

## PROGRESS REPORT - DOMESTIC ABUSE

**Report By:** Service Manager, Safeguarding and Assessment Service  
and Designated Nurse, Safeguarding Children, PCT

### Wards Affected

Countywide

### Purpose

1. To inform Scrutiny Committee of progress made since 2006, in addressing the needs of children affected by domestic abuse.

### Financial Implications

2. A number of service developments are planned, for which funding is required. These are:
  - a) Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences
  - b) Independent Domestic Violence Advisor
  - c) Support to children affected by domestic abuse, living in the community
3. There are no financial implications for the Council in respect of the first two of these developments. The details of the funding arrangements in place or planned are dealt with below, at points 23 and 28. The detail of how it is proposed to fund development of support to children affected by domestic abuse is dealt with below, at point 18.

### Background

4. Domestic abuse is a pervasive and frequently hidden problem. Available statistics indicate that domestic abuse incidents account for between 16% and 25% of all recorded violent crime. Approximately 1 in 8 women are thought to have suffered domestic abuse, and women are much more likely than men to experience multiple incidents of domestic abuse (around 89% of those experiencing 4 or more incidents of domestic abuse are women).
5. The Department of Health estimated (2002) that 750,000 children per year witness domestic abuse. These children are at increased risk of behaviour problems and emotional trauma, and mental health difficulties in adult life. On average 75% of children subject to child protection plans and half of all child protection case cases referred to Children's Social Care Services are because of domestic abuse.
6. In Herefordshire, 40% of children who are currently subject to Child Protection Plans require this protection from harm because of their exposure to domestic abuse in their home lives.

7. In Autumn 2005 a Joint Area Review of Children's Services was undertaken in Herefordshire. This was an inspