

**Home Affairs Select Committee call for written evidence on Policing priorities**

**Response from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales**

Role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 established in law the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC), to provide public leadership on domestic abuse issues, play a key role in overseeing and monitoring the provision of domestic abuse services in England and Wales and promote best practice, including in multi-agency working.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The role of the Commissioner is to encourage good practice in preventing domestic abuse; identifying victims and survivors, and perpetrators of domestic abuse, as well as children affected by domestic abuse; and improving the protection and provision of support to people affected by domestic abuse from agencies and government.

Scope of the response

The response to this Call for Evidence is limited to the questions which are most relevant to the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s work and raises policing issues which are most pertinent to supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Context

According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) 2022, an estimated 2.4 million adults experienced domestic abuse in the last year.[[2]](#footnote-3) Domestic abuse is a high-volume crime. In the year ending March 2022, the police recorded 1,500,369 domestic abuse-related incidents, with 910,980 of these being recorded as crimes.[[3]](#footnote-4) Despite this, over the past five years, we have seen an incremental fall in criminal justice outcomes for domestic abuse-related offences.

In the year ending June 2022, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) recorded a 6.5% fall in domestic abuse receipts when compared to the previous year ending June 2021, from 72,527 to 67,790. The fall was even more stark when compared to the year ending June 2016, with receipts falling by 44% from 121,457 to 67,790.[[4]](#footnote-5) Similarly, the volume of domestic abuse charges had decreased by 7% when compared to the previous year, from 48,391 to 44,892, and by 45% when compared to the year ending June 2016, from 100,268 to 44,892.[[5]](#footnote-6)

The fall in outcomes can be seen across the criminal justice process, with prosecution volumes decreasing by 13% in the past year, from 59,709 to 52,125 and almost halving when compared to June 2016, from 100,268 to 52,125. Convictions have also fallen in the last year by 13.4%, from 46,261 to 40,042 and by 47% since June 2016, from 75,236 to 40,042.

Whilst this data reveals that there are issues across the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in responding to domestic abuse, it is important to note that the police is one of the first agencies from whom survivors seek support when reporting that they have experienced domestic abuse.

There are currently a number of high-profile inquiries detailing issues with policing and public confidence in the police’s ability to respond to crimes such as domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG). Whilst the Commissioner welcomes these inquiries, they demonstrate a clear need for reform in the police’s response to domestic abuse. If action is not undertaken to improve the policing response to domestic abuse, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office is concerned that this will further deter individuals who experience these crimes from reporting on the basis that they may not feel like adequate action will be taken. This, in turn will prevent perpetrators from being brought to justice for their actions.

It is crucial that the police and the wider CJS commits to reform and ensures that seeking justice and supporting victims in their journey through the CJS is at the centre of activities, behaviours, and every interaction.

Response to the Call for Evidence

**2.What balance police forces in England and Wales should strike between a focus on preventing and solving crime and carrying out their other functions?**

Prevention

Police forces have a statutory duty to work with wider agencies to prevent domestic abuse if it reaches the threshold of amounting to serious violence (the ‘Serious Violence Duty’).In accordance with section 8 of the Police, Crime and Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, ‘specified authorities for a local government area must collaborate with each other to prevent and reduce serious violence in the area’.[[6]](#footnote-7) Domestic abuse falls within the definition of serious violence for the purposes of the legislation section 13(3) so long as it meets the thresholds of section 13(6). Due to the prevalence and severity of domestic abuse, the Commissioner sees a high likelihood that domestic abuse would meet the threshold across all force areas. This is because nearly half (43%) of police recorded violent offences against women and a fifth (23%) against men were committed by intimate partners,[[7]](#footnote-8) and the most common type of violence to be experienced on a repeated basis is domestic violence.[[8]](#footnote-9) 49% of all female homicides (and 10% of male homicides) are domestic homicides.[[9]](#footnote-10) Despite this, charging, prosecutions and convictions have fallen significantly in recent years for domestic abuse.[[10]](#footnote-11) This is extremely concerning and it is therefore crucial that police resources are focused towards preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

As per our office’s Serious Violence Duty Statutory Guidance Consultation Response (SVD), we know there is a relationship between children who are at high risk, or already perpetrating, public space serious violence and previous/current experience of domestic abuse. Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) have provided a range of data which supports this, including one area finding a relationship whereby around a third of serious violence incidents are domestic abuse related and another 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 Commissioner that after trawling through Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) cases over a year and a half, they found 45% had a serious presence of domestic abuse. Another VRU raised the risk around maternity, particularly under 25-year-old parents who are in a volatile relationship with little to no community support and the presence of weapons. VRUs also shared emerging patterns and narratives of young boys and girls joining gangs to feel protected from domestic abuse in the home, or to ‘feel strong’. The NSPCC also recognises domestic abuse as a risk factor for gang membership. [[11]](#footnote-12)

The academic Jade Levell examines this overlap in her book *Boys, Childhood Development and Gang Involvement* which explores the ‘deterministic pathways or proving causal outcomes after the experience of childhood domestic abuse’. [[12]](#footnote-13) Levell stresses that ‘It is imperative to always keep in mind that most child survivors do not end up following the life paths of the participants in her book [perpetrating SV]…However, what we need to grapple with is the relatively high prevalence of childhood domestic violence and abuse (DVA) among young men who do find themselves on- road and gang- involved’.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Police should safeguard children who are victims of domestic abuse and act to prevent their risk of further abuse, adopting abusive patterns of behaviour or becoming involved in other crime. Data collated in 2018 as part of the Serious Violence Duty Strategy shows that numbers of children in care and excluded have risen since 2014 and that ‘being in care and school exclusion are markers for increased risk of both victimisation and perpetration and also substance abuse’.[[14]](#footnote-15) These circumstances can be a consequence and symptomatic of domestic abuse. Agencies should therefore be able to identify these risk factors and implement effective interventions to prevent escalation of behaviour.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 places a duty on three of the specified authorities [in the SVD] (police, health and local authority) as statutory ‘safeguarding partners’ for local areas in England.[[15]](#footnote-16) As part of the SVD, there should be an onus on ensuring ‘enforcement and criminal justice-based activity is a ‘critical part of a public health approach’.[[16]](#footnote-17)

This duty means that police must work together with these agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area, including identifying and responding to their needs. There are overlapping risk factors of becoming a victim and/or perpetrator of serious violence and these risk factors apply at an individual, family and community level.

