

Government consultation on Children's social care: stable homes, built on love

Role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

The Domestic Abuse Act establishes in law the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for the purpose of providing public leadership on domestic abuse issues and to play a key role in overseeing and monitoring the provision of domestic abuse services in England and Wales. The role of the Commissioner is to encourage good practice in preventing domestic abuse; identifying adult and child victims and survivors, as well as perpetrators of domestic abuse; and improving the protection and provision of support to people affected by domestic abuse from agencies and government. As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, I welcome the opportunity to feedback on the Government consultation on Children's social care and would be pleased to discuss the contents of this response further, if requested to do so.

Scope of response

As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, my response to this consultation is limited to matters pertaining to domestic abuse in relation to the *Children's Social Care: Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy.

Background: Impact of domestic abuse on children

The NSPCC estimates that 1 in 5 children in the UK will experience domestic abuse.¹ Domestic abuse is the most common adverse background factor in children deemed 'in need' of support from local authority children's social care and is recorded in around 50% of all children's social care assessments, with the actual figure estimated to be significantly higher.² Domestic abuse was recorded in 160,690 'child in need' assessments in England in 2022, with similar figures recorded dating back to 2018.³ Domestic abuse was also the most common family characteristic found within Serious Case Reviews, which concerned the most extreme and grievous failures to protect children from harm.⁴

¹ Radford et al (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC

² [Characteristics of children in need, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

³ [Characteristics of children in need, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

⁴ Dickens et al (2022) Learning for the future: final analysis of serious case reviews, 2017 to 2019, Department for Education.

The profound negative impact of growing up in a household where there is domestic abuse is acknowledged by a growing body of research.⁵ Exposure to domestic abuse causes harm at every stage of child development, with research demonstrating impact on children's neurological development from infancy, and even before birth.⁶ This impact continues into childhood, with one study finding that the majority of child victims studied had developed behavioural problems and around 40% had difficulties adjusting at school.⁷ Studies also show that in adolescence, children and young people who have been exposed to domestic abuse experience higher rates of interpersonal problems with other family members, and have an increased rate of risk taking and anti-social behaviour, such as school truancy, early sexual activity, substance misuse, and delinquency.⁸

Sustained exposure to domestic abuse leads to increased risk of negative impacts that continue into adulthood.⁹ Longitudinal research shows an increased risk of mental and physical health issues, risky and harmful behaviour, as well as adverse outcomes in education, relationships, housing.¹⁰ Child victims are also at increased risk of becoming victims and perpetrators of violent crime, including domestic abuse, themselves in adulthood. The NSPCC recognises domestic abuse as a risk factor for gang membership, and Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) have provided a range of data which supports this, including one area identifying 42% of children involved in public space serious violence experienced domestic abuse in the home (19% more than once). Another area informed the Domestic Abuse Commissioner that 45% of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA) cases studied over a year and a half involved presence of domestic abuse.

The lasting impact of domestic abuse results in significant harm for victims, and is also a costly problem for public services, with individuals affected more likely to require additional support from health services, as well as other costs associated with increased likelihood of mental and physical health problems, such as unemployment.¹¹ Recent analysis conducted by the charity SafeLives examines the economic, human and emotional cost of domestic abuse for children, indicating the significant cashable savings that could be made through earlier and more thoughtful, integrated intervention.¹² SafeLives research estimates that the median average length of abuse before MARAC referral is three years.¹³ Taking into account the costs of mental health support, police referrals, youth crime costs, children's social care and education disruption ahead of this three year point, the research estimated a

⁵ Felitti, V.J., 1998. The relationship of adult health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14, pp.245-258.

⁶ James M. (1994) Domestic violence as a form of child abuse: identification and prevention. Australian Institute of Family Studies; Stiles MM, (2002). Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children. American Family Physician.

⁷ SafeLives (2014), In plain sight: The evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse.

⁸ Stiles MM, (2002). Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children. American Family Physician.

⁹ Stanley, N., 2011. *Children experiencing domestic violence: a research review*. Dartington: Research in practice.

¹⁰ ['Not just collateral damage' Barnardo's Report 0.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

¹¹ [Health and financial burden of adverse childhood experiences in England and Wales: a combined primary data study of five surveys | BMJ Open](#)

¹² Safelives, [Investing to save: Domestic abuse and the CSR](#) (September 2021)

¹³ Ibid.

potential £508 million cashable saving if early, effective interventions were implemented.¹⁴

Despite the high prevalence of domestic abuse in children's social care assessments, and the compelling evidence of the impacts of exposure to domestic abuse later in life, there is a chronic lack of awareness and specialist support available to children affected by domestic abuse in children's social care, as detailed in this consultation response. This is both symptomatic and reflective of a broader tendency within child safeguarding providers to fail to recognise the importance of their role in the local response to domestic abuse. The Department for Education's vision for 'stable homes built on love' will not be deliverable without placing domestic abuse awareness, support and prevention at the heart of all its strategies, ensuring a Coordinated Community Response, with domestic abuse awareness firmly embedded in all new strategies and processes, at cultural and practical level.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021: Children as victims in their own right

The new statutory definition of domestic abuse established in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises children and young people who are exposed to domestic abuse as victims in their own right, whether or not abuse is directed at them.¹⁵ There is currently a lack of clarity within children's social care as to what the legislative change means in practice, with confusion as to whether the change means there is now a legal requirement for all children that have directly experienced or witnessed domestic abuse to be referred for a child safeguarding assessment.

Insight from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team and the domestic abuse and child protection sectors indicate a high level of local variation in approaches to safeguarding and supporting children affected by domestic abuse, with thresholds for accessing support generally being high. This variation was highlighted in The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel on Multi-Agency safeguarding and domestic abuse survey, which asked how local partnerships were responding to the legislative change to recognise children as victims. Responses were varied, with some partnerships reporting they could not answer the question because they were waiting for further national guidance, and others reporting they had always considered children to be direct victims of domestic abuse, and that this shaped their whole response.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. It is estimated that 27% of children who develop a mental health condition do so as a result of primarily being exposed to domestic abuse. Given that the unit cost per child experiencing a mental health problem per year is £32,000 (based on the average duration of domestic abuse and mental health consequences) SafeLives have assessed the economic impact of domestic abuse is calculated to be £373 million per year. Similarly, 22% of children who develop physical aggression have been exposed to domestic abuse. Given that the unit costs per child demonstrating physical aggression is calculated at £28,000 (based on school drop-out rate which has a lifetime economic cost of £186,000), this costs the government £296 million per year.

¹⁵ [Domestic Abuse Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

¹⁶ [Multi-agency safeguarding and domestic abuse paper - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

This variation is exacerbated by a wider tendency for some child safeguarding partners to underestimate or fail to recognise the role they play in the local response to domestic abuse, which is discussed in detail in the sections below. Reporting from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team and the domestic abuse and child protection sectors indicates that despite the prevalence of domestic abuse, there is a tendency across children's social care providers to view domestic abuse as a separate or contextual issue and underestimate the impact on children. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel paper describes social workers and other practitioners often treating domestic abuse as a contextual concern with limited further exploration of the case or specific needs of the child. The paper flags social care agencies' current failures to identify, understand, and appropriately refer domestic abuse as a significant barrier to ensuring children's welfare.¹⁷

To realise its vision that 'every child and family who needs it will have access to high quality help, no matter where they live', it is crucial that the Department for Education takes proactive steps towards building a better Coordinated Community Response, recognising the vital role of child safeguarding in protecting and supporting child victims of domestic abuse. A key component of this work will be in clarifying the implications of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and Duty to Collaborate in the Victims and Prisoners Bill in relation to the children's safeguarding and social care context, where a high proportion of child victims of domestic abuse are concentrated, to ensure local authorities are meeting their new duties.

The Department for Education should develop new guidance regarding what children as victims in their own right means in practice for children's social care providers. This should include a clear national expectation in terms of local independent children's domestic abuse support services, and a standardised referral pathway to ensure a uniform response to child victims across child safeguarding and social care agencies. This guidance should be integrated with the Department for Education's 'no wrong door' objective, to reflect the fact that children are likely to engage with and enter the social care system through a variety of pathways. Knowledge should be consistent across agencies, with a clear and consistent understanding of correct referral pathways to ensure children are not missed.

Lack of support, capacity and funding

Alongside the ambiguity regarding implementation and best practice, there is a chronic lack of capacity in specialist domestic abuse support for children, exacerbated by the fact the legislative introduction of children as victims is expected to result in a significant uptick in referrals and demand for these services. Findings in the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's mapping exercise, *A Patchwork of Provision*,

¹⁷ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Briefing (September 2022) Multi-Agency safeguarding and domestic abuse, noted that: The Panel's review of cases found that most practitioners (and subsequently those writing rapid reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews) use the term 'domestic abuse' without full exploration, assessment or understanding of the nature of the abuse and its impact on the child and family Panel Briefing 2.

have shown that gaps in existing support for children are significant, with just 29% of survivors who wanted support for their children being able to access it. Staffordshire local authority has reported to the Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team an expected uplift of 10,000 annual referrals into statutory and specialist services as a conservative estimate.

If all children who are recorded as having been exposed to or affected by domestic abuse are automatically required to receive a child safeguarding assessment, as per requirements set out in the Children's Act, additional funding will be required to meet the increased demand on children's social care services.¹⁸ The lack of clarity and capacity to meet the legislative change is already having significant impact for local service providers. Gwent Police force, for example, report that they are automatically referring all children linked to a domestic abuse case to children's social care, which is resulting in a significant backlog with insufficient resource to meet the increased demand.

The forthcoming Victims and Prisoners Bill will require local services to consider children commissioning and strategic response under the Duty to Collaborate. The Department for Education should work with the Ministry of Justice to appropriately cost the Duty to Collaborate to ensure there are funds in place to support the increase in referral volumes expected when children become legally required to be considered in commissioning and strategic response under the Duty.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has emphasised the importance of independent, specialist domestic abuse services with the right level of expertise in providing effective support to victims of domestic abuse.¹⁹ Independence of services is critical in securing the trust of victims and survivors. In the Commissioner's mapping and wider research, victims and survivors repeatedly described a dynamic of struggling to trust statutory agencies. Services situated 'in house' within a public sector body are significantly less likely to gain the trust of child and adult victims and survivors to disclose their abuse (particularly given the potential consequence if child removal) and therefore hamper the service's ability to support them or assess risk. This is particularly the case for victims and survivors from minoritized communities. It is crucial that efforts to meet increased demand do not result in domestic abuse support services being moved 'in house' by local authorities, and commissioners should only bring services in-house in exceptional circumstances.

Recommendation 1: The new children's social care strategy must ensure child safeguarding partners recognise their role in the local response to domestic abuse. Child safeguarding partners should work with local domestic abuse boards and specialist domestic abuse services to align strategies, workplans, and commissioning and have clear referral and accountability mechanisms. They should establish stronger working relationships and clear information sharing protocols.

¹⁸ [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

¹⁹ [DAC Mapping-Abuse-Survivors Long-Policy-Report Nov2022 FA.pdf \(domesticabusecommissioner.uk\)](#)

Recommendation 2: Local child safeguarding partnerships should include domestic abuse services in the development of their strategies and local responses – including commissioning, service design and delivery. Local safeguarding systems should look at domestic abuse more systemically to create a more child centric response. This should include attention to behaviour change tactics for adult perpetrators.

