

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London

Our ref:TP/VS

6 August 2021

Dear Home Secretary

RE: HMICFRS report: Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic

Thank you for the report on policing domestic abuse during the pandemic, which includes recommendations to be addressed by Chief Constables. Suffolk Constabulary has provided a comprehensive response to these recommendations, which is attached. I am pleased that the HMICFRS inspection report highlights good practice by Suffolk Constabulary.

The report brings into focus the important relationship between front-line officers and the Joint Justice Department which is a collaborated function across Norfolk and Suffolk Constabularies, and the ongoing challenges within the Criminal Justice System. It is important to ensure the service for victims across the police functions is as seamless as possible.

In terms of the work of my office, it remains a priority to ensure that specialist support services are in place to support recommendation 2 and we continue to work with partners on this. The delays in the criminal justice system impact the work of both the police and victims' services, which are key to the extent to which victims continue to receive support.

An effective response to domestic abuse is an important area of focus within my Police and Crime Plan. We will consider the learning for our relationships with key partners in Suffolk, including the partnership work to refresh the Suffolk Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

It is vital that alongside the efforts of the police and support agencies, Government tackles the failures in the criminal justice system. These are creating further distress for victims.

I will keep these matters under review as part of my accountability arrangements.

Yours sincerely



Tim Passmore, Police and Crime Commissioner for Suffolk



Subject	HMICFRS Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic published June 2021
Date	07/07/2021
PURPOSE	Briefing Note
PREPARED BY	Supt Kerry Cutler
COMMISSIONED BY	T/DCS A SMITH

INTRODUCTION

This briefing note is written in response to the HMICFRS **Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic published June 2021**. This review looked at how the police nationally responded to the unique challenges the COVID-19 pandemic placed on preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

POSITIVE WORK BY POLICE

The HMICFRS highlighted that the pandemic had put domestic abuse victims at greater risk, but it praised the police for making good use of technology and working with partners to find new ways to support victims. For example, some police forces:

- sent links for virtual appointments to victims which left no trace on the victim’s phone or computer, which their abuser may check;
- worked with businesses, including hairdressers and banks, to improve understanding of the signs of abuse or provide a safe space for victims;
- ran media campaigns to promote the “silent solution” system for emergency contact, where someone calling 999 can press 55 if they are not able to speak; and
- used online platforms to disclose information to potential victims about a partner’s history of abuse, where previously this had to take place at a police station.

Suffolk Constabulary is specifically referenced in the report for contacting more than 600 previous domestic abuse victims by telephone to offer reassurance, provide information about support services and encourage them to report further incidents. In recognition that due to lockdown restrictions it may be more likely that the perpetrator would be at home with the victim, a call script was used to help reduce risk. This enabled the victim to explain without arousing suspicion that they were unable to speak, but it also provided a rationale for the call if it was answered by the perpetrator.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The inspectorate said that while the police had innovated throughout the pandemic, it still had some concerns about how the police responds to domestic abuse longer-term.

HMICFRS found that on average, three in every four domestic abuse crimes reported to the police are closed without the perpetrator being charged – a situation which has gradually worsened over the last five years. The inspectorate also said it had significant concerns about court backlogs, which whilst not for the police to solve, may increase the likelihood of victims disengaging from the criminal justice process.

HMICFRS has recommended that the police should:

Recommendation 1

- We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should immediately introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework. The framework should assess the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.
- We recommend that forces immediately review their use of a telephone-based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing.

The majority of reporting by a victim or witness of Domestic Abuse is via the CCR with calls to either 999 or 101. All grading decisions in the CCR are based on the THRIVE principles with the National Decision Model (NDM) used to assist CCR decision makers on the appropriate response. If a victim or witness were to contact 101, they are initially presented to an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to allow the caller to opt for the queue most appropriate to what it is they are reporting or querying. Domestic Abuse is designated a 'High' priority call and would be placed in the relevant 101 queue within the CCR. The remainder are presented to the Central Call Answering (CCA) switchboard who will THRIVE the call and if Domestic Abuse related will either place in the High Priority queue or if found to be urgent passed to the CCR to be dealt with as a 999 call.

To assist call takers in gathering information with regards to incidents of Domestic Abuse, CCR personnel are provided with a list of suggested points that they should aim to obtain from the caller/victim. In addition, CCR personnel will make use of available technology and intelligence systems to assist with additional identification of risk.