Therefore, police must understand the intersectional complex needs and barriers when engaging with young people and have knowledge of the agencies and services best placed to assist them in providing effective interventions for children and young people. As part of early intervention, there must be clear referral pathways to specialist interventions and programmes. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner encourages police engagement with toolkits like The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF).[[17]](#footnote-18) The YEF summarises the best available research evidence on different approaches to preventing serious youth violence. It is based on real life data about what has happened when these approaches have been used before and how effective an approach is likely to be.[[18]](#footnote-19) Furthermore, police who are working with children and young people who have been impacted by domestic abuse should undergo specialist training in order to have a trauma-informed and intersectional understanding of this area.

As one of the organisations bound by the Serious Violence Duty, policing should work with wider agencies to develop a ‘multi-agency approach to understand the causes and consequences of serious violence, focusing on prevention and early intervention, and informed by evidence-led best practice.’[[19]](#footnote-20) The benefits of a whole system approach is supported in the recent ‘Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides 2021-2022 Year 2 Report’ with a key finding being that: *“The police alone cannot prevent domestic abuse or homicide. Of the cases in th[eir] dataset in which the individuals [suspected victim suicide] were not previously known to police, almost half were known to one or more non-police agency.”*

This also reflects the findings made in the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s ‘A Patchwork of Provision’ report, with the research revealing the most common professions to whom survivors first made a disclosure of domestic abuse were health (44%), police (43%), social services (16%) and domestic abuse support workers (15%).[[20]](#footnote-21) The range of organisations from whom survivors seek support demonstrates a clear need for local areas to develop frameworks to work together to identify vulnerable individuals and prevent them from experiencing further harm. Multi-agency partnerships such as Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) are absolutely vital to identifying those most at risk and put in place appropriate interventions, especially in adult family violence cases.[[21]](#footnote-22)

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office recommends that local areas establish frameworks to share information, data and intelligence in order to flag individuals who are at risk of harm, as well as to identity perpetrators who may require interventions. These frameworks should work closely with existing arrangements such as Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARACs) and perpetrator panels to ensure that those at highest risk of harm are identified and the appropriate safeguarding measures are implemented.

As is being prioritised through the funding of VRUs, and necessary for the discharging of the serious violence prevention duty, effective data sharing across a multi-agency approach is of huge importance. The VRU ‘Application Guidance’ provides a helpful summary of a whole system approach to violence reduction, which is being one that includes, ‘information and intelligence sharing which should primarily consist of sharing anonymised aggregated data to inform the strategic, tactical and operational response to serious violence’.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Agencies should disaggregate domestic abuse data to capture key intersections with protected characteristics, region, and whether the abuse was perpetrated within an intimate partner relationship or familial abuse. This will help agencies, Government and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office identify demographic variations and create strategic responses accordingly.

**Recommendation 1: Police should be proactive in safeguarding adults and children who are victims of domestic abuse. Police should work with other public health authorities and there should be early referral routes where children young people are at risk of perpetrating domestic abuse and other forms of serious violence. Specialist training and handbooks like YEF should be provided for those working closely with children who are victims of domestic abuse.**

**Recommendation 2: In line with the Serious Violence Duty, police forces should work with other agencies to create and implement a multi-agency whole system approach to breaking the cycle of violence, particularly where trauma from domestic abuse increases risk of becoming a victim of, or increase propensity to perpetrate, domestic abuse and/or public space serious violence. The multi-agency response should share data to better identify and respond to serious violence and be used to safeguard those most at risk. Any data collected as part of this should gather demographic information which can be disaggregated.**

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office recommends the use of a Coordinated Community Response (CCR) for all domestic abuse cases. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act does not specify the partnership model through which specified authorities must fulfil their obligations to collaborate to prevent and reduce serious violence. Rather, ‘[r]epresentatives from the specified statutory organisations should collectively decide on the appropriate partnership in which they will work together to undertake the requirements of the Duty’.[[23]](#footnote-24) The Serious Violence Statutory Guidance sets out that ‘every local area will have a range of existing multi-agency arrangements in place’.[[24]](#footnote-25) These existing partnerships may include Community Safety Partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards, Serious Organised Crime Partnerships as well as Supporting Families Programme Structures, MARACs, Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Boards, Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Boards (VAWDASV), Criminal Justice Boards, Violence Reduction Units (non-statutory), MAPPA and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.[[25]](#footnote-26)

The flexibility of a whole system approach is designed to allow specified authorities to build on existing infrastructure, strengths and capabilities as they consider most appropriate. The CCR provides the most effective response to domestic abuse and should be adopted as a best practice example of multi-agency working. The CCR is a sector recognised, whole system approach which brings together a **variety of agencies and community-based services to work in collaboration to prevent further harm and help victims and survivors establish safety, whilst holding perpetrators of domestic abuse to account**. This is done by spreading responsibility for support and intervention across agencies, rather than one individual agency or on the victim.[[26]](#footnote-27) Having this tailored domestic abuse model is best practice as it has been developed to ensure that the victim is at the centre of the response and that all aspects of support are fully considered. This includes the ‘broadest possible response to domestic abuse, addressing prevention, early intervention, dealing with crisis, risk fluctuation, long-term recovery and safety, [through] working with a wide range of services, pathways, agencies and systems’.[[27]](#footnote-28) For policing, those wider agencies would include probation, NHS/CCGs, housing, children’s services, schools and colleges, mental health, substance misuse, youth offending, whom they would share referral information, intelligence and data.

The CCR model should be adopted and aligned with existing arrangements such as MARAC to ensure perpetrator management teams have key information from victim-focused panels. These structures can be crucial in flagging perpetrators who are high risk, but may not be in contact with the CJS and enable effective early intervention and disruption to their behaviour.

**Recommendation 3: The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office recommends using a CCR in domestic abuse cases. The CCR should incorporate existing and multi-agency whole system approaches. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office recommends using a CCR in domestic abuse cases. The CCR should incorporate existing and multi-agency whole system approach.**

The College of Policing (CoP) guidance is that ‘championing prevention is crucial.’[[28]](#footnote-29) Whilst there is balance to be struck between prevention and first response, a strong strategic focus on prevention is a key way of reducing harm in the long-term.

First response

Police should be trained to provide a robust, supportive and trauma-informed response when victims and survivors of domestic abuse first report an incident. The police are frequently one of the first agencies to whom victims and survivors of domestic abuse make a disclosure about their experience. In a recent survey conducted by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s office with over 4,000 victims and survivors of domestic abuse, 42.7% of respondents said that the first organisation to whom they reached out was the police.[[29]](#footnote-30)

A survivor’s experience when interacting with a front-line police officer is likely to shape their decision to disclose, seek help and support in the future so it is crucial that police understand the nature, root causes, indicators and dynamics of domestic abuse, as well as how to enquire and respond safely and appropriately. Best practice is needed when recording witness statements at the time of incident, both in building a robust case but also ensuring the victim does not need to keep retelling what they have experienced to different officers and practitioners which can be re-traumatising. Best practice would include being sensitive and creating a safe and non-judgemental space when conducting any witness statement. It is essential that the interview process itself does not reinforce any aspects of discriminatory or abusive experiences for the witness.

When attending an incident, police officers must ensure that they undertake a thorough risk assessment and implement safeguarding measures to protect victims and survivors who report an incident. The first time a victim calls the police may not be the first incident of abuse they have experienced and reporting can put victims at risk of further harm from perpetrators, who may feel like they have lost control in the relationship.[[30]](#footnote-31) It is therefore crucial that a full history of events is undertaken as part of the risk assessment and protective measures are implemented to prevent further harm to victims and their families.

Police officers should share information as to where a victim can access wider support services, such as therapeutic support, housing, health and social care services**.** Officers should also know what community-based and specialist ‘by and for’ services are available in a victim’s area and how referrals to these services can be made. Police referral and sign posting must happen at the earliest opportunity. Using a CCR approach, police should work with local specialist domestic abuse organisations to plan how they can best collaborate to support victims.

**Recommendation 4: Police should provide sufficient training to officers to ensure a first response to domestic abuse is effective. The activities of a first response should balance being supportive and believing the victim, directing them to the services specific to their needs whilst also gathering evidence effectively and through non-traumatising means. Police should work with domestic abuse organisations and local commissioners in order to do this, as part of a CCR response.**

A CCR approach cannot be fully realised without Government funding. It is vital that the Government commits long term sustainable funding for community-based services that support victims navigate the CJS, including court-based Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVAs). In our office’s report conducted with Safe Lives, ‘Mapping the provision of court-related domestic abuse support and advocacy across England and Wales’, when victims were asked what made a positive impact on their experience through court, the most common answer given was the specialist domestic abuse or sexual violence services (this finding was the same for both the family court and criminal court). Despite their benefits, there are very few dedicated court support services, with only eight (5%) based or co-located in a court. Most domestic abuse court support is provided by wider community domestic abuse services (without a specific court focus). However, these services are becoming increasingly stretched (with 85% spending less than 40% of their time supporting the court process) and only one in five domestic abuse services providing dedicated court support.[[31]](#footnote-32)

**Recommendation 5: The Government must provide sufficient long-term and secure funding for specialist ‘by and for services’. This should be specifically ear-marked in the upcoming spending review to ensure the quality and consistency of provision. This should not be at the expense of community-based services funding but in addition to it.**

**Recommendation 6: There must be Government funding for domestic abuse specialist support which is resourced specifically for CJS support.**

Investigation

Police forces should carry out proportionate, thorough and timely investigations into reported crimes**.** Police should exercise their professional curiosity when attending callouts in order to establish whether the incident forms part of a wider pattern of behaviour which should be investigated. This means asking the victim questions about their day-to-day relationship with the perpetrator and identifying abusive behaviours, speaking to neighbours and other potential witnesses, taking witness statements and gathering other key evidence at the time of incident. As part of the ‘Achieving Best Evidence’ (ABE) framework, there are several special measures which can be offered to intimidated victims to assist them in giving evidence in an effective manner. A key aspect of this is to ensure that interviews are planned with the victims’ needs in mind, carried out in a trauma-informed way and gather as much relevant information as possible in order to prevent the victim from having to recount their story several times. Police officers should inform victims of the special measures available for the purposes of the investigation and offer the use of ABE suites to help avoid the re-traumatisation of survivors during the evidence gathering process. Prosecutors should meet with victims before charging decisions are made to explain the nature of the offence, the criminal justice process and the special measures which are available to victims attending court as a matter of course.[[32]](#footnote-33)

The police should ensure the views of the witness as to which of the special measures could be applied for, such as an intermediary, to attend any subsequent meetings between the prosecutor and the witness; and whether the witness is receiving therapy to the prosecutor is done at the earliest point.

The ability for vulnerable victims to have their cross-examination pre-recorded away from the courtroom reduces the stress of giving evidence in court, which many find intimidating and so we encourage its use by police. ‘Child[ren], vulnerable adult[s] and intimidated witnesses are eligible for video-recorded evidence-in-chief, provided that the court determines that access to this special measure is likely to maximise the quality of the witness’s evidence and it is not against the interests of justice to admit such video recorded evidence’ (Section 27[2]). The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office supports the use of Section 27 in domestic abuse cases and the roll out of pre-recorded cross-examination (Section 28) to domestic abuse victims, which is currently being piloted for victims of sexual and trafficking offences.

‘Achieving Best Evidence’ also states that ‘Intimidated witnesses in the court room are likely to benefit from the support of an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) or an IDVA, as appropriate.[[33]](#footnote-34) Our office recommends that every victim of domestic abuse have an IDVA in a court room.

**Recommendation 7: Domestic abuse victims should be informed of and part of a discussion on special measures and which may be applicable to their case. Police should ensure victims are referred to court support bodies like IDVAs and domestic abuse advocates.**

Police officers should build cases in collaboration with the CPS.Police should seek early legal advice from the CPS when gathering evidence forinvestigations**.** This is important to ensure that case files are as robust as possible and that perpetrators can be effectively charged. During the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic abuse cases were prioritised by policing and the CPS, which streamlined the investigation and charging process as these agencies adopted more collaborative working approaches.[[34]](#footnote-35) This interim protocol has now has been lifted, even though the volume of domestic abuse cases has not reduced since the pandemic. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is concerned that this will lead to further drops in referral and charging rates for domestic abuse cases. This is particularly troubling given the significant reduction in referrals, charging and prosecution volumes which are noted above. The police must work more closely with CPS to ascertain why this is and ensure that they are investigating as well as acting in emergency.