Recommendation 3: The Department for Education should develop new guidance regarding what children as victims in their own right means in practice for children’s social care providers. This should include updated statutory guidance in relation to the Duty to Collaborate in the Victims and Prisoner’s Bill to establish a clear national expectation for local children’s domestic abuse support services, and a standardised referral pathway and assessment process. This should include routine enquiry and data collection regarding domestic abuse to ensure a uniform response to child victims across child safeguarding and social care agencies.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities should work with the Ministry of Justice to appropriately cost the duty to collaborate in the forthcoming Victims and Prisoners Bill. This work should ensure there are funds in place to support the increase in referral volumes expected when children become legally required to be considered in commissioning and strategic response under the Duty to Collaborate.

Recommendation 5: The Department for Education should take steps to address the lack of specialist support available for children affected by domestic abuse. They should work closely with the specialist domestic abuse, VAWG and ‘by and for’ sectors, as well as the children’s sector, to ensure funding is available to meet the needs of children affected by domestic abuse. Evaluations of interventions already funded through the ‘Children Affected by Domestic Abuse Fund’ should be incorporated into this work, and consideration should be given to how specialist support for children can be mainstreamed into local and national commissioning of services. Children are equally likely to be affected by domestic abuse in every part of England and Wales, and so support for children should be a natural part of commissioning services in every locality.²⁰

Recommendation 6: The increased need for specialist domestic abuse support services should be prioritised and factored into the DfE’s work to improve assessment of needs and resources for local authority funding, including the new formula for children and young people’s services funding provided to local authorities.

Lack of knowledge and consensus regarding best practice

Effective support and therapeutic services are key to helping child victims of domestic abuse process and recover from their traumatic experiences and are an important prevention tool in reducing the risks of abuse being perpetuated in

²⁰ [‘A Patchwork of Provision’ - Domestic Abuse Commissioner](#)

adulthood. However, there is a lack of consensus among service providers regarding what best practice in supporting families with child victims of domestic abuse looks like.

Requirements are often sensitive and complex, and vary considerably depending on the age and needs of the child. While we consider the work the Department for Education have commissioned with 'What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care' a positive first step, further robust research is needed to develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of the gold standard for services to support child victims of domestic abuse across a full range of contexts and age groups. Certain principles of good practice are evident, such as the importance of Coordinated Community Response and a trauma informed, victim centred approach which holds perpetrators accountable, as endorsed in the Safe and Together Model.²¹ However the Department for Education should undertake further work in close consultation with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, domestic abuse sector and subject matter experts to assess and identify further best practice and an appropriate minimum standard in supporting child victims of domestic abuse, and factor this into their strategy.

Recommendation 7: The Department for Education should work closely with experts in the domestic abuse and child protection sectors to identify effective local practice to support children and families experiencing domestic abuse. As part of this, the DfE should undertake work via one or more of the DfE's proposed pathfinder sites to test and identify best practice in support services for child victims.

Lack of professional understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse

Experts in the sector have flagged that the training social workers currently receive in qualification training is often very limited, with some courses devoting only half a day to domestic abuse. Reports show a lack of professional understanding of the nuances and dynamics of domestic abuse in the children's social care sector, with an overemphasis on physical violence as a means of assessing the level of risk, lacking understanding of other, more subtle, forms of abuse such as controlling and coercive behaviour. This lack of understanding means that the risk posed to both children and adult victims of coercive control cannot be accurately identified or assessed by professionals, with patterns of coercive control either being missed, minimised, or conflated with more generalised parental conflict. Additionally, an incapacity to identify or understand the dynamics of coercive control means social care practitioners are unable to consistently provide appropriate support for victims, and handling of perpetrators, which can inadvertently lead to enabling perpetrator behaviour further.

