



Domestic Issues:

The Role of Local Authorities in
Tackling Domestic Abuse

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New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to modernise public services, develop local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this White Paper as part of it's innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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The Cost of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence accounts for 16% of recorded crime and 25% of reported violent crime recorded by the police. Domestic violence will affect 1 in 4 women in their lifetime. It is pervasive, can be difficult to prosecute and perpetrators are nearly always repeat offenders. There are usually multiple assaults before a victim calls the police yet one incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute. The estimated cost to the Government, taking into account the cost to the justice system, health care, housing and lost economic output, is almost £6 billion rising to £23 billion when taking into account the human and emotional cost.¹ Domestic violence has a deeper impact on society too. It is a factor of life for 80% of young offenders and some research suggests victims are significantly more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs.² Domestic Violence is closely linked with anti-social behaviour, bullying, child abuse, fear of crime, health and mental health problems, social exclusion and poverty. What issue could be more cross-cutting?

For many years the handling of domestic violence and its fallout was seen as the responsibility of the voluntary sector through

1 S.Walby, (2004) The Cost of Domestic Violence

2 LGA, (2005) Prioritising Work to Address Domestic Violence

women's groups and agencies like Women's Aid. These agencies still play a vital role but large strides have been taken in recent years to mainstream domestic violence. Its profile has risen within Government, within the criminal justice system and within society at large, though there is still some way to go.

A National Approach

To date, central Government has been driving action on domestic violence and there is too frequently a perception that change can only continue to come from above. Work is ongoing to develop a national framework for preventing domestic violence and the focus of many women's groups is on altering central Government attitudes in order to draw down greater funding.

This centralised attitude has achieved some success. The Home Office continues to lead on this issue and progress has been made on improving national legislation and the prosecution of offenders. Government support has put domestic violence on the national agenda and significantly increased its profile in the media. Government has also built it into the CPA performance framework to ensure its importance is raised among local authorities. But a centralised approach also has drawbacks:

- The Home Office's inter-departmental groups have begun to address the cross cutting nature of the agenda but the emphasis remains on the criminal justice system rather than the provision of other vital services. National

legislation can improve the justice system's responsiveness to domestic abuse issues but it is less effective in ensuring the delivery of other support services.

- With a Home Office focus, the profile of domestic violence is affected by national media, shifting departmental policy and the high profile of issues such as immigration, over-crowded prisons and terrorism.
 - As the Home Office splits into two departments there are also concerns that support for successful developments in the field of domestic violence (e.g. specialist courts) will be withdrawn.
- Central policy cannot deliver the level of community engagement needed to tackle domestic violence at its roots.
- Centralised policies cannot reflect and respond to local needs and circumstances. They can also lead to conflicting and incompatible local responses in service delivery.
- Central funding policies lead to uncertainty and short-term service strategies.

- Local authorities are the key delivery agent of the services needed to support those affected.
- In the long-term, national pressure will not translate into significant sustainable political action at a local level.
- Domestic violence is still seen as 'too difficult' to be dealt with locally which can lead to inertia and inaction both politically and within service provision.
- Public monies could be more effectively spent in this area with stronger local leadership and improved local strategic and operational structures.
- Government has made a commitment to reduce ring fencing of funding. Local authorities must now be convinced of the importance of tackling domestic violence locally if they are to provide the resources needed to tackle it in their area.

Government is also cutting back the existing performance framework recognising the need for an improved system for driving local improvements. The domestic violence Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) covers primarily operational procedures. Scores achieved vary from less than one percent to one hundred percent, but in some instances this says little about real local achievement. As with any performance framework, a focus on outcomes can get lost beneath the need to meet central Government targets. The BVPI also refers to district councils but does not

Can we improve on a centralised approach?
Central pressure has delivered improvements at a local level but real and sustained progress requires local responsibility.

reflect the role of county councils in delivering relevant services in two tier areas.

“Trying to fit a complex cross-cutting issue like domestic violence into the existing orthodox performance management framework just doesn’t work.”

Domestic Violence Coordinator

If we are to take this agenda forward new actions are needed to drive improvements in domestic violence locally, to improve and join up local services and to sustain local government’s passion for the task.

In fact, domestic violence is very much a local issue. The social, cultural and environmental factors that influence it in Tower Hamlets may not be the same as those in Torquay. These factors can and should influence the way that resources and services are targeted locally. Services need the flexibility to design local services around local need.