 His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services’ (HMICFRS) ‘Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic’

highlights that there is an increasing use of Outcome 15 (Evidential difficulties: suspect identified, but evidential difficulties prevented further action) and Outcome 16 (Evidential difficulties: suspect identified, victim does not support prosecution) being used by the police to close cases.[[35]](#footnote-36) From March 2016 to March 2020, Outcome 16 in domestic abuse cases rose from 35.4% to 54%. Given the high attrition rates with regards to the prosecution of domestic abuse cases and long delays for a court date it is even more important that evidence gathering is done early and thoroughly.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office supports the HMICFRS recommendations that:

**Recommendation 8**:

**Use of Outcome 15 and Outcome 16 is immediately reviewed by all forces.**

**Police in domestic abuse investigations should guarantee all attempts to engage victims are explored, and that all possible lines of evidence are considered so that in all cases the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved.**

**The use of outcomes 15 and 16 should be appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, must be clearly recorded.**

Investigations should be evidence-led, perpetrator focused and trauma-informed.The neurological response to the trauma of violent and abusive behaviours can impact a victim’s ability to provide evidence in a coherent manner, particularly where an incident has occurred recently. This is because trauma can cause dissociative symptoms or fragment memories and lead them to be recalled out of sequence. This does not mean that victims of domestic abuse are unreliable witnesses.[[36]](#footnote-37) However, anecdotally victims and survivors who have contacted our office have stated that they have had their allegations minimised or been accused of lying where they cannot recall information. Police officers must receive trauma-informed witness training to ensure that they can identify and understand the effect of trauma on domestic abuse victims. This will help to ensure the right policing response and decision-making process as to how to progress cases.

As stated in the CPS’ ‘Domestic abuse guidelines for prosecutors’, ‘all cases of domestic abuse should have an evidence-led approach and the starting point should be to build cases in which the prosecution does not need to rely on the victim’. Factors like re-traumatisation, intimidation, lack of in place special measures, or delays of many months often influence whether a victim will be able to be give evidence and how well they will be able to give evidence.

**Recommendation 9: Investigations should be evidence-led with officers working with CPS to build a robust case. Investigations should be perpetrator focused police should be trauma-informed when speaking to victims.**

In His Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) and HMICFRS’ joint inspection into Evidence-Led Prosecutions, it was highlighted that neither the police nor the CPS can ‘distinguish those cases where an evidence-led approach may be more effective because there are no systems to flag relevant cases.’ Moreover, ‘whilst training for cases involving domestic abuse was in place across both organisations, because of other pressures, uptake was variable in some instances.’[[37]](#footnote-38)

The CPS has specific e-learning on domestic abuse evidence led prosecutions. Yet, whilst this training is mandatory, during the course of the joint inspection, it was apparent that not all prosecutors had completed it. Instead, it seems that there is currently only some joint training between the organisations which is sporadic and often on an ad hoc basis.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office supports the joint inspection into evidence led prosecutions findings and reiterates that:

**Recommendation 10: Police forces should ensure that training, messaging and guidance is clear and that evidence led cases should benefit from the same quality of investigation, early gathering of evidence and supervisory oversight as other domestic abuse cases, particularly in cases where the victim does not support police action.**

Victims should be kept updated about the progress of their case throughout the course of the investigation to help them remain engaged in the criminal justice process**.** The police should work closely with the CPS to ensure that victims are appropriately and sensitively updated about the status of their case. As recommended in the HMICFRS 2021 ‘Review of policing during the pandemic’, the police must ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims and to keep them up to date with the progress of their case.[[38]](#footnote-39)

We reiterate the recommendation made from our submission to the Victims’ Bill Consultation which supports Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse’s proposal that regular contact with victims should be timetabled into the criminal justice journey.[[39]](#footnote-40) This would ensure that key updates on a case are communicated to victims and survivors in a timely manner and would help them to feel reassured that progress is being made on their case.

**Recommendation 11:** **Police must ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims and update them with the progress of their case.**

Police must offer access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays. The current combination of delays and lack of communication is a huge cause of in victim attrition. The latest estimate for offence to completion in the Crown Court is currently 378 days which remains well above those seen pre-COVID (109 days in Q1 2020).[[40]](#footnote-41)

These delays create more opportunities for re-offending and increases risk of harm to victims and families. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office supports the recommendation of the Victims’ Commissioner to establish a separate complaints system for breaches of the Victims’ Code, which sits outside of each criminal justice agency. It could be the case that a response to a complaint requires the input of multiple organisations, and separate complaints systems should not prohibit that.[[41]](#footnote-42)

Currently, the requirement to complain to the individual police force or CPS area can be onerous where individuals are unsure where to find information as to which area they sit in, with the contact details or complaints form varying across different areas and often being difficult to find on a website. A centralised website should be created, whereby individuals can find information regarding how complaints procedures work and the relevant agency against whom they need to lodge a complaint. The website should provide a page whereby an individual can select the agency against whom they wish to complain and select the relevant police force or CPS area to whom the complaint should be referred by typing in their postcode. The website could act a portal on which individuals could follow the progress of their complaint and also allow for immediate escalation where they are dissatisfied with the response and wish to appeal to the next stage.

The centralised complaints website should include an analysis function so that criminal justice agencies, central government and inspectorates and victims can understand common themes from complaints. Having centralised data on some of the most common issues and feedback from those who lodge complaints would be useful in helping inform learning which could be shared amongst agencies and drive training and improvements to the CJS. Once the complaints process is exhausted, victim feedback could be retrieved using this portal.

**Recommendation 12: Clear routes of complaints should be set up in light of the backlog of cases and court delays. There should be a centralised complaints website where people can track the progress of their complaint and where there can be escalation if the response is unsatisfactory.**

**3. What roles police forces should be prioritised?**

**Roles in Community Safety Units (CSUs), or Public Protection Units should be prioritised.** Resourcing these units and ensuring they are well staffed and adequately resourced to carry out investigations is highly important. For example, there is currently a lack of capacity in CSUs. This is partly due to high staff turnover and regular rotation out of the unit. This impacts specialist knowledge-sharing between officers and creates skills gaps as it means there are fewer members of staff with extensive amounts of experience and expertise in this area.

