Results: Survey of professionals who work with perpetrators of domestic abuse

Findings Report

About Respect and The Drive Partnership

Respect is the UK membership organisation for work with domestic violence perpetrators, male victims and young people. Respect accreditation is the benchmark for the provision of quality interventions with men who use violence against their female partners.

The Drive Partnership is made up of three organisations, Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance. Between them, these organisations have significant expertise in working with victims, perpetrators and developing sustainable responses to entrenched social problems.

The Drive partnership, hereafter, 'Drive', believes domestic abuse is not acceptable or inevitable. Drive works with high-harm, high-risk, serial perpetrators of domestic abuse to prevent and end their abusive behaviour and protect victims. Drive also advocates for changes to national systems so that perpetrators posing all levels of risk are held to account and challenged to change their abusive behaviour.

Drive has been funded by a government grant through Respect to write this report based on survey responses from a broad range of statutory and voluntary sectors services working with perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Introduction

The pressures and challenges of COVID-19 have been well-documented within the domestic abuse sector, particularly for those providing victim services, as organisations struggle to cope with increased demand for their services with diminished resources.[1] In contrast, limited information is available on the experience of those working directly with perpetrators of domestic abuse. With this in mind, The Drive Partnership of Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance, designed a survey to understand the challenges faced by a broad range of statutory and voluntary sector services and any changes in the nature of their cases, so as share any learning and feed into thinking on preparations for any future lockdown scenarios.

[1] https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20survey%20of%20frontline%20domestic%20abuse%20organisations%20for%20COVID-19%2030.03.20_0.pdf

The survey was open from May 12th to 29th 2020 and had 55 responses: 62% from England, 36% from Wales and 2% from Northern Ireland.

Just over half of those responding were from a statutory organisation (53%) with two-fifths from a voluntary organisation (42%) and the remaining 5% from 'other' organisations such as housing association or a programme funded by Police and Crime Commissioners. Those based in a statutory organisation were primarily from probation (31%), police (28%) and housing (10%). We are grateful for the time that respondents took to participate in the survey.

Respondents were asked whether they provided specific services for perpetrators or whether they came across those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours as part of a wider role. Police and probation respondents differed in how they categorised themselves in this regard, depending on the detailed service provided.

Over half of respondents (56%) delivered specific service for those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours, such as standalone perpetrator interventions run by police, probation or as part of a domestic abuse charity, with the remainder (44%) coming across those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours as part of wider role, such as within the police, probation, housing and drug and alcohol services. The percentage of those delivering specific specialist services differed between statutory organisations (41%) and voluntary/other organisations (73%).

Summary of key findings and commentary

- **Continued delivery in the face of challenge**: Problems with technology, increased demand for perpetrator services, and multi-agency working were the main challenges to providing perpetrator services; however, three-quarters of services providing specific intervention for perpetrators managed to continue their work and take on new referrals during lockdown.
- **Increased risk**: 95% of respondents felt COVID-19 has led to an increase in risk for child and adult victims and survivors of domestic abuse.
- **Financial challenges**: A quarter of respondents who provide a specific perpetrator service reported financial difficulties, rising to over a third for voluntary sector organisations. A third of voluntary agencies survey furloughed staff.
- **Challenges with multi-agency working**: One third of respondents noted challenges with multi-agency working. Those who were delivering a specific perpetrator service within a statutory organisation (such a policing, probation or children's social care) reported more difficulties than those in the voluntary sector. Of those statutory sector agencies reporting challenges, half of them had difficulties with mental health agencies and 'perpetrator provision'.
- Whilst multi-agency working was challenging, it was also deemed by many as a solution to the extra pressures generated by lockdown.
- **Deepening of perpetrators' concerns**: 87% of respondents saw increases in mental health concerns of perpetrators. This came at a time when working with mental health agencies was difficult. Increased concerns around alcohol misuse and child contact were also very prevalent.

- **Perpetrators asking for advice on coping with lockdown**: 80% of respondents reported that 'coping strategies' were the most common form of support sought by perpetrators. Surprisingly, this figure also included requests for support of this kind from the police.
- Responses from Wales were very similar to those from England. There was just one response from Northern Ireland, limiting our ability to draw any conclusions from this part of the UK.

These key findings paint a picture of risk management under-strain. A range of organisations reported dealing with higher risk levels and with perpetrators with multiple disadvantages, at the same time as having to cope with financial challenges and difficulties in accessing support from other agencies. In this context it is impressive that three quarters of responding organisations delivering specific services to perpetrators were able to not only continue delivering their service but also take on new referrals.