The Pivotal Role of Local Authorities

Some positive steps have been taken to localise the agenda around the country. Many areas have Domestic Violence Partnerships which help bring together local agencies and make joined-up services more easily accessible to victims. More strategic work is also ongoing at a local and regional level with many areas developing their own domestic violence strategies. In London, the Mayor’s Second Domestic Violence Strategy continues to push this up the agenda of relevant local agencies and to develop a more coordinated response across London.

But within this framework the contribution of local authorities is not as great as it could be. Local authorities are the lead agency in just one of the recommendations in London’s strategy. This is a reflection of the difficulties in getting agreed upon and co-ordinated responses across disparate councils. These difficulties must be met head on by local authorities and not sidestepped by overly-centralised thinking.

Local authorities must also avoid the temptation to departmentalise domestic violence. The LGA has produced work on designing Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) which reflect ambitious domestic violence targets for local authorities. This research, Targeting abuse – setting domestic violence stretch targets, noted that most domestic violence targets are located within the safer and stronger communities block of the LAA. It concluded that more needed to be done across LAA blocks to deliver the cross-cutting action required.

Too many people remain unconvinced that local authorities are ready to face the challenge of domestic violence. While some councils are leading the field, the perception is that others are failing to participate fully in the agenda or take responsibility for its progress. The Domestic Violence Co-ordinator role is too often perceived to be under-funded, under supported and under-valued. Several Coordinators felt their status within the council was not proportional to the size of the problem. This is reflected in their limited access to local politicians and service leaders.

Unfortunately, the perception of local inaction continues to inform domestic violence guidance which undermines the potential for effective, co-ordinated locally driven responses. The role of local authorities in this agenda needs to be reformed and strengthened without undermining the work that existing agencies are better positioned and qualified to do. Local government should instead be a force for change in the local area, a co-ordinating body for services and ideas, providing support and guidance across the agenda. Councils are best positioned to do this as they already have a key role in so many relevant areas.

1) Delivering Services

Domestic violence victims are interested in more than repercussions for the perpetrator. Victims are likely to require assistance with housing, social services, counselling and advisory groups, children's services, legal assistance and advocacy. They may need support from health services and community groups, support to find a job and to navigate the benefits system. Worse, victims have to handle this complex web of agencies and services having endured (or while still enduring) the trauma of the abuse.

It is incredibly difficult for victims to navigate this landscape but it is also vital. Police action without safety mechanisms for victims can increase the risk of re-offending and reduce the likelihood of future reporting of crime. Every victim requires a different package of services and support tailored to their needs. The absence of one element in the package

can undermine the achievements of the rest. This is where local authorities add most value to the debate. The agency best placed to understand, co-ordinate and explain this complex network of agencies is the local authority. In some areas access to domestic violence related services has been pooled and streamlined to make it easier for victims. For example, the Family Justice Centre in Croydon shows what can be done by a local authority with adequate support and imagination.

This is not always the case. Some agencies have funding to provide education services but no clear route for persuading local schools to implement their programs. Domestic violence must be integrated across local services and service strategies. This can only happen at a local level. It is best achieved by local authorities working with local partners and strengthening understanding within their own organisation.

2) Role in scrutinising, influencing and guiding a complex network of agencies and public bodies

Local authorities are heavily involved in policy decisions within Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs), Local Strategic Health Partnerships (LSHPs), Domestic Violence Fora, as well as in local services such as education, housing, social care and community support. The decisions made in these arenas impact directly on the agenda. Local authorities are best placed to scrutinise the progress of local agencies and

council departments, ensuring that domestic violence is integrated within each of these agendas.

Using their role at the centre of this network, local authorities should be used to spread a greater awareness of the issues associated with domestic violence and build stronger relationships across agencies. The role of Domestic Violence Co-ordinator, often funded by the local authority, aims to do this. When successful these coordinators are vital in bringing together partners from within and outside local government, improving the sharing of information and experience, spreading good practice and garnering political support.

In some local authorities the Domestic Violence Coordinator role is currently under-appreciated, under resourced and locked out of important discussions. To have a real impact at a local level the potential of this role must be released. This could mean building targets for the role into the LAA, ensuring a duty for agencies and departments in the LSP to cooperate with the Coordinator and raising the profile of the role across local authorities and service deliver partners.

3) Unique access and accountability to local people

Local authorities are already effectively reaching out to the people that might be affected by domestic violence. Local authorities can work with partners to engage with hard-to-reach communities and groups

that the criminal justice system might otherwise be seen to alienate.