Recent roundtables held by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner with police officers in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), revealed that working in CSUs is seen as undesirable, with the working environment being vicariously traumatic and unsupportive. Combating the skills gaps should be a priority. The roles must be made more appealing with officers given the opportunity to specialise. Additionally, more should be done to attract the people most appropriate to respond to domestic abuse and work in these units.

CSU officers are often the most regular point of contact that a victim will interact with throughout their investigation and so they must have a strong investigative capacity and be trauma informed.One of the functions of CSUs is to help gain the co-operation of the public with the police in preventing crime and enhancing local community safety, so the resourcing into this area would also be a good step in rebuilding trust in the police more generally.

**Recommendation 13: The police should prioritise CSUs and Public Protection Units and do more to make the roles desirable with the opportunity to specialise. These units must be specially trained on domestic abuse and be trauma informed.**

As stated previously, the police should co-locate IDVAs. Specialist community-based services that help survivors to navigate the CJS are critical in improving the wider CJS response. These services are greatly needed to reduce attrition. There should also be specialist domestic abuse advocates within police forces.These IDVAs should work to support police officers who experience incidents of police perpetuated domestic abuse (PPDA).

**Recommendation 14: There should be co-location of police services with IDVAs and police forces should have specialist domestic abuse advocates for internal domestic abuse cases.**

Police forces should create specialist units that focus on police perpetrators of domestic abuse and sexual violence in an effort towards cultural change. In light of the Casey Review and Angolini inquiries it is crucial that police forces examine their culture, training and how they handle gross misconduct and domestic abuse. Both where there is domestic abuse or sexual harassment within a police force (police perpetuated domestic abuse towards another member of staff) and externally (police to member of the public). The MPS and Nottinghamshire Police have introduced Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences Units (DASO) and Domestic Abuse Support Units to investigate allegations against officers and currently over 600 allegations are being investigated by DASO. We encourage further roll out of these units across England and Wales.

**Recommendation 15: The Police must review their staff, culture, training and protocols for gross misconduct. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office recommends the roll out of specialist Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences Units across England and Wales.**

**4.What can be done to improve community policing and increase trust in police officers and forces, including on funding and on disciplinary powers when police officer behaviour falls below required standards?**

A commitment to cultural change and training is needed across all police forces. We note that ‘Domestic Abuse Matters’ training is provided to police by both SafeLives and Women’s Aid. The SafeLives Cultural Change programmes have led to measurable improvements; for example, the Domestic Abuse Matters training for police forces was found to lead to a 41% increase in arrests for coercive and controlling behaviour.[[42]](#footnote-43) Further cultural changes programmes should be embedded into forces. The programmes should be developed to ensure that individuals within the police and wider CJS have a good understanding of VAWG and domestic abuse and recognise that responding is a part of their core business.

Building trust can also be done by being a part of a multi-agency response, for domestic abuse cases, this is by using the CCR approach. There are already many existing structures in place where commitment from the police should be maintained like MARAC which could be aligned with the CCR. A HMICFRS inspection into the police response to VAWG showed that ‘roles and responsibilities for partners working together in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements vary considerably’. [[43]](#footnote-44) Police must ensure that all forces are a part of the multi-agency response and be proactive in setting up working groups involving IDVAs and other front-line professionals to discuss challenges, sample cases, share data and ensure that issues of performance are continually addressed. In turn, these operational group should feed into the work of Local Strategic Groups/Partnerships and Local Criminal Justice Boards.

Across the board more training is needed on domestic abuse, assault, VAWG, and controlling and coercive behaviour. This training should be frequent and mandatory to both the police and all practitioners who work within the CJS. Police should adopt a trauma-informed approach at all levels to better support victims through the CJS process. In December 2021, The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) and CoP set out how they will measure the impact of the new policing VAWG framework. [[44]](#footnote-45) As part of this, there is a requirement for all police forces to take action and improve how they tackle VAWG.

All police forces should commit to the development and implementation of a VAWG and Domestic Abuse Strategy and as per the national framework, there should be ‘regular independent scrutiny of force performance in responding to VAWG’ and we would add, Domestic Abuse Strategies.[[45]](#footnote-46) These strategies should be coherent and align with wider in place domestic abuse and VAWG strategies like the Strategic Partnerships, Safeguarding Partnership Boards or the Police Crime Commissioners (PCCs).

**Recommendation 16:** **Police forces should commit to the development and implementation of a VAWG and Domestic Abuse Strategy. Police should have thorough training on domestic abuse, sexual violence, misogyny, power, and control.**

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner welcomes the independent reviews taking place into police misconduct and is deeply concerned by the handling of incidents of domestic abuse and sexual abuse uncovered within police forces. As the Centre for Women’s Justice super-complainant examined ‘police victims of PPDA, when they work in the same force as their perpetrator, are in a uniquely difficult position’ as they may feel at risk of employment repercussions which discourages them from coming forward.

CWJ’s statistics revealed that only 3 out of 104 respondents agreed that they could trust the police involved in their case to respond and make case decisions impartially and only 6 participants said that they would feel confident to report domestic abuse to the police again. This shows that there is an urgent need for examination of police processes and handling of gross misconduct.[[46]](#footnote-47) Forces must act to create a culture where police officers will feel empowered to report and challenge PPDA and be supported in doing so.

In order to regain trust, there must be a zero-tolerance policy within the police towards all forms of abuse. As is written in the ‘Policing violence against women and girls national framework’, police forces must ‘complete an urgent review of all current allegations of sexual misconduct, domestic abuse and other VAWG-related offences against officers and staff, ensuring that they are being investigated fully and quickly’.[[47]](#footnote-48)

**Recommendation 17: The police must commit to cultural change ensuring transparency, having a zero-tolerance policy to police misconduct and PPDA.**

A firewall should be introduced between the police and immigration control agencies, to create a safe reporting mechanism for migrant survivors of domestic abuse. The HMICFRS’ recommendation to introduce a firewall must be implemented as a matter of urgency.The joint investigation by HMICFRS, the CoP and the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) found that victims of crime with insecure or uncertain immigration status are fearful that, if they report crimes to the police, their information will be shared with the Home Office.[[48]](#footnote-49) Research by Liberty and Southall Black Sisters also states that these features deter domestic abuse victims and witnesses engaging with the police because of their unsettled immigration status. As a consequence, victims and survivors are denied justice, while offenders go unpunished and remain a threat to the public.[[49]](#footnote-50)

This again stresses the importance of specialist ‘by and for’ services co-located with police forces. Research showssome migrant and minoritised women face additional barriers including lack of English language skills hampering understanding of rights and services available, social isolation and notions of honour and shame in some communities, including fear of censure from wider family and community. This leads victims to report later and can involve greater safety risks.[[50]](#footnote-51)

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office will be publishing ‘Safety Before Status: The Solutions’ in December 2022 which is the second report that focuses on survivors of domestic abuse with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF). It seeks to improve the policy response to migrant victimsas often they are unable to access life-saving refuge and are often forced to stay with an abuser or face homelessness and destitution.