The challenges of multi-agency working come across strongly in survey responses, including between statutory bodies. It is unsurprising that some of these agencies were difficult to contact. Mental health services for example, which featured prominently in the list of multi-agency working challenges, are likely to have been impacted by a strain on the NHS during the pandemic, including a pause on some non-essential services. Since mental health referrals must go through a GP, most of whom had also transitioned to telephone consultations, difficulties dealing with mental health services were to be expected. However, these new challenges came at a bad time, as mental health needs were increasing and came on top of long-standing challenges previously reported by both Respect members services and Drive practitioners in making mental health referrals.

Statutory organisations noted more difficulties than voluntary organisations in working with other agencies, and 'perpetrator provision' was reported as one of the most common routes they found challenging. Many of these perpetrator programmes are run by voluntary organisations – a third of whom were reporting financial difficulties. Additionally, over a third of voluntary organisations who delivered a direct perpetrator service had furloughed their staff. This may explain some of the difficulty in contacting perpetrator provision and other services run by the voluntary sector.

With 80% of services being approached by perpetrators who were seeking advice on coping strategies, including surprisingly from the police, the survey results are a reminder of how much pressure some households have felt during lockdown. We would usually expect police to be approached regarding matters such as housing and child contact, as opposed to advice on coping strategies. This picture of people worried about their own behaviour is backed up by data from the Respect Phoneline, which has experienced a huge surge in calls over lockdown. The Drive Partnership aims to further explore perpetrators' help-seeking behaviour in an additional survey.

It is essential that both statutory and voluntary services are supported to manage these challenges and implement processes to better manage the risk to victims and survivors in any future lockdown situation.

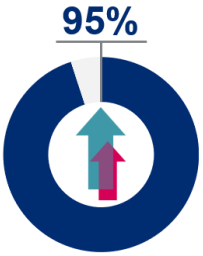
Key findings

Risk

COVID-19 has led to an increase in the risk for domestic abuse child and adult victims and survivors.

Of those delivering specific perpetrator services (these included voluntary services providing perpetrator behaviour change programmes, statutory services such as probation services including CRCs or specific police-run perpetrator services) a quarter were only delivering a service for existing service users, while three-quarters of services were both supporting existing service users and taking on new referrals during lockdown.

Most of these perpetrator service providers (91%) reported being in regular contact with those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours. Those delivering specific perpetrator services were over three times more likely to use video calls (53% vs 15%) and twice as likely to have used text/instant messages (50% vs 20%) than those who come across those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours as part of wider role. The methods of contact had changed for the vast majority (86%) of those maintaining regular contact with more reliance of phone calls, video calls and message than face-to-face appointments.



Of professionals felt Covid-19 has led to an **increase in risk** for **victims/survivors of domestic abuse** and their children

Nearly all respondents (95%) thought that COVID-19 has led to an increase in the risk for child and adult victims and survivors. More than half (58%) stated that the increase was significant. With the risk to victims increasing, it is essential perpetrator services are supported to continue delivering their services

Multiple disadvantage and help-seeking

There are increased difficulties around perpetrators with multiple disadvantages particularly with mental health, alcohol misuse and child contact.

Through the survey Drive sought to explore any trends or common challenges frontline practitioners were seeing in terms of perpetrator behaviour and help-seeking during the pandemic.

An increase in difficulties was reported for those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours including:

- **mental health**
- **alcohol misuse**
- **child contact**
- **contact with services**

Increased difficulties were reportedly seen in multiple areas but particularly concerning perpetrators' mental health (87%), alcohol misuse (60%), child contact (60%), contact with services (58%), employment (55%), finances (53%), housing (42%), drug misuse (40%), parenting (36%), child safeguarding (29%), and concerns around release from prison (25%). With increased difficulties in these areas, which may in turn lead to increased risk to child and adult victims and survivors, especially with services reporting reduced capacity and resources, it is clear that provision for perpetrator services and services serving those with

multiple disadvantage must be funded sustainably and supported to continue post-lockdown and in any future return to lockdown.

The survey also revealed that perpetrators were mostly seeking support around coping strategies (80%), advice (78%) and continuation of previous work (73%). As to be expected, those who deliver a specific perpetrator service were almost twice as likely to state the requirement of coping strategies (100% vs 54%) and continuation of previous work (90% vs 50%) than those for who come across people perpetrating abusive/harmful behaviours as part of their wider role. Still, those who came across perpetrators as part of their wider role – including police – reported being asked about coping strategies. This is out of the ordinary as usually we would expect police to be approached regarding practical matters such as child contact, as opposed to advice on coping strategies. This may reflect the narrowing of other avenues of support during the pandemic, with police being one of the few remaining accessible agencies.