It is important with an issue such as domestic violence that any response is a 'community response'. Domestic violence is as much about attitudes, cultural norms and accepted behaviour as it is about crime and punishment. For any policy approach to be successful it must impact on 'hearts and minds' in a way that only a local approach can. This can begin with the mainstreaming of domestic violence work into local education as is already taking place in some areas such as Wandsworth. It can also involve community initiatives and campaigns such as those now regularly seen at local community events around the country.

This shows some of the ways that local authorities can use their status and local reach to raise awareness. Once a certain level of awareness is reached, the public will expect results, greater accountability will follow and political responsibility increases. Local authorities must continue to build on the momentum created by Government and the media around this issue. Councils must increase local awareness and be ready to accept the responsibility to deliver better outcomes for victims that will inevitably result from this.

4) Community Leadership

Members can provide consistent vocal support for domestic violence issues, political accountability, and visible community

engagement. In London, the high profile interest of the Mayor in the agenda has been vital in raising the profile of the subject locally and in increasing democratic accountability. This provides a powerful tool for persuading others to take domestic violence seriously and a single reference point for community engagement on the issue.

For those areas without a Mayor, the support of a single motivated politician can be enough to change views and build support for domestic violence strategies within a local authority and the wider community. Local authorities that designate a politician as domestic violence champion in the local area, as many have done, creates a focus for external partners and a channel for exerting stronger internal pressure. High level local political engagement should be prioritised by local authorities and external agencies.

5) Innovation

Local authorities have shown themselves to be leaders in the field when it comes to developing new tools and ways of delivering domestic violence tackling services. Croydon have shown what can be achieved by coordinating services within one Family Justice System. Local authorities in Wales contributed to the introduction of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferencing (MARAC), a new holistic approach to assessing the risk in DV cases. Wandsworth Borough Council are developing a program for taking issues of abuse and relationships into primary schools. Leeds Council has been running an Inter-

Agency project on women and violence since 1990 and has become a nationally recognised leader in developing work on violence against women and children. The resources, influence and network of partners available to local authorities give them the ability to make a more profound and lasting impact on the agenda. A closer relationship between agencies and local government would allow these resources to be better exploited.

Developing the Local Authority Role

The desire for immediate action coupled with a somewhat negative perception of local authorities has contributed to the centralised agenda we see today. But without local support a centralised outlook cannot deliver the long-term and sustainable improvements required across the agenda. Local government has started to take this agenda forward itself and greater devolution of responsibility would support this move.

If the focus was shifted towards local government then the experience, passion and applied pressure of the domestic violence sector could deliver better outcomes, faster. This requires a change in attitude and emphasis within local government but also at a central level and among practitioners and agencies. As Lyons stated, “central Government [must resist] encouragements to meet the particular objectives of lobby groups, professional organisations and representative bodies through central action, and instead encourage such groups to work with local government.”

Increased pressure from below will help raise the profile of domestic violence at a local level. In turn this increases its political impact and local leaders and senior staff will begin to take greater responsibility for the issue in their area. The recent work to put an economic cost on domestic violence, coupled with increased local pressures, will be a more persuasive argument than the need to meet a fairly low profile BVPI.

Increased local political interest and clear lines of accountability must be developed. A member with overall responsibility for domestic violence can be a powerful champion for change across the council and the wider community, providing a focus for victims, agencies and support groups. This accountability and accompanying scrutiny must also be cross-cutting. Member interest cannot sit just within the safer communities block but must also scrutinise and drive progress in services such as health, education, children's services and housing.

Local authorities must continue to deliver services in a way that reflects this cross-cutting approach.

- Domestic Violence Partnerships, MARAC, Family Justice Centres and Fora continue to create the space and opportunity for cross-service working. These groups should continue to be strengthened, supported and replicated in order to improve information sharing, reduce replication and deliver a seamless co-ordinated response.

- To achieve this local authorities

must encourage (and demand) input from all relevant local agencies (i.e. local magistrates, health services, housing associations, police, women's workers, community groups, education authorities, religious groups etc)

- In several local authorities, sharing training and expertise across departments and partner agencies has been an effective way of raising the profile of domestic violence and joining-up thinking.
- Local authorities' information systems must reflect the cross-cutting nature of domestic violence. These systems must allow relevant agencies to share and compare relevant information effectively. Any system should also regularly gauge the needs and experiences of service users.
- Councils in two-tier areas will need to co-ordinate more effectively across boundaries. Co-ordinating service provision across two-tier areas would reduce costs, eliminate gaps in service provision and allow the pooling of funding and resource to meet bolder shared objectives.

