

**Interim Report on Domestic Violence by Panel
of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny
Committee 2010/11**

Committee Members

Moira McLaughlin (Chair)

Ann Bridson

Pat Glasman

Cherry Povall

Background to setting up the Panel

At the start of the 2010 municipal year, the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny committee highlighted the area of domestic violence as one about which little firm information was known by committee members, and which they believed was a subject that was often shied away from, as being too uncomfortable to confront.

For these reasons, the committee felt it would be informative to examine the issues in more detail through a panel investigation.

A panel of 4 members was set up. Cllrs Pat Glasman, Ann Bridson and Cherry Povall expressed an interest in being part of the panel and Cllr. Moira McLaughlin agreed to act as chair.

The panel have met each month, and have been supported in their work by Gill Barr and Jayne Reid from the Family Safety Unit (FSU) of the WBC, Steve McGilvray from the Community Safety Team, Dave Swarbrick , Area Team Manager from Wallasey from CYDP, Julia Hassall Branch Head CYPD, all from the Council.

They have also been supported by Val Saunders from Wirral Women's and Children's Aid, Dave Grisenthwaite from Merseyside Police and Ann Potter from Barnardos.

The panel would like to thank each of these for their informative help and also for the work they do on a day to day basis in this very difficult area.

This report represents an interim summary of the panel's work to date and it is the intention to carry over the investigation to the next municipal year, if the next Chair and Cttee members agree.

Context of Report on Domestic Violence

The Government defines domestic violence as “Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality”

All forms of domestic violence stem from the abusers’ desire for power and control over other family members, and although every situation is unique, there are common factors involved.

It is estimated that 1 in 4 women will suffer domestic violence at some time in their lives, and though it is recognised that incidents of domestic violence are found in every socio-economic group, it is also recognised that a major contributory factor to increased risk is poverty. This is a particular concern as Wirral has some of the most deprived wards in the country within its boundaries.

In monetary terms, the cost of domestic violence is huge, at an estimated £13 billion annually which breaks down as follows £3.1 B cost to the State, £1.3 B to employers and a human suffering cost of £17B (Walby 2004).

This figure is based on the cost to the criminal justice system, Healthcare, cost of treating mental illness, housing and legal costs.

Though those figures are startling, the researcher believes that is probably an underestimation, as many public services do not collect information.

The number of women supported by domestic violence services on a typical day was surveyed in Nov 2006 at being 11, 310 and this represented a rise of 50% on the 2003 figure.

See appendices of Scoping document, Graphs of wards comparisons for Wirral, list of incidents in Wards of Wirral and glossary of terms

Panel Investigation

Panel started the investigation by looking at the situation in Wirral by mapping the extent of the problem in total, as reported, and as broken down into ward.

Apart from the geographical spread, they were interested in looking at the people most affected, and factors which pre-dispose to violence being used in the home environment.

The panel then planned to investigate the impact on service provision across public and voluntary agencies, and then evaluate how they respond to the problem, both in preventative and re-active terms.

Using the recent Home Office strategy document "Violence Against Women and Young Girls", it is estimated that there are approx. 20,000 incidents of domestic violence in Wirral annually.

The Staying Safe Strategy Group in it's report further identify that 6,951 Wirral women and girls aged between 16-59 have been a victim of physical assault in the past year and 38,494 have been victims of stalking and harassment.

In a study carried out in Wirral between Sept 2009-August 2010, it was found that 31% of victims were pregnant and 33% of perpetrators have problems with alcohol

A breakdown of wards in Wirral reveal the surprising fact that though, as might be expected, Birkenhead/Tranmere has the highest number of reported incidents, Wallasey Ward has the second highest.

Reacting to Individual Incidents

Merseyside Police report 4,000 calls to incidents annually in Wirral and the Family Safety Unit (FSU) receive approx 750 reports annually of cases which are assessed as being of medium to high risk, with high risk being defined as meaning the victim is at risk of serious injury or death.

Last year the Wirral Women`s and Children Aid received 110 referrals for refuge accommodation, of which 56 were for Wirral residents. The rest were from elsewhere.

