

DAC Survivor Engagement Policy:

March 2024

This policy lays out what survivors can expect when engaging with the office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC). It also outlines the key principles which the DAC endorses when promoting survivor engagement external to the DAC office.

There are two primary ways survivors will interact with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner: via correspondence with our office and via the online platform – VOICES.

VOICES is a place to ensure victims and survivors across England and Wales can engage with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, national and local government, statutory agencies, academia, and the voluntary sector. This platform works to ensure their experiences are heard, valued, and elevated in a safe and empowering way, and that the response to domestic abuse is improved through their engagement.

This policy applies when the DAC hosts round tables, in person and online and other participatory events. It also applies when the DAC works with survivors to speak to the media.

In addition, the policy sets out our approach to working with children and young people who experience domestic abuse.

Summary

- This policy sets out the DAC principles of survivor engagement.
- The policy explains why survivor engagement is important to the Commissioner and the importance of ensuring opportunities are accessible to a diverse range of people.
- The policy covers: a tool to help identify if engagement is suitable for a survivor, what survivors can expect from good engagement.
- Payment information outlining who we pay and for what is covered in this policy.

Confidentiality

All information processing at the office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, will be managed in accordance with all UK and EU data protection legislation, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All engagement with the DAC Office takes place within a framework of assumed confidentiality, unless we have specific consent to share information or we are required to breach confidentiality because we believe a person, adult or child, to be at imminent risk of significant harm. Or if we are instructed to do so by a court of law. In the context of safeguarding, harm is not limited to physical harm, it includes emotional and psychological harm.

This means that whatever you tell the Domestic Abuse Commissioner or any members of her team, will not be shared with anyone else, except in certain circumstances. The only times we will share what you have told us, are:

- if you give us specific consent to do so, OR
- If we believe an adult or child is at imminent risk of significant harm, OR
- If a court of law instructs us to, for example if evidence is required for criminal proceedings.

This means on rare occasions; we will not be able to keep your details confidential and we may need to involve statutory agencies. Where possible, we will seek to involve you in this process.

Safeguarding

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has safeguarding arrangements in place to protect children and adults from all forms of harm and abuse.

All staff of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office are required to follow the DAC's safeguarding policies. All DAC staff must complete the mandatory safeguarding training.

Information about the policies and actions required in the event of a disclosure or concern for an individual's safety can be obtained from the

Safeguarding Team (email sg@domesticabusecommissioner.independent.gov.uk). This includes any immediate actions as well as arrangements for recording and reporting the concern or incident. In the event of concern that an individual is at immediate risk of significant harm, the emergency services will be notified.

Introduction

Why lived experience matters to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

- The first priority of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's strategic plan is to stand with and for victims and survivors of domestic abuse.
- It is vital that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's work to improve the response to domestic abuse is led and shaped by the lived realities of those subject to domestic abuse.
- Lived experience matters for many reasons, not least of which is that only someone who has been through an experience knows the nuances and complexities of dealing with it.
- When the voices of those who have lived through and who have been subjected to domestic abuse are centred and listened to, there is a greater chance of the response meeting the needs of survivors.

Language

We use the term 'victims and survivors' to describe people with lived experience of domestic abuse. This is short for 'victims and survivors of domestic abuse' which we may also use, along with 'victim or survivor' when we are describing an individual. However, we understand some people do not like or use this term and we support everyone's autonomy to describe their experiences in a way that is comfortable for them.

'Lived experience' describes the things people have directly experienced themselves. Someone with lived experience of domestic abuse will have experienced any form of domestic abuse as an adult or a child. It also describes friends and family members who have been bereaved by a domestic homicide. This term is used in contrast with 'learned experience', which describes when someone has learned about the experience of

domestic abuse – e.g., by research/study/employment– but has not directly experienced it themselves.

The term ‘survivor engagement’ describes the process of empowering victims and survivors of domestic abuse to use their lived experience to influence change. This could involve a victim or survivor advising a domestic abuse service on how their support is delivered, speaking about their lived experience at an event, participating in research, or consulting with organisations on relevant policies.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline what we mean by lived experience and survivor engagement. It is to lay out what survivors can expect when they interact with the office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner.

The policy also includes the values we promote when discussing lived experience.

The policy also outlines the process if an individual has concerns. It also refers to safeguarding processes.

This policy applies to all types of engagement with survivors including but not limited to; correspondence, online activities, roundtables, in person events, media speaking.

Scope

This policy applies to all who work for and all who engage with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and her team.

Any survivor who is engaged directly with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and her team, can expect the standards laid out in the policy.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner recognises that there is no “us and them” with survivors and professionals. She knows that all in her office meet and interact daily with survivors of domestic abuse in their regular business. The scope of this policy therefore is for when the office engages survivors with the specific purpose of understanding and hearing their expertise as survivors.

Under Part 2, s19 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner is legally prevented from exercising any function in relation to an individual case. This means that the Commissioner cannot offer support to victims and survivors or raise issues with services or agencies they have been in contact with on their behalf. The Domestic Abuse Act sets out that this does not prevent the Domestic Abuse Commissioner from considering an individual case and drawing conclusions about them for the purpose of, or in the context of, considering a general issue.