Reports additionally indicate a tendency toward victim blaming attitudes and language regarding parent victims. As the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy points out, parents who have experienced domestic abuse report that they feel

²¹ [About the Safe & Together™ Model | Safe & Together Institute \(safeandtogetherinstitute.com\)](https://www.safeandtogetherinstitute.com/)

investigated when they ask for help. Reporting suggests that agencies often inappropriately attribute responsibility to the victim to protect their child. The Multi-agency Safeguarding Panel on domestic abuse found that actions were often focused on mothers changing their parenting or protecting the children from the behaviour of the perpetrator, rather than recognising that the children were being directly harmed by the perpetrator and holding them accountable. This dynamic can result in victims being reluctant to disclose abuse or seek support for themselves and their children for fear of having their children removed, demonstrating the importance of specialist, independent domestic abuse services for victims.²² In some cases, the lack of a coordinated and effective domestic abuse response can result in children being removed from their families where other forms of support and intervention may have been more successful, which runs counter to the aims of the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy, that families remain together where safe and possible to do so.²³

To fulfil the Department for Education's vision for keeping children safe, it is essential that the dynamics of domestic abuse, and impact of domestic abuse on children are fully understood and firmly embedded across professionals working in the children's social care sector at a cultural and individual level. This relates to Pillar 5 of the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy: 'A valued, supported and highly-skilled social worker for every child who needs one.'

Recommendation 8: Child safeguarding practitioners and multi-agency partners should work with domestic abuse practitioners to develop a common language and shared frameworks to ensure domestic abuse is comprehensively understood and effectively tackled. This should be informed by existing good practice in integrating the domestic abuse specialist sector and social care, such as the examples referenced in recommendation 10. As part of this, compulsory training, delivered by specialist domestic abuse services should be embedded for all statutory children's services and practitioners working or interacting with children and families to ensure they provide a domestic abuse informed response. This should include practical guidance regarding recognising more subtle forms of domestic abuse including coercive control, assessing risk, the impact on victims and children, how to support child and adult victims of domestic abuse, engaging and handling perpetrators, and understanding the domestic abuse support offer in their area.

Recommendation 9: Specialist led domestic abuse training should be prioritised in the strategy's proposed Early Career Framework (ECF) for social workers, to ensure social workers fully grasp the nuances and dynamics of domestic abuse, including coercive control, and the impact that this has on children. The effectiveness of domestic abuse training should be assessed as part of the proposed inspection Social Work England conduct for all initial education routes for social workers by 2025.

²² AVA (2022) Staying Mum Project, London [Staying-Mum-Final-1.pdf \(avaproject.org.uk\)](#)

²³ [Children of domestic abuse victims increasingly being taken into care | Domestic violence | The Guardian](#)

Recommendation 10: Work should be undertaken, in cooperation with experts in the domestic abuse sector, to identify examples of good local practice in embedding domestic abuse awareness within children's social care, such as Waltham Forest, Hackney, and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime work to roll out the 'Safe and Together' programme of intensive domestic abuse training for front line children's social care workers, and Drive project's Restart programme pilot, which seeks to identify and respond to patterns of domestic abuse at an earlier stage for families engaged with Children's Social Care, taking a multi-agency approach, which includes working with housing teams to develop new accommodation pathways and supports CSC and housing. The Department for Education should convene shared learning between child and family safeguarding bodies and examples of excellent practice seen in partnerships with the domestic abuse specialist sector to enable shared learning of the tools and skills developed.

Lack of coordinated multi-agency working

This section relates to 'Pillar 2' of the Stable Homes Built on Love strategy: 'A decisive multi-agency child protection system'. As the strategy notes, 'often there is a fragmented understanding across agencies of what life is like for children and an episodic approach to help and protection.' This is very much the case in relation to children and domestic abuse, where currently there is little overlap between multi-agency working on child safeguarding and domestic abuse.