**Recommendation 18: A firewall between police and immigration authorities should be urgently implemented to help victims experiencing immigration abuse.**

Police should ensure the enforcement of protection orders. As examined by The Centre for Women’s Justice’s super-complaint and HMICFRS, there is currently a failing by the police to enforce protective measures (bail, non-molestation orders, Domestic Violence Protection Notices and Domestic Violence Protection Orders and restraining orders). In the HMICFRS conducted review, ‘A duty to protect’ it was found that there is a need for better data collection and a requirement for research to be conducted to identify a more robust system of nationwide information sharing which can be used to improve the safety of vulnerable people.

The benefits of this approach have been demonstrated in North Yorkshire with Project Shield. Project Shield is a multi-agency scheme aimed at preventing harm by delivering an improved service around the enforcement of non-molestation orders (NMO), by sharing the court ordered NMO with police and safeguarding professionals. The pilot had a considerable impact and it enabled the police to respond more effectively when victims reported breaches of their NMO and helped the police to take decisive safeguarding action to prevent harm from occurring.[[51]](#footnote-52) The Commissioner supports the further funding of this pilot to different areas across England and Wales.

**Recommendation 19: There must be an enforcement of protection orders by police. There must be joint up approaches between agencies for when orders are breached**.

Police should have knowledge of specialist ‘by and for’ services to sign post victims to in their local area**.** Groups who may need specialist services include those who areLGBTQ+, Deaf and disabled, Black and minoritised, and those who have multiple disadvantages and complex needs (including drug and alcohol support needs, mental health problems, or experiencing homelessness).

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office frequently receives correspondence from victims in these groups stating that there are few or no adequate means of support and that support is subject to a postcode lottery. This was evidenced in our office’s recent report which mapped the provision of domestic abuse services. Completed by over 4,000 survivors of domestic abuse victims, we found that ‘67% per cent of Black and minoritised survivors, 68% of LGBT+ survivors, 55% of disabled survivors and 16 of 62 Deaf survivors wanted access to a specialist ‘by and for’ organisation to provide them with the help they needed. When looking at trans people specifically, a much higher proportion than the overall LGBT+ respondents wanted access to a specialist ‘by and for’ organisation – with 21 of 23 trans victims and survivors saying they wanted this type of support.[[52]](#footnote-53)

This specialist support could include, for example, a strong understanding of multiple forms of discrimination and the delivery of tailored services and intersectional advocacy to address a range of needs. Victims and survivors from these communities face structural barriers to finding or accessing support, and services delivered from outside their community may fail to understand the complexity of the abuse they have experienced, or lack the trust needed for survivors to fully disclose the abuse.

The evidence is also clear that specialist ‘by and for’ services are better placed to support victims and survivors from marginalised and minoritised communities, and to meet their intersecting needs.

Of the Black and minoritised survivors who responded, 78% of those who had accessed a ‘by and for’ service felt safer, compared to 48% who had accessed another kind of service, and 30% who had accessed no support whatsoever.[[53]](#footnote-54) A similar pattern is seen for other minoritised groups who responded to our survey – notably LGBT+ and Deaf, and disabled survivors, but cannot be robustly reported on due to low sample sizes. The lack of a robust sample size to compare LGBT+, Deaf or disabled survivors who had accessed a ‘by and for’ service with other services is itself notable, and reveals the paucity of these services across England and Wales. Whilst police may not be co-located with a specialist ‘by and for’ service they should have knowledge of where these services are and be able to sign post victims to them. As part of the CCR and co-location, police should also feed into discussions on the provision and best funding allocations of ‘by and for’ services to ensure that the needs of the victims in their community are being adequately and most effectively resourced.

**Recommendation 20: Where a survivor has protected characteristics, a referral should be made to a relevant specialist by-and-for service in the local area who can support them through the proceedings. Police forces should keep an up-to-date list of such services and establish clear referral pathways with relevant organisations. As part of co-location, police should involve themselves in discussions on funding arrangements, and on the needs of the community and funding allocations to ‘by and for’ services to best serve the needs of their community.**

In particular, police should prioritise resources to enable access to interpreters for Deaf victims who report crimes. One of the groups most affected and with the least amount of provisions from our survey were those who needed access to British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters or other languages.[[54]](#footnote-55) Many survivors have shared that their statements have not been properly recorded or they were not able to even give a statement. We have also heard accounts where victims have had to prove their disability before they were offered an interpreter.

**Recommendation 21: Police should prioritise access to interpreters for Deaf victims.**

The Government must also make this a priority. Funding is greatly needed for specialist ‘by and for’ services in the CJS with quality-assured interpreters and communication support throughout the CJS, from police through to court.The Government should develop a programme of work to address the barriers to accessing the justice system for disabled people, incorporating training for police, court staff, magistrates and judges, as well as considering the impact of remote video-links.

**Recommendation 22: The Government should commit long- term funding into community-based services and specialist ‘by and for’ services in addition to national services.**

**5. Specifically, what the Metropolitan Police (MPS) must do to increase trust under its new Commissioner**

As the Casey Review is established to examine; ‘there are huge concerns on police behaviour and grave levels of public concern’ and so a review of the culture and standards of the MPS are wholly appropriate and welcomed. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner recently held roundtables with police officers in the MPS to share good practice. At these roundtables many suggestions were raised on how the MPS might improve and in turn increase trust.