The office promotes external opportunities for engagement via our website and newsletters. These opportunities have been reviewed through a due diligence process, in line with our values, expectations and safeguarding processes.

While the Commissioner and her team encourage good practice in the external opportunities they advertise, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner is not responsible for this practice.

What can survivors expect when they engage with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner?

The first priority of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) is to stand with Victims and Survivors. As such survivors can expect integrity and transparency in their engagement with the DAC office.

When survivors engage with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, they can expect that:

- Survivor engagement will be purposeful,
- Survivor engagement will be ethical,
- Survivors will always be treated with dignity and respect,
- Survivors will be informed of outcomes and the results of any engagement where possible.

At the heart of all survivor engagement are the values that we stand for.

DAC Principles of survivor engagement.

1. There is no “us and them”. Every workplace will be home to many survivors of domestic abuse. Survivors are professionals and vice versa.

2. There is no one voice to represent survivors – there are as many types of survivors as there are people.
3. Not all voices are heard equally and those with platforms and microphones should actively seek to amplify those that are less likely to be heard.
4. Survivors are free to share as much or as little as they choose. People subject to domestic abuse can tell us what they want to see change without having to explain their story.
5. Survivors should have the space to influence what matters to them, not just comment on what matters to organisations.

Accessibility

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is committed to involving a diverse range of survivors and removing barriers to participation where possible. We recognise not all voices are heard equally and those with platforms and microphones should actively seek to amplify those that are less likely to be heard.

We refer to the inequalities in participation and representation as outlined in the VAWG Anti Racism Charter, and actively work to disrupt them.

[VAWG_Sector_Anti_Racism_Charter.pdf \(mcusercontent.com\)](#)

We understand that many survivors might be experiencing physical or mental ill health, may have disabilities or additional access needs, or be carers and this may mean making bespoke arrangements to support people's involvement. We also recognise that some people face multiple disadvantage, including experiences of homelessness, substance use, involvement in the criminal justice system and complex mental health needs, which can limit their capacity to be involved.

We aim to maximise the accessibility of communication, information and documents relating to engagement opportunities and public consultations. Documents and digital materials should be written in plain English. Consideration will also be given to translation and interpreting services where appropriate. Face to face involvement opportunities,

whether a one-off workshop or event, or regular meetings, should consider the access and support needs of the target audience and those attending.

Where possible we will:

- Arrange BSL/foreign language translators.
- Provide easy read documents
- Offering a preference for in-person/virtual
- Where activities are in person ensure physical accessibility
- Where activities are online – we will offer a range of methods of communicating to reach different needs, e.g. teams, phone calls, zoom.

We will also use technology and remote access engagement approaches, e.g. webinars and teleconferences as they can be cost effective as well as supporting those who live in geographically remote areas, or those who have difficulty travelling to get involved.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner notes that not all survivors interact in the digital world, and where practical will work with the sector to provide alternatives via paper newsletters and in person connections also.

Research

An ethical approach is integrated at the heart of all the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office research projects. This includes working with our sector and survivor advisory groups to develop our research methods and inform our work. Our team abide by Government Social Research ethical principles, and also apply the domestic abuse specific [Research Integrity Framework](#). The framework was written by the four Women's Aid federations from Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in partnership with academic researchers.

You will be kept fully informed in any information you share or activity you are part of, will be used for research purposes.

Understanding if lived experience engagement is right for a survivor

There are many ways survivors can get involved to share their voice. Survivors may be considering joining a focus group or roundtable or taking part in research, or sharing their story for the media.

We understand that there are as many types of survivors as there are people. Some people are happy to be involved with little or no support and others will not wish to be involved without it. Some will engage whilst still being subjected to domestic abuse.

We recognise that some survivors will face additional challenges to engage and the DAC will be mindful of the following:

Victims and survivors experiencing ongoing abuse

Survivors can write to the commissioner and sign up for the VOICES platform whilst still being subject to domestic abuse. Survivors commonly engage whilst experiencing ongoing post separation abuse.

We want to ensure that survivors have the autonomy to participate regardless of their circumstances. We also want to ensure the safety of survivors who may be experiencing abuse and yet not be receiving any formal support.

Whenever the Domestic Abuse Commissioner engages survivors who disclose current abuse, support routes and options will be shared. We will be clear with survivors that we are not a support service, and that specialist domestic abuse services are best placed to provide support.

When there is a safeguarding concern, where appropriate and possible, the DAC worker will inform the survivor and will follow internal procedures. This may mean breaking confidentiality where safeguarding procedures must be followed. More information about this is set out within this document's confidentiality statement and is available on our VOICES page online.

Victims and survivors who are not in contact with domestic abuse services

We know for many survivors that either the service they received was finite or limited and even if the abuse hasn't stopped, the formal support has. We also know that some survivors never access formal support for a variety of reasons.

We also know that engagement can bring to the surface emotions and experiences that may benefit from professional support.