Where multi-agency working involving children does happen, it currently only happens in cases deemed 'high risk' through DASH, meaning that most children will be missed. MARAC boards are primarily used to safeguard adult victims deemed high risk but fail to co-ordinate an effective response to child victims. In 40% of cases where a victim has children and is assessed to be at risk of murder or serious harm, those children are not already known to social services, suggesting that the risk posed to children is not being appropriately assessed.²⁴

It should be noted that there are also examples of good local practice in this area. For instance, the approach taken by Cornwall MARAC in which all services, including Children's Social Care have designated and trained MARAC representatives and domestic abuse champions, which has reportedly increased referrals to MARAC from children's social care, and improved early identification, multi-agency working, and domestic abuse awareness across the service. The Department for Education should work with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and experts in the sector to identify and apply the lessons of such good practice in multi-agency working when developing new strategies and guidance for a more joined up approach.

In general, however, when multi-agency child safeguarding arrangements are made, specialist domestic abuse services are rarely involved. For example, whilst MASH arrangements are an effective means of bringing agencies together to share information, domestic abuse specialist services are not always present, and where they are, services are not always an equal partner in the decision making, with

²⁴ [Multi-agency safeguarding and domestic abuse \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

representatives from sector and front-line organisations reporting a tendency for multi-agency working to side-line or exclude specialist domestic abuse services.

It is essential that the current lack of effective overlap between domestic abuse and child safeguarding multi agency responses is addressed and factored into the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy's efforts to pathfind a new, more integrated and expert child protection response. Rapid reviews and child safeguarding practice reviews should involve specialist domestic abuse services as standard where domestic abuse is mentioned, and effectively and consistently record information pertaining to domestic abuse.

Child Safeguarding Partnerships and Adult Safeguarding Partnerships should be better joint up and have mutual accountability for child victims of abuse. Domestic abuse usually impacts on a wide network of family members, often exposing multiple individuals to harm, and multi-agency working should reflect this by taking a whole family approach, which considers the child victim and adult victim's needs in equal measure, as well as perpetrator dynamics.

Feedback from the Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team also notes that inflexibility in Children's Social Care agencies can prevent the victim's preference being prioritised in terms of who they feel most comfortable engaging, especially in instances where this is an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) or domestic abuse worker. This approach can result in repeat disclosures, duplicated contact with various agencies, and increases risk of information sharing barriers. Future strategies should prioritise being flexible and victim led in terms of which professional constitutes the main point of contact for the victim.

Recommendation 11: Rapid reviews and child safeguarding practice reviews should involve independent specialist domestic abuse services as standard where domestic abuse is mentioned and effectively record information pertaining to domestic abuse. The Department for Education should work to identify and learn from pre-existing local good practice in this area.

Recommendation 12: Child Safeguarding partnerships and adult safeguarding partnerships should be better joint up and have mutual accountability for child victims of abuse. Domestic abuse usually impacts on a wide network of family members, often exposing multiple individuals to harm.

Recommendation 13: Child Safeguarding partnerships should consider ways in which services can become more flexible and victim-centred in their ways of working to minimise risk of lack of continuity and traumatisation due to need for repeat disclosures. The Department for Education should work to identify and learn from pre-existing local good practice in this area.

Lack of domestic abuse expertise within Family Help

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is supportive of emphasis the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy places on well-coordinated multi-disciplinary working to support families, which is in line with the Commissioner's view that a Coordinated

Community Response is crucial to tackling domestic abuse and ensuring support for victims.

Despite the fact the *Stable Homes Built on Love* strategy repeatedly mentions domestic abuse services as a key component of the Family Help offering, insight from the DAC Office's Practice and Partnerships team indicates that the level of domestic abuse support available in existing family hubs is inconsistent and, in some cases, non-existent. While the minimum expectations relating to domestic abuse support laid out in the Family Hub Service Expectations are positive, given the prevalence of domestic abuse, and the importance of independent specialist services to meet the needs of communities it is essential that these standards are consistently upheld and that specialist independent domestic abuse services are well embedded within Family Help and Family Hubs services as standard.²⁵ This priority should be factored into efforts to path-find a new approach to Family Help and the Family Help workforce, and reflected in the development of strategically aligned funding strategies in which specialist independent domestic abuse services should be consistently prioritised within budgets as compulsory components of family safeguarding.