Of the referrals, only 33 were accommodated and 36% of those were Wirral residents.

When the Police are called to an incident of suspected domestic violence, they have a system of assessment. When a call is received by them, and that is the most frequent way a case is reported to them, it is referred to the Police Domestic Violence Unit. They get about 600 calls per month and they are given a priority status so that the aim is to respond within 10mins. All frontline officers have training in how to resolve the problem and arrest the perpetrator if possible.

All cases are assessed and given a score based on the presence of factors such as alcohol or drug involvement. The score is categorised into a gold, silver or bronze classification. The bronze are dealt with by means of a warning letter and silver and gold are passed on to social Services

When a suspected incident of domestic violence is identified by any of the relevant agencies such as housing providers, education, health police, social services, it is passed to FSU for formal assessment of the risk to the victim, and those most at risk are dealt with by the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) , which has recently undergone an independent quality assurance evaluation.

This showed that a total of 9 different agencies had referred to MARAC in the last 12months, and there was a steady increase in numbers being referred.

This is viewed in a positive way as Wirral exceeds the expected referrals from non-police agencies.

Members of the panel were able to spend time witnessing how MARAC works in practice and were impressed by the number of agencies involved in the planning of interventions.

This multi-disciplinary team, which meets fortnightly, develops the planning of support services, and the agencies work together to plan the interventions through the use of Co-ordinated Action against Domestic Abuse (CAADA) and Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH) protocols.

The children's assessments are carried out by social workers. It is felt that this approach is comprehensive, robust and produces good outcomes. In performance terms, this is backed up by the fact that Wirral's FSU is judged to be one of the best performing in the country, with 10% of re-referrals in a 12month period demonstrating the quality of their planning, which in the vast majority of cases is successful in avoiding recurring incidents.

Responding to issues of domestic violence

In the planning of responses to the whole issue of domestic violence, the approach deployed is in key themes which are:

1. To intervene at an early stage to make sure that young people understand the importance of healthy relationships and respect the right to say “no”
2. The importance of training for professionals and frontline staff for early detection of and risk factors associated with domestic and sexual violence, and this should include all frontline staff such as educational staff, health workers, housing staff, police and social care staff.
3. Support for victims through the process of fleeing, protection and resettlement.
4. The use of new powers to help victims break the cycle of violence which include the use of different orders including the new Domestic Violence Protection Orders

The Panel looked at how these interventions are being used in Wirral and whether the delivery was effective.

Intervention at an early stage.

The improved awareness of issues relating to domestic violence and the need to educate people, particularly young people, about what is acceptable behaviour in a relationship has led to a widespread campaign to raise awareness of it as an issue, through poster and TV advertising campaigns. Leaflets advertising help services are widely distributed in all public buildings and the Panel heard about the work being done in schools and youth services.

They were told of some innovative work being done in schools in Cheshire, and it is the panel’s intention to ask the person responsible for establishing this, to come to talk to the group to see if it can inform practice in Wirral’s schools.

Importance of Training

The Panel found that high importance is given to the appropriate and ongoing training of frontline staff working at all levels. This training is aimed at enabling staff to identify and support adults who are victims and children involved who may be affected by domestic abuse.

Members of the Panel invited Ann Potter from Barnardos to come to speak to them about a tool for assessment using a multi agency approach which is being developed, and used for assessing the risk of domestic violence which focuses' on the needs and risk to children in families where domestic violence is a factor.

It concentrates on regarding domestic violence witnessed by children as being harmful to them, and, because of that, it is a safeguarding issue for children's services to address.

It fits in with the existing use of CAADA –DASH, which is currently used in Wirral and focuses on the outcomes for children.

The Panel understands that, if it is in use, it should be done only after training in its use has been given to all frontline staff such as police, health, social care, education and housing staff, and it should be used in conjunction with the already existing policies of Safeguarding and the Children's and Young People's Plan.

Though it is not widely used as yet, its use is spreading, with all London boroughs now employing it, and it is widely influencing a changing approach to assessment for children.

Support for Victims.