Each CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) created is reviewed at the earliest opportunity by either the CCR Supervisor or CCR Inspector to allow a review of the risk assessment to take place. If necessary, the grading may be increased to provide a quicker response. There is an expectation that prior to closure of a recognised domestic incident a relevant record has been created, i.e., Crime Investigation / non-crime domestic record etc., and a CAD will not be closed unless this is documented. This is checked through the CCR National Crime Recording Standards/NCIR review and audit process and fed back to the CCR on a case by case basis.

With regards to the Quality Assurance (QA), along with ASB, all CCR Inspectors are allocated 5 random ASB CADs and calls to QA, they are also allocated 5 other crime groups, in line with Force Priorities. This way the CCR can focus on any common themes or best practice, being able to see the difference between those CADs which have effectively negated the need for a crime compared to others that maybe haven't. Currently the CCR are focussing on - *DA, Harassment, Hate Crime, Concern for safety, Missing/Absent, Violence Against the Person.*

DA was last audited in May of this year and looked at the following:

- Correctly classified
- Quiff Required/completed
- THRIVE'd and correctly graded
- What checks were completed (ATHENA/PNC/NFLMS)
- Correctly allocated (NRT/SNT/SGU)
- Crime required and added
- Correct tags used
- Evidence of CSE
- Positive and developmental feedback given to staff member

There is no On-Line reporting for DA and the Force website signposts victims to using 999 or 101. In addition, the Force also use the 'Silent Solution' where victims can dial 999 but if unable to communicate due to the presence of the perpetrator can dial 55 and will be put through to the police who will know it is an emergency call.

Third-party reports received via the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub are routinely assessed, if any crimes disclosed these are recorded and allocated for further investigation.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that forces immediately review their capacity to provide ongoing support and safeguarding to victims of domestic abuse whose case is awaiting trial at court. This should:

- ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims to keep them up to date with the progress of their case; and
- enable the offer of access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays.

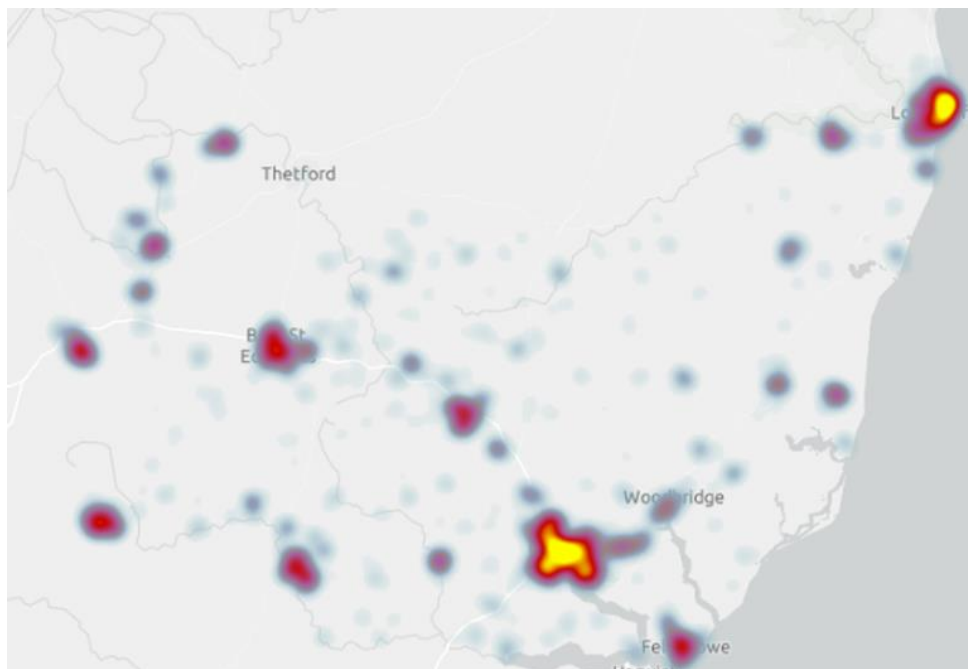
The Office for National Statistics (ONS) stated 'There has generally been an increase in demand for domestic abuse victim services during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly affecting helplines as lockdown measures eased; this does not necessarily indicate an increase in the number of victims, but perhaps an increase in the severity of abuse being experienced, and a lack of available coping mechanisms such as the ability to leave the home to escape the abuse, or attend counselling'.