Drive also explored the types of support that services were continuing to provide during COVID-19. Three quarters (75%) reported heightened risk-management planning (including multi-agency interventions), 73% were providing tools for self-regulation/de-escalation techniques and 62% were giving referrals to both specialist multi-agency interventions and children's services. Since this work is essential for mitigating the risk of harm to child and adult victims and survivors, it is vital they have adequate capacity and resources to continue this work during the transition out of lockdown.

84% of respondents were offering **individual work via phone or online platform.**

This **increased to 97%** for services providing **direct provision** to those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours

Multi-agency working

Multi-agency working during lockdown was a particular challenge but also a vital way of making contact with perpetrators and providing the correct support.

One third (35%) of all respondents reported having had challenges with multi-agency working, but similarly, a third of those who discussed how challenges were overcome, spoke of increasing communication with other services. This suggests that multi-agency working was seen as challenging but nonetheless important.

The most common areas they found challenging to engage with were perpetrator provision, mental health, policing, housing, and probation.

One-third reported **challenges with multi-agency working**

primarily with **Mental Health services** and **Perpetrator Provision**

In further detail, respondents who were delivering a specific perpetrator service within a statutory organisation reported higher than the average difficulties, with 42% reporting challenges navigating multi-agency working. These respondents were from probation, the police, and children's social care with perpetrator provision and probation most commonly mentioned.

In contrast, those delivering a specific service within a voluntary organisation reported lower than the average challenges with multi-agency working at 26%. Of those who did report challenges, children's social care and policing were the most common.

Since police, probation and children's social care were found to be both experiencing problems in communicating with other agencies and were reported by both statutory and voluntary agencies to be challenging to communicate with, it is clear there is space for improving processes for multi-agency working in these sectors.

Respondents who work with perpetrators as part of their wider role, such as police, probation, and housing, reported experiencing the greatest challenges with perpetrator provision, housing, and mental health. When looking at the difference in challenges encountered by the statutory versus voluntary sector, we can see those within the statutory sector most commonly reported housing, perpetrator provision, probation, and policing, as challenging whereas those in the voluntary sector reported mental health as the most challenging.

Despite being a source of frustration for many respondents, multi-agency working was also a way in which professionals overcame some of the challenges of COVID-19. A third reported overcoming challenges by increasing their communication with other services. Multi-agency work was highlighted as a way of contacting perpetrators as well as ensuring they were getting the correct support.

"Making contact with service-users: we have often overcome this with multi-agency approach i.e. liaison with Social Services teams to establish contact/relay messages."

"Housing perpetrators – liaised continuously with housing providers and partners to highlight barriers – positive police action – requested review of case – challenged decisions – raised in MARAC."

Multi-agency work was also the third most common answer when discussing special measures that had been put in place for COVID-19. Overall, answers highlighted an increase in contact between professionals.

"Increased our victim contact. Increased our contact with partner agencies. More regular feedback to partner agencies."

"Continuation of multi-agency approach via video conference, etc."

There are many possible explanations for the increased difficulties regarding multi-agency working, including the increased demand suggested by this survey, reduced capacity evidenced by the financial problems reported in this survey, and other pressures created by COVID-19, such as those felt in the NHS, that could have fed into challenges with mental health referrals. We know information sharing and cross sector working is essential for reducing risk, particularly in these circumstances. It is therefore essential that multi-agency working systems and processes are strengthened to cope with increased demand.

Perpetrator service funding

A quarter of those providing a specific perpetrator service reported financial difficulties.

Concerningly, of the survey respondents who deliver a specific perpetrator service, one quarter (26%) reported experiencing financial difficulty, increasing to more than one third (36%) for voluntary organisations. This decreases to one in ten (11%) for statutory organisations showing that funding in the voluntary sector is particularly precarious and needs extra support. We also know 36% of voluntary organisations who deliver a direct perpetrator service were furloughing staff, which again has implications for the service they can deliver.

Of **non-statutory services** providing **direct provision** to those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours

36% were **experiencing financial difficulty**

Of **non-statutory services** providing **direct provision** to those who perpetrate abusive/harmful behaviours

36% had used the **furlough scheme** for staff

Almost half (43%) of voluntary sector organisations providing a perpetrator service had received additional COVID-19 funding (beyond the use of the furlough scheme) – in contrast to no statutory organisations. Half of those who had received additional funding still reported financial difficulties, demonstrating the need for sustainable funding to guarantee continued provision of perpetrator services.

