of domestic abuse, there is a perpetrator. If we are to stand any chance of reducing risk to adult victims and children and tackle the root cause of domestic abuse, it is imperative that we identify and engage those individuals perpetrating abuse and hold them to account. For far too long we have placed the burden of responsibility on victims to leave an abusive relationship. As professionals, we act without empathy in demanding a mother leave the relationship to protect her child, or else face the consequences.

Following the Domestic Abuse Bill signed into law in April 2021, a national framework for policing violence against women and girls was published in December 2021 with the aim to create consistency across police forces. The first of its kind, the framework includes actions for the 'Relentless Pursuit of Perpetrators'.

However, just like safeguarding the victim, the identifying and targeting of domestic abuse perpetrators must go beyond a criminal justice response. It is the responsibility of all frontline services. Unless we commit to a shared vision of addressing those causing harm, perpetrators will remain under the radar and victims will continue to suffer in silence.

We are familiar with phrases such as 'a multi-agency response to domestic abuse' and 'we must not work in silos when tackling domestic abuse'. During the last decade we have made significant progress in educating a range of professionals in the social, health, housing and education sectors to actively identify victims within services. Now it is our professional and moral duty to these victims to also actively identify and engage perpetrators.

Perpetrators are not easily identifiable, saving their abuse for behind closed doors. Domestic abuse has secrets attached to it and patterns of behaviour are far more nuanced than physical abuse. With the stigma fuelling the secret, an individual does not randomly identify as a domestic abuse perpetrator. As professionals we must therefore include a deeper understanding of personal relationships in our existing assessments and routine enquiries. Using a range of simple tools and strategies, professionals can evoke discussion and reflection on behaviour. If handled correctly, this approach can set the scene for disclosures and referrals to specialist perpetrator services. In the same way that pregnant women are asked about their relationship at midwife appointments and parents about their children when presenting at A&E, we want to see routine relationship enquiries and curious questioning across all services.

Professionals already proactively question domestic abuse victims to reduce risk and increase safety - and Hampton Trust is ambitious in wanting to see services adopt the same approach for perpetrators. If all frontline professionals across sectors can develop competence and confidence in the identification and engagement of perpetrators, then this in turn will increase the safety for victims and help us break the cycle of domestic abuse.