Large scale cultural change is needed within the MPS. There must be stronger responses and transparent disciplinary action where there is misconduct. Likewise, the MPS must move away from an introspective and protective culture to one of openness and transparency. Despite one of the standards of professional behaviour for police officers and police staff being a requirement to ‘report, challenge or take action against the conduct of colleagues which has fallen below

the standards of professional behaviour’, the findings of Operation Hotton

show ‘a reluctance to challenge inappropriate behaviour and misconduct.’[[55]](#footnote-56)

Indeed, the report identified several structural issues relating to working practices which allowed conduct issues to permeate and behavioural problems to go unchallenged. These issues included the nature of work, shift patterns, isolation, supervision, acting up/unofficial promotions.[[56]](#footnote-57)

The Casey Review’s ‘Interim Report on Misconduct’ identifies that the MPS is both too slow to resolve allegations of misconduct and that the force is not clear what constitutes misconduct and what will be done about it.[[57]](#footnote-58) It is crucial that all recommendations for improvement from the Casey Review are implemented and that the progress on this implementation is recorded and shared.

**Recommendation 23: The MPS must commit to a programme of cultural change and publicly address the major structural and cultural issues. Recommendations from reviews like the Operation Hotton and Casey Review should be implemented with urgency and progress of their implementation should be monitored and shared.**

The Operation Hotton investigation into the MPS found evidence of a culture of ‘toxic masculinity’, sexual harassment and misogyny within the force. There was evidence of teams dominated by ‘macho’ officers using discriminatory, misogynistic and offensive language. Likewise, the investigation found numerous messages [between police officers] about domestic violence, plus sexually explicit, misogynistic and demeaning conversations.’[[58]](#footnote-59) When challenged by colleagues, those who reported the behaviour were ostracised, harassed and humiliated. This is unacceptable and urgent action, including the immediate suspension of those reported to engaging in or perpetuate these behaviours.

Training is needed consistently across the MPS on domestic abuse and VAWG and more generally misogyny, power and control across all policing levels. Officers who attended our roundtables noted that usually there is sporadic training which is optional to attend, thereby preventing a consistent knowledge of these issues across the force. Training should be compulsory and frequent. In particular, there should be a focus on how to speak to domestic abuse victims and work in ways which are trauma-informed.

**Recommendation 24: There must be transparent disciplinary action for misconduct and a focus on training on domestic abuse, VAWG, misogyny, power and control.**

The MPS must also work more closely within the communities which it serves and in particular with minoritised communities**.** Black and minoritised communities who have been historically overpoliced are more likely to mistrust the police and thus be more hesitant to report crimes.[[59]](#footnote-60) National data from May 2022 shows that Black people are almost nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than White people and the rate at which police used force was five times higher for people perceived to be Black.[[60]](#footnote-61)

For Black and minoritised victims, there can be multiple barriers to accessing justice. As voiced in Imkaan’s the ‘Decriminalisation of Rape’ report, this ranges from ‘the racialised stereotypes about black and minoritised survivors held by multiple professionals, to disproportionate and discriminatory policing’.[[61]](#footnote-62) A fundamental issue for Black and minoritised women and girls relates to their sexual violence and abuse being seen by communities and sometimes by professionals as an extension of their culture and/or religion. This diminishes the experiences of victims/survivors and delegitimis[es] their trauma:[[62]](#footnote-63) The ‘Police Race Action Plan’ captured a need to ‘review all national standards for practice and training, to ensure that they support the development of an anti-racist police service. The MPS, in particular, must make a ‘commitment to anti-racism’. This drive should be ‘embedded as part of leadership programmes at all levels, wider promotion frameworks and appraisal processes’.[[63]](#footnote-64) Likewise, as part of the Race Action Plan’s commitments, there must a zero tolerance of racism in policing.[[64]](#footnote-65)

**Recommendation 25: The MPS must work closely with Black and minoritised communities. They must have training to understand the additional barriers faced by these victims, and the history of policing Black and minoritised people (including the trauma of disproportionality). The MPS must implement commitments in the Police Race Action Plan with urgency.**

**6. What steps can be taken to improve national conviction rates, including via relationships with other bodies such as the Crown Prosecution Service.**

Police and CPS

Collaboration and communication between police and CPS must be improved**.** As mentioned previously, through the CCR model, agencies like the CPS and police must work effectively together to secure better outcomes for survivors of domestic abuse and bring perpetrators to justice. There is encouraging committed work like the RASSO strategy where ‘the CPS have committed to a wide-ranging, joint programme of work with the police through a joint police/CPS rape action plan which aims to improve case progression, help [CPS] build stronger cases from the outset, and accelerate the time taken to bring cases to court’.[[65]](#footnote-66) The CPS and police should continue this work and also develop a programme for domestic abuse victims. To do so, they must work closely with victims and survivors, the domestic abuse sector, including specialist ‘by and for’ services and wider victim support organisations, who will be able to provide expert advice and input to inform this work.

For updates on the progression of a victim’s case and information about the offender following conviction, both police and CPS must ensure that communication with victims is vastly improved. The police must ensure that victims of domestic abuse are contacted through methods of their preferences and that they are trauma informed if they are going to reach out many months or years later.[[66]](#footnote-67)

Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) Max Hill, recently spoke to the Justice Committee about the provision of enhanced services when contacting rape victims, an idea which stemmed from the National Rape Conference. We would thoroughly encourage this to be extended to domestic abuse victims and ask that the CPS continues to work in a collaborative way with the police and informed by victims, ISVA and IDVAs.[[67]](#footnote-68)

**Recommendation 26**: **Commitment to improved communication is needed when informing victims of case progression and information on the offender circumstances following conviction. CPS should commit to a strategy for domestic abuse victims that is created collaboratively with those in the domestic abuse sector.**

In a similar vein, the CPS must itself do more to tackle the huge backlog of cases (through increasing its capacity) as it is the victims who suffer from huge delays and being unable to have closure. Given the significant court delays faced by survivors and victims of domestic abuse it is critical that the CPS reinstate prioritisation of domestic abuse cases. There are already high attrition rates with regards to the prosecution of domestic abuse cases. Long delays for a court date are likely to compound this problem.

**Recommendation 27: CPS and Police should work collaboratively to tackle attrition, lack of referral. CPS must tackle the backlog of cases.**

Co-ordination with CPS is needed when perpetrators are released on bail or where perpetrators are not being subject to bail conditions. Where this is the case, it is important to have safeguarding measures in place. The Centre for Women’s Justice’s (CWJ) super-complaint on ‘Police failure to use protective measures in cases involving violence against women and girls’ shows that police often misunderstood different protection orders.[[68]](#footnote-69)

A large proportion of individuals who are arrested are released under investigation without bail conditions due to a failure to correctly apply the legal test, which is that bail conditions can be used when “necessary and proportionate”. Guidance, training and supervision is required by police forces to ensure that the test is applied properly to protect victims, and that release without bail conditions is not being used simply in order to avoid the additional demands imposed on police officers by pre-charge bail rules.

When bail conditions are imposed, they are almost always lifted after 28 days. The Commissioner supports the CWJ’s finding that there is a fundamental problem with the legislation on extensions of bail. This prevents extensions if the police investigation has not been progressed diligently and expeditiously, regardless of the level of risk faced by the victim. The use of suspects being released under investigation should be restricted in cases of domestic abuse due to the danger which they could pose to a victim and their family. In most cases, where the police are not ready to charge a suspected perpetrator, they should be released on pre-charge bail, rather than released under investigation.

**Recommendation 28: Police officers should have thorough guidance training and supervision on use of protection orders. Police in domestic abuse cases should release suspects under pre-charge bail as opposed to release under investigation.**

Both CPS and the police must actively invite scrutiny and hold scrutiny panels where there are No Further Action (NFA) decisions. Where a NFA decision is made, victims should be contacted by telephone as well as via letters as a matter to course to ensure that they have received notice of the decision and to give them the opportunity to ask any questions regarding why this decision has been made. As part of this, victims should have the Victim’s Right to Review (VRR) process raised to them and explained. Extensive training should be provided for police officers and prosecutors with regard to the VRR process and the criteria for offering this to victims to ensure that all victims who are eligible are offered this recourse.

**Recommendation 29: Police should work closely with CPS and ensure victims of the progress of their case and inform victims of the VRR in cases of NFA. Police and CPS should have training on VRR processes.**

**Recommendation 30: Where there are NFA decisions, police and CPS should hold scrutiny panels.**

Alongside scrutiny of NFA decisions, it is important that police and CPS work to improve data quality to enable further and more nuanced insights. Data should also be collected and recorded on factors driving decision to NFA an incident. Following an extensive review undertaken by the CoP, CPS and NPCC in February 2022, Joint Operational Improvement Meetings (JOIMs) were launched. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office encourages the use of JOIMs for forces and CPS to refresh existing local governance structures and work to improve casework performance through strong working relationships, sharing and solving issues and discussing good practices.[[69]](#footnote-70) Domestic abuse support workers should be involved in JOIMs to ensure that survivors needs are incorporated into the improvements of these CJS bodies.

**Recommendation 31: Data collection and quality must be improved. JOIMS are encouraged for CPS and Police to refresh existing governance structures. Domestic abuse support specialists should be present at JOIMs to ensure the voice of the survivor is heard.**

The CPS and His Majesty’s Courts & Tribunal Service (HMCTS) should revitalise the Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts model and should support its roll out across England and Wales. Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts (SDACs) have consistently demonstrated better outcomes for victims and survivors and yet their provision has been allowed to wane in recent years**.** SDACs operate across many areas of England and Wales to provide survivors of domestic abuse with the support needed to help successfully access and navigate the court system and form effective links across agencies and with Community Safety Partnerships.

They are specially adapted magistrates’ courts hearings which seek to increase the number of successful prosecutions and improve safety for victims, and include the provision of specialist IDVAs, criminal justice staff who are specially trained in the dynamics of domestic abuse and clustering of cases to better facilitate the provision of these specialist services. These Specialist courts go well beyond the Domestic Abuse Best Practice Framework, and genuinely provide a better wrap-around for survivors to more effectively manage risk and support them through the process.

Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, which was one of the organisations instrumental in the establishing the first SDACs in England, also emphasises the importance of Domestic Abuse Court Coordinators within SDACs.[[70]](#footnote-71) These Domestic Abuse Court Coordinators attend court every week to observe proceedings and assist in ensuring that information is provided to the Court to enable safe decisions to be made. By delivering a report on each case to all agencies and practitioners involved and maintaining a record of information from all agencies they are able to track cases accurately.[[71]](#footnote-72)

The findings from the ‘Evaluation of the Westminster Specialist Domestic Abuse Court’ are that SDACs ‘improv[e] victim-survivor feelings of safety and engagement during the court process as well as improving information sharing, multi-agency working and accountability between CJS agencies. The SDAC model facilitate[s]more informed recommendations and decision-making by the professionals who [are] able to access more information about cases as well as apply their specialist knowledge of DA [domestic abuse] when imposing sentences, bail conditions and protective orders’.[[72]](#footnote-73)

**Recommendation 32: The CPS and HMCTS should revitalise the SDAC model which will improve outcomes for domestic abuse cases by ensuring the safety and support of victims while managing risk.**

Police and Government

As highlighted in **Recommendations 5, 6 and 22,** the need for sustainable and effective funding for community- based services, IDVAs and specialist ‘by and for’ is a necessity and underpins the viability of a CCR. It should be stressed that specialist ‘by and for’ and community-based services’ funding must be ring fenced and not afforded at the expense of national services.

The Government should renew the National Oversight Group. The National Oversight Group was set up in 2014 ‘to monitor and report on the progress made in implementing recommendations for police responses to domestic abuse. The intention was the group should report publicly on progress every quarter, however it has fallen into abeyance.[[73]](#footnote-74) The Government must embark on a considerable programme of work to clear court backlogs, including through re-prioritisation of domestic abuse and VAWG cases by the CPS. This should be monitored and overseen by the National Oversight Group. The group should also be used to understand the falls in CJS outcomes for domestic abuse and oversee domestic abuse training throughout the CJS.

**Recommendation 33: The Government should renew the National Oversight Group for Domestic Abuse which should report on progress of police strategies and response to domestic abuse and address the falling outcomes for domestic abuse and oversee training.**

Government funding is needed for a new data tool which records the progress of cases from report to court. There are currently huge gaps in data and poor data retention across the CJS. For example, there is no dedicated data which shows the average length of cases involving domestic abuse going through the family or criminal courts. There is also currently no way of tracking attrition properly. A new data tool is needed to collect this information, track cases and map victims’ journey through the CJS. More must also be done to ensure CPS and police can share data and there must be greater system alignment set up to ensure there are file sharing capabilities between these bodies.

**Recommendation 34: The Government should fund the creation of a new data tool in the CJS to address the huge data gaps. The Government should fund systems that benefit data sharing and alignment.**

**December 2022**

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