Main challenges for perpetrator provision

Problems with technology, increased demand for perpetrator services, and multi-agency working were highlighted as the main challenges to providing perpetrator services, but also the most frequent special measures put in place in response.

Frontline staff responding to the survey were also asked open-ended questions around what special measures were put in place due to COVID-19 and what the biggest challenges were and how they overcame them.

Technology

During the lockdown period, technology became essential, and was seen as both a challenge and a solution.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of all responses given for the biggest challenge included issues around relying on technology and not being able to have face-to-face appointments. Concerns were raised about not having privacy at home when contacting clients, lack of internet or phone signal for clients, clients not owning essential technology for communication and the ongoing concern about not being able to meet face-to-face. We know anecdotally that initial expectations to rely on video calls were not actualised because many clients did not have adequate data or technology to support this.

"Working over the telephone, potential other people in the building could overhear the conversation and the work undertaken. Not able to see the person therefore unable to pick up on body language social cues."

Technology was also the most common special measure put in place to cope with the challenges of COVID-19 – specifically the introduction of virtual meetings as staff transitioned to working from home.

"All contact has moved to online platforms or via telephone. The programme we deliver has been tailored to the individual to meet their current risk and need.

Materials have been created electronically in order that the perpetrator can access these at a safe and suitable time."

Increasing the support available to perpetrators

Of those discussing the special measures put in place to cope with the demands of COVID-19, one-quarter specified an increase in the support provided to victims and survivors and perpetrators of domestic abuse. This mainly included an increase in telephone contact and check-ins with clients, with the aim of managing the increased risk to victims.

"Increased contact, regular check-ins, use of HAD scales to monitor changes in depression and anxiety, revisited safety plans for perpetrators and victims."

"Frequent telephone contact where appropriate."

Frontline practitioners also referenced the influx of new cases, increased workload, and limited staffing, with this being the third most common answer when asked about their biggest challenges.

"The increase in volume of new cases. We have streamlined the programme to meet essential risk and need. We have recruited more staff. We have created electronic resources as support."

Although the majority of frontline workers and services increased support to perpetrators, 2% of survey responses reported that, because of the circumstances, they had decreased their support to clients.

"Reduced contact with clients – no home visits, face-to-face or face-to-face meetings with professionals."

As mentioned above, multi-agency working was seen as a challenge but also a solution to help organisations continue to support clients and manage risk.

In addition, since technology can help organisations continue to provide their services through unprecedented circumstances, it is essential they have the time, resources and equipment to do this safely and effectively.

To respond to the increased risk to victims, services have needed to step up their perpetrator provision. Ensuring support and funding for this is paramount to prevent lives being put at risk in future lockdown scenarios.

Conclusion

It is clear COVID-19 has led to an increase in the risk for child and adult victims and survivors and that a range of agencies were and are working hard to mitigate this. There were particular difficulties around perpetrators with multiple disadvantages, specifically mental health, alcohol misuse and child contact. Services that support these additional needs may need capacity building to cope any future surge in demand, so that the risk to victims is mitigated.

Improved processes of multi-agency working would also be beneficial. Multi-agency working was relied upon for services to continue their action on perpetrators, but this was also cited as a major challenge. Results suggest systems need to be improved facilitate communications between agencies, **particularly within mental health as well as in police, probation and children's social care which were found to be both**

experiencing problems in communicating with other agencies and were reported by both statutory and voluntary agencies to be challenging to communicate with.

The value of multi-agency working has been evidenced by a number of specialist perpetrator service models, including MATAC and Drive, well before the advent of covid-19. The findings from this survey reinforces this evidence and points to the value of establishing multi-agency information sharing and intervention processes for the management of perpetrators of domestic of abuse. It would be helpful to have such processes established before any future lockdown.

Sustainable funding and financial reserves are also essential to voluntary services to enable them to cope with increased demand – half who received additional COVID-19 funding still reported financial difficulties.

In addition, since technology can help organisations continue to provide perpetrator services through unprecedented circumstances, the survey suggests is essential they have the time, resources, and equipment to do this safely and effectively.

Ultimately, in order to respond to increased risk to victims during COVID-19, services have needed to step up their perpetrator provision. Ensuring the support, funding and processes are in place to enable this will help protect victims in both future lockdown scenarios and as the UK transitions out of lockdown.