Services to protect victims of abuse and prevent occurrence should be delivered in a co-ordinated way, and the Panel recognises that this joint approach is developing.

he FSU offers helps to victims by providing support through their staff of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA) who support victims through the process of, for example, accessing financial help, help with re-housing and court procedures

Wirral Women's and Children's Aid give support through their advice and help line, their outreach work and the refuge and the Zero Centre, which provides a wide range of support services such as a support programme for children and young people, and emotional and practical support for women coming out of abusive relationships.

Members of the panel were able to visit the Refuge and a visit is planned to the Zero Centre

Use of new powers to break cycle of violence

To help provide protection for victims there are several different actions through the justice system and court orders that can be used.

Police are able to put a marker on an address, so that if they receive a call from that address they are able to respond more quickly.

Where there is no criminal case pending, a woman can apply for a Civil Order and it is thought that as they can be applied for very quickly (within 24hrs) they can be useful in protecting women.

Also Non Molestation Orders and Occupation Orders can also be of help and for women on low income legal aid has been available to help, although this may change in the future.

Key Areas of Concern & identified Gaps in Provision.

The Panel is concerned about the following:

Funding.

The Family Support Unit is funded through the Area Based Grant and there is a degree of uncertainty about the future funding, which if it were to be reduced, would lead to a reduction in the numbers of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates and that would have a detrimental effect on service, as they would have to move out of preventative work and concentrate on the high risk group only

Wirral Women's and Children's Aid are concerned because the adult service is funded through Supporting People grant, which is being cut and the children's services are funded through grants from the voluntary sector and charitable donations, which again may suffer in the current economic climate.

Access to Legal Aid.

If Legal Aid aid is withdrawn from those wishing to apply for legal remedies to Domestic Violence, there is concern that, with costs for court proceedings likely to be around £800, these costs would be prohibitive. This would mean that women would either have to represent themselves, or not apply for the orders.

There is also a gap in support provision for women who enter this country legally, but on their husband's visas and therefore have no right to any service as they have no right to access public funds, if they should leave their husband. Though there is a small project in Liverpool called Sojourn for African and Asian women , there is no provision for Eastern European women, and these are an increasing number .

Gaps in provision of services for men.

Though the majority of victims of domestic violence are women, with 93% of victims being women, and 7% men, it is a significant problem in men and it is believed that the incidence is increasing.

All professionals feel that there is a particular problem of male victims not reporting because of a stigma. Of those cases that were reported, there was a particular problem identified of older males being abused by family members. However, it is also the case that younger males experience violence by partners

There is very little provision for male victims with no refuge places, no assistance of support such as those delivered through the Zero Centre and only 1 IDVA available through FSU.

It is felt that services for men are about 30years behind in development than those available for women.

Gaps in provision of services for young women.

A further area of concerns is the high incidence of violence to young women aged between 16-25 who are pregnant and it is believed that 14% of women in that group are being abused.

There was a particular gap identified in service provision for young women aged between 16-18. If they are abused, they do not have the same risk assessment as adults , and that results in them not being able to access the same range of services as adults.

Problems with perpetrators of violence presenting as victims.

A further problem was identified in that, not infrequently, perpetrators of domestic violence will present as victims and will use child contact visits to make contact with their victim when those child contact visits are supervised by a family member.

On further investigation, with comparisons made to other European countries, particularly in northern Europe, it appears this does not happen there, as there are much more rigorous procedures in place to avoid this happening, by the use 2 week removal orders which are very speedily applied .

Conclusion

Though this is an interim report, only and the panel wish the work to continue, it has become obvious that the subject matter is so vast that, rather than rush to conclusions with a picture only part painted, it would be wiser to carry the work over until the next year's committee is established.

The Panel would want to continue to look at the work that the courts do and how that fits in with other agencies. They felt a visit to the Zero centre would be helpful also and they would like to hear about some of the work being done with young people around self esteem.

However even at this stage it has been possible to highlight some areas for consideration when looking at how the process can be improved, and where gaps are to be found in service. These are highlighted in the body of the report and the section above.

Panel would like to repeat the thanks to all those who have given so freely of the time in this piece of work.