This framework would ensure that a comprehensive, relevant and cost-effective set of services are available to those that need them.

A focus on local solutions requires a more effective way of monitoring progress at the local level. As the LGA state, “work to tackle domestic violence is exactly the sort of cross-cutting initiative that fits within the structure of the LAA framework.”³ Local authorities must build on the progress already made within Local Area Agreements. New agreements must ensure funding can be used more effectively to target domestic violence. Funding must be mainstreamed and made more certain and transparent if long-term preventative measures are to be developed. LAA funding must also move away from central targets toward a more outcome based system that involves and consults with all local partners.

Progress towards LAA goals must be monitored and supported by stronger scrutiny of DV. Scrutiny of local authority and partner actions must be improved and strengthened with improved powers for intervention. Scrutiny panels should increase their use of external agencies to increase their understanding of the issues and utilise their first hand experiences to drive performance.

The Domestic Violence Coordinator role should also be strengthened and the duty for relevant local agencies and council departments to cooperate with the Coordinator must be enforced. They should have more access to local politicians, to local partners and to all local authority departments, not just the criminal justice system and the Safer Communities arena. This would encourage

better relationships across departments and agencies, fostering a greater understanding of the domestic violence agenda. It would also help local authorities develop a greater general understanding of the way different services and departments interact.

A more strategic role for Domestic Violence Coordinators is vital. At a regional level there should be a more explicit duty to bring together local experiences, spread best practice and encourage regional cooperation between local authorities and local authority services. This role is currently undertaken by the domestic violence lead in each Government Office (GO). As the role of GOs reduces, local authorities need to ensure they take up the mantle. Strategic collaboration would help develop localised frameworks that were not driven by home office targets but by real experiences. A stronger focus on inter-area cooperation would also help meet the needs of those women who move between local authority boundaries, as many do for protection.

Conclusion

A national approach to domestic violence has achieved a lot in a relatively short space of time. The profile of domestic violence is higher than at any time in the past and understating of the issues is increasing across the public sector. But a Home Office led solution cannot continue to deliver the results we want. Real, sustained progress requires locally led solutions, strong community leadership and accountability, influence over a complex

3 LGA, (2006), work to address domestic violence and Local Area Agreements

network of delivery agencies and joined-up, responsive services. Local authorities are uniquely placed to deliver in each of these areas.

In order to achieve this, councils must refocus their efforts to engage with specialists in the field, extend and support the Domestic Violence Co-ordinator role and raise awareness and understanding of cross-cutting issues across all service departments and members. This requires high level domestic violence champions within local authorities and stronger LAA targets to drive progress. Councils must also begin to think about and respond to issues in a more long-term, proactive manner that recognises the social, human and financial cost of the problem.

If time and resource were dedicated to improving responses, local authorities could save millions and improve the lives of everyone in their constituencies, not just victims. And there are wider benefits for local authorities taking the lead on this, benefits that extend beyond the agenda. The necessary steps for improving the handling of domestic violence are relevant across the local government spectrum:

- Reducing central 'tick-box' targets,
- Putting local authorities at the centre of a network of relevant agencies,
- Joining-up and tailoring local services,
- Improving two-tier working,

- Creating stronger more accountable local leadership,
- Supporting stronger scrutiny,
- Improving relationships with the third sector,
- Integrating departmental strategies

Local authorities must address all these issues if they are to meet the wider challenges ahead. Councils could develop new ways of working that would apply across local government and local services. This would improve the delivery of relevant, joined up services and improving outcomes for all those in need.

We should also take time to praise local authorities for their achievements so far in this policy area. From Haringey to Hartlepool, councils in NLGN's Innovation Network were rightly proud of the progress they had made on this agenda. Early education (Doncaster's Miss Dorothy programme), one-stop shop service centres (Haringey's Hearthstone Centre), effective two-Tier working (Somerset's "Somerset Change") multi-agency training programmes (Barking and Dagenham), improved information systems (Northamptonshire's Canary Incident Reporting System and Essex's automatic notification system), a DV forum communications strategy (Basingstoke and Deane) – these are just some of the innovative and effective local solutions that councils are implementing to combat and reduce incidents of domestic violence.

All the councils consulted were optimistic about their ability to take the lead on this agenda. What they need now is the opportunity to take the lead and support from partners and Government to deliver more effective local solutions.