It is additionally crucial that the emphasis the strategy places on reconciliation, keeping families together, and the Reducing Parental Conflict programme is appropriately domestic abuse informed, and does not inadvertently encourage victims (both adult and child) to remain in abusive relationships and households. Reporting from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team flags that victims of domestic abuse are experiencing misunderstanding and miscategorisation of abuse as 'parental conflict' by practitioners in children's social care. Parental conflict and domestic abuse are distinct and require different types of intervention and action from services. It is therefore essential that practitioners are able to distinguish and differentiate the two in order to correctly manage and understand risk in the household. Again, this risk should be reduced through the systematic embedding of specialist independent domestic abuse services embedded in all family safeguarding partnerships, and through improved professional understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse.

An area that is particularly lacking in the current community response to domestic abuse in child safeguarding is expertise and services regarding the handling of perpetrator behaviour. Feedback from the sector suggest there is a decisive lack of training on how to handle and hold perpetrators to account, with some social workers reporting a reluctance to intervene in households with domestic abuse for fear of making things worse. This can result in a perpetrator of domestic abuse retaining control and access to a child victim. There is additionally a chronic lack of services geared towards behaviour change for perpetrators. Measures to improve capacity for handling perpetrator dynamics and behaviour change and should be factored into local safeguarding strategies, with a clear emphasis on information sharing to ensure adult and child victims are effectively protected and perpetrators are appropriately held to account.

²⁵ [Family Hub Service Expectations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Recommendation 14: The Department for Education should work to ensure that all Family Help initiatives (including Family Hubs, Reducing Parental Conflict & Supporting Families) and all associated guidance are created in consultation with specialist domestic abuse services and experts to ensure services are appropriately domestic abuse informed.

Recommendation 15: Specialist independent domestic abuse services should be colocated in family help partnerships to ensure adult and child victims are appropriately supported.

Family networks

The deeper and more systematically embedded awareness of domestic abuse that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner calls for across the entire children's social care system should extend to proposals made in 'Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks', around kinship care. Given the prevalence of domestic abuse there is a high chance abusive dynamics may be present in the kinship networks children are moved into. Additionally, there are increased risks to child victims if their kinship care arrangements involve being looked after by a member of a parent-perpetrator's family, for instance a grandparent carer may be coerced by their adult child who is also a perpetrator into contact arrangements that are not safe for the child. If increased emphasis on kinship care arrangements results in a lack of professional enquiry in these contexts, there is also increased risk of other forms of abuse which perpetuate within families such as so-called honour-based abuse. There should be robust safeguarding processes to ensure children are not exposed to domestic abuse, including subtle forms such as coercive control, or other forms of abuse in kinship arrangements.

Recommendation 16: The department for Education should develop robust safeguarding processes to ensure children are not exposed to domestic abuse, including subtle forms such as coercive control, in kinship contexts. This should be factored into DfE's planning for pilots testing Family Network Support Packages, and the proposed national kinship care strategy.

Data collection and sharing

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team, and experts within the children's sector have flagged that while some local authorities collect data on domestic abuse in child safeguarding contexts, there are currently no consistent data collection measures in place to capture cases in which the presence of domestic abuse is flagged as a reason for child protection. This related to 'Pillar 6' of the strategy: 'A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data, flags the importance of effective data collection and sharing in children's social care contexts.' In order to effectively measure and understand the prevalence and impact of domestic abuse on children, the Department for Education

should introduce a national standardised system requiring social workers to record data where domestic abuse, including coercive control, is suspected or disclosed.

Recommendation 17: Domestic abuse as a reason for the involvement of child protection services should be made a national standard compulsory category. Standardised processes should be introduced where they are not already for social workers to record data where domestic abuse, including coercive control, is suspected or disclosed. This should be factored into the Department for Education's 2023 data strategy as part of the DfE's long-term plan for transforming data in children's social care.

Recommendation 18: Domestic abuse related outputs should be added to the Children's Social Care National Framework.