Area	Indicator	Last 12 months	Three Year Average	% Difference
Domestic Abuse Crimes	Number of crimes	9,358	8,298	12.8%
	Solved Number	996	1,205	-17.3%
	- Percentage solved	10.6%	14.5%	-3.9p.p
	Percentage of Cases where investigation not possible	1.2%	0.9%	0.3p.p
	Percentage of Cases where victim does not support	47.4%	51.9%	-4.5p.p
		Last 12 months	Three Year Average	% Difference

In the period 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 the number of Domestic Abuse crimes reported to Suffolk Police has seen an increase of 12.8 % (1060 crimes) against the 3-year average. Domestic Abuse reporting has been much lower than expected during the last 12 months and further examination of data needs to be done to understand trends. Examination of data in other forces has identified that abuse by current partners and family members increasing, while ex-partner abuse declined/ Lockdown restrictions may have prevented movement therefore providing an added safeguard for victims who were not residing with the perpetrator.

The Force data specifically relates to the number of crimes recorded and should not be taken as an indicator of the number of victims who have reported Domestic Abuse during the last 12 months. There were 5,983 distinct individual victims who had reported a domestic abuse crime to police during that same period. This means a number may have reported more than one incident during the previous 12 months or when they did report an incident, reported a number of incidents that resulted in more than one crime being recorded.

Mapping of reported crimes shows reporting is centered around our large towns:



COVID is likely to have masked demand in the last 12 months. There are various hypotheses suggesting the impact that Covid-19 has had on worsening domestic abuse, such as lack of social contact, reduction in service provision and lack of opportunity for face to face contact. Feedback from victims (national research) suggests that police response in rural areas is not as good as in urban areas. In response to this the Constabulary has undertaken specific training to DA Champions regarding Rural Domestic Abuse and a Rural Engagement Plan has been created which aims to:

- To raise awareness of reporting mechanisms and support services available to victims to rural domestic abuse.
- To use all opportunities available to engage, inform and support others on the effects of domestic abuse, signs to look for and where to seek support.
- To work with our partners in identifying those at risk of harm and ensuring they receive the right care and support.

Leeway Domestic Violence and Abuse Services have provided the IDVA service in Suffolk since 1 October 2018. The service is funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner. In the last year the IDVA and ISVA workforce in Suffolk have dealt with increased referrals and complexity of cases (including greater mental health needs, addiction and more victims with learning difficulties). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was mentioned by all services as a contributory factor in the complexity of cases and as a barrier to accessing support and the ability of victims to cope and recover. Services were able to cope by spending less time travelling and working remotely during the pandemic however it is expected that more clients will want face to face support when pandemic restrictions are eased, increasing pressure on the capacity of existing services.

In February 2021 the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) notified PCCs of the National ISVA and IDVA Fund, to be distributed through Expressions of Interest (EOI). The funding was announced in response to the increases in volume of cases to support services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A local assessment of need was undertaken as part of the OPCC bid to the fund. This covered an analysis of current unmet need for advocates in Suffolk, gaps in provision for under-represented victims (such as those with protected characteristics and males) and how the proposal would align with existing provision. The analysis showed:

- A 20% increase in the number of DA crimes reported to the police, an increase of 16% in MARAC cases and of 29% in referrals to the IDVA service in 2020.
- Safelives (the UK DA charity) recommend an average 100 referrals a year per IDVA and advise there should be 18 (full time equivalent) IDVAs in Suffolk. Suffolk had 188 referrals per IDVA in 2020 and 11.7 FTE IDVAs.
- Cases supported at court rose from an average of 41 in 2019 to 51 in 2020.
- Data shows increases in male, black and minority ethnic and elderly referrals to the IDVA service in 2020 but these groups remain under-represented.

- There is currently no specialist provision to encourage victims to seek support or spare capacity for specialist training.
- Partners and advisors identified a gap in referrals from health, particularly for the elderly and were concerned with the rising number of young people seeking support.
- ISVAs dealt with 34% more referrals in 2020 but the number of male, ethnic minority, LGBT+ and non-English speaker clients remains low.

On the basis of the analysis the OPCC requested funding for 4 additional IDVAs in the Suffolk IDVA service (provided by Leeway Domestic Violence and Abuse Services) with specialist skills in supporting young people, male victims, victims from minority backgrounds and victims whose cases go to court.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that all forces immediately review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This is to ensure that:

- domestic abuse investigations 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;
- there is regular and effective supervision of investigations that supports the above point to be achieved; and
- the use of outcomes 15 and 16 is appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, are clearly recorded.

Through the Performance Improvement Unit (PIU) the Constabulary have begun an audit of Domestic Abuse cases regarding positive action and positive outcomes, included within this work the PIU will review outcome 15 and 16. The sample size for review is 750-1000 cases. The findings will be reported later in the year and taken forward as part of a new Continuous Improvement Plan that is being created for Domestic Abuse.