

Domestic abuse and child protection: Change Project case file audit report

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Background

This case file audit formed part of a national Change Project, led by Research in Practice with Professors Featherstone and Morris. The Change Project emerged from discussions with senior managers and practitioners in local authorities and the third sector which highlighted the urgency of exploring possibilities for 'thinking and doing differently' in relation to domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and child protection. Managers and practitioners expressed an appetite to engage with the international scholarship on risk and understand more about how intersecting inequalities impact upon the challenges and opportunities faced by adults impacted by DVA.

The Change Project

Research in Practice has supported a number of [Change Projects](#) across the children's social care sector. This project focused on Domestic Abuse and Violence in the context of Child Protection. Research in Practice led on recruitment and administration with Professors Featherstone and Morris coordinating a team that included Sharon Inglis, a consultant in restorative practice, with Jessica Wild and Susannah Bowyer (Research in Practice) supporting the development of the content and sessions.

Applications were invited from Research in Practice's [membership network](#) with a focus on recruiting managers and strategic leaders in child and family services. They in turn were asked to nominate a partner from a local agency involved with them in responding to DVA. The project involved over 30 agencies and was delivered over an 18-month period culminating in spring 2021 (with a re-call day in June 2021). Participating agencies included Local Authority Children's Services, Women's Organisations, DVA specialist support services, Police and family support agencies.

The Case File Audit

As part of the learning process participants were supported to undertake a local case file audit to explore how their child protection services currently understand and respond to concerns about DVA.

The aims were:

- To better understand what is being defined as DVA in child protection responses.

- To begin to explore common themes in responses by services and practitioners.
- To capture themes emerging in family experiences (as described by professionals).

Files within each agency were reviewed in pairs by staff from the agency using a template provided, and all the cases reviewed involved (at some stage) child protection interventions that were driven by concerns about DVA. Each participating agency then produced a summary sheet (again using a template) that identified emerging themes and practice issues.

The data

The file audit outcomes are based on:

- Reviewing 166 files from 22 Local Authorities in England that included over 286 children.
- Interventions that were primarily child protection; a limited number were family support cases or care proceedings.

The themes

Entering (or re-entering) the systems

The most common source of referrals were police services followed by health and family support staff. Very few referrals came from neighbours or family members. The police referrals often contained adequate or good information about a specific incident. The focus on incidents meant, however, that referrals lacked any sense of context – whether in terms of histories, socio-economic circumstances or information on family networks. As a result, services and systems (mainly children's services) were responding to a specific incident and then 'playing catch up' in terms of trying to situate it in a broader picture. The focus on episodes or incidents has been noted as a problematic feature of approaches to domestic abuse previously and therefore should not be considered as unique to participating agencies.¹ Catch-up activities usually took the form of convening multi-agency meetings as well as engaging the family concerned; although as discussed further below, engagement with families was limited.

The limits to the file information

The absence of attention to social and economic circumstances in the referrals, is possibly understandable at the point of crisis. However, this continued to be evident throughout the development of the plans and responses by children's services and multi-agency partners. Children's experiences were often included in the assessments and there was evidence of high quality accounts, with considerable efforts being made to hear their voices and understand what was happening from their perspectives. Women's experiences and circumstances were less detailed, but did feature to an extent (although these descriptions were often confined to how these experiences affected their parenting). Even less detail was evident about the men and their experiences and circumstances. The partial, graded nature of the information then shaped the responses and planning.

¹ [Sidebottom, P et al. \(2016\). *Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014*, London, DfE](#)

How systems and professionals interpret and translate experiences

Once the referral is received and broader professional conversations begin, there is evidence of significant increase in the use of jargon, generic 'catch all' terminology and value-based reflections. This included summary references on records to 'domestic abuse' without any details about the nature or type, professional debates about agency or service responsibilities in responding to the family, and value-based commentary on women as mothers and their protectiveness:

'Mother is the victim of a serious assault by partner, she states the relationship is over however she has a pattern of returning to abusive relationships and failing to see the impact on her children.'

However, the audit did identify that children's experiences are increasingly central to plans and to assessments, with greater nuance and understanding of the impact of domestic abuse and violence on them evident.

The audit revealed that a particular pathway is routine and is best summarised as follows:

incident-driven referrals *plus* partial information gathering often dominated by professional information sharing rather than conversations with those directly impacted and involved *plus* institutional categorisation *equalling* 'one size fits all' service driven responses.

A number of questions emerged from this process driven approach:

- Are conversations about domestic abuse happening in the right place with the right people and at the right time, in order to create the possibilities for supporting safety and change?
- Is the focus too much on multi-agency talking and navigating institutional categories? Have we built professional processes to compensate for the incident-driven nature of contact with women and their families (multi-agency information-sharing forums are the obvious example)? These forums engage in information-sharing but they may, or may not, result in effective help plans and rarely include family members.
- How can we capture the context of incidents at the point of developing support? The lack of detailed discussions with all family members about the abuse, their understandings of its causes and the possible solutions, is striking and problematic.

Plans and professional responses

The file audit reinforced a broader theme from various DVA studies, namely that when children are deemed to be in need of protection, women are assigned unrealistic roles and responsibilities. The impact of women's own experiences of abuse and violence on their behaviour is often minimised, and assumptions made about women's responsibility for providing protection and safety. The audit found an absence of professional insight into the consequences of this approach for subsequent engagement and participation.

Of particular note from the audit was the extent to which men became largely invisible as the work developed post referral. Plans focused on children and women, and men were routinely either absent from plans or allocated to specialist programmes and services. The extent to which their harmful behaviours were reduced or managed was unclear, the focus consistently being on changes in the behaviour or arrangements of the women.

Linked to the absence of men in the data from the audit was a pattern that highlighted separation strategies as a common default position. Work with the whole family was evident in a limited number of cases, and some areas were testing out the use of family approaches such as Family Group Conferences, but this was uncommon. Protection plans were focused on separation as a means of managing risk, and this theme links closely to the earlier discussion of unrealistic expectations and demands placed on women.

Conclusion

The audit findings highlight that routine practices focus on mothers, and though more attention is being paid to children's experiences, men are largely invisible. These findings echo some of the concerns that prompted the development of the Change Project and highlight the importance of its work. The findings suggest the need to re-think how men and women are being understood and responded to, and suggest that current professional responses and practices need to be reconsidered in order to support this. In particular, the audit indicates the value of 'a day in the life' approach in professional analyses and responses. By this we mean practice approaches that support family members to walk professionals through their daily routines and practices to ensure they have fine-grained and very concrete understandings of the impacts of harmful behaviours and experiences on family members in a variety of settings and contexts. This nuanced approach would enable the framing of the problem and the possibilities differently by identifying sources of stresses as well as strengths.

More detailed 'practice near' research would support agencies in this process and enable rich understandings to emerge and inform policy and practice. The experiences and perspectives of those impacted by DVA should be key. Ultimately there needs to be a rebalancing of the conversation around DVA. This involves engaging with its complexities as manifest in the lives of women, men and children and appreciating the role played by intersecting inequalities as part of a move away from 'one size fits all' understandings and responses.