The DAC recognises though that it is vital to hear the voices of people who haven't accessed services, and to understand why not.

The DAC does not hold a support function either for a group or on a one-to-one basis. The DAC is legally prohibited from being involved in individual cases.

The DAC would encourage survivors to reflect whether an engagement is right for them and is happy to discuss with survivors prior to engagement what can be expected.

One tool we encourage survivors to take, is this self-audit to understand if the involvement is right for them.

We have taken and adapted the self-audit checklist from The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework Report (safeandequal.org.au) and it can be seen in appendix A. Regardless of whether a survivor is accessing support, this checklist can be a useful tool to help assess whether a piece of engagement is right.

Engaging survivors through Domestic Abuse support services

Often we will work with sector organisations to engage survivors both directly with our office and to facilitate engagement for the DAC which is then hosted within a sector organisation. Where appropriate we endeavour to recompense organisations who support this work and when we do this, also for them to disseminate payments to relevant survivors.

Engaging Children and Young People, who have been subjected to domestic abuse with the DAC

Under Part 1 s3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Children under the age of 18 are recognised as victims in their own right when seeing, hearing or experiencing the effects of domestic abuse. Young people aged 16–25 are also at particular risk of domestic abuse in their intimate partner relationships.

Understanding the experiences and priorities of children and young people is vital.

The DAC recognises that engaging with children and young people has additional concerns and safeguarding procedures. When engaging children and young people under the age of 18, the DAC will work alongside established and reputable specialist groups and organisations to ensure the unique needs of children and young people are met.

Expenses and payments

The DAC will reimburse reasonable expenses for survivor engagement. We offer vouchers to participants of formal engagement opportunities. Our rates of compensation are based on the living wage.

Exact amounts vary due to the nature of the activity, and the length of time and preparation involved for survivors.

Full details will be shared with survivors at the first available point of engagement.

Managing concerns about the engagement.

Lived experience engagement can result in some survivors raising concerns. These can be about the nature of the activity or a personal concern which has been triggered because of the activity.

The lead staff at DAC should try to deal with any concerns raised by the survivor in the first instance, exploring the issues with the survivor and trying to understand where, why and how they have arisen to jointly identify solutions.

On rare occasions sometimes survivors find themselves in an engagement activity which for a variety of reasons does not suit the individual. If the staff of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner have concerns about the behaviour or suitability of a survivor when engaged, these should be raised in a supportive way, with the individual directly, where possible.

If a survivor is not happy – they can escalate their concerns within the DAC office. Concerns will first be escalated to the Chief of Staff and the Commissioner, and thereafter to the Home Office as our Sponsoring Department.

All engagement activity should be a safe and respectful experience for everyone participating. In the event that a participant in survivor engagement is abusive, the DAC have the ability to remove someone from an activity or group engagement or cease contact where someone is consistently abusive.

Abuse in any form will not be tolerated.

To be clear, this is not about silencing any individual but there will be forms of behaviour which are completely unacceptable e.g. racist or discriminatory language, etc.

In the event that a survivor discloses further abuse which indicates a risk, the staff will listen and signpost. They will follow safeguarding processes where applicable.

Appendix A

LIVED EXPERIENCE ENGAGEMENT SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS

This series of questions has been developed to support domestic abuse victim survivors decide whether they would like to be formally engaged as a survivor advocate. These questions might provide useful guidance for discussions between an organisation and a survivor during the recruitment process.

- What are my reasons for wanting to participate as a survivor advocate?
- Do I really want to participate or am I feeling that I should?
- Am I ready to talk about my own personal experiences if required?

RESOURCES NEEDED

- Do I have enough resources in place both personally and professionally to do the work required as an expert by experience?
- What support will I need to ensure my health and wellbeing is not negatively impacted by participation?
- How will I manage the emotions associated with talking about domestic abuse?
- What strategies will I use if someone reacts negatively or judgmentally to my expertise?

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

- Is it safe for me to participate?
- Are there any ongoing risks posed by the person who abused me?
- Are there protections that can be put in place to increase my safety?
- Do I know if this organisation has procedures in place to record and remember the safety protections I want to put in place?

BOUNDARIES

- How will I ensure my personal and professional boundaries are upheld?
- What are my personal limits regarding what I am happy to contribute as a survivor advocate?
- Am I clear about the limitations of this role and who I can represent when I speak publicly?

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Am I involved in any ongoing legal proceedings that may be jeopardised by participating as an expert by experience?
- Are there any potential legal consequences of being an expert by experience?
- Am I clear about how I would make complaints or provide feedback about my involvement with this organisation?

PRIVACY

- What information am I ready to share and what information do I want to keep private?
- How do I feel about colleagues or family members finding out about my experiences?
- Do I want to participate in this work anonymously?
- Am I able to use my own name or do I want to develop a synonym?
- Is it ok for photos to be used of me in promotional materials or online?

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Are there people in my life who need to be aware of my decision to be an expert by experience?
- How might my children or family feel about my decision to participate? What might the impacts of this decision be for them?
- How might my community feel about and react to my decision to participate? How might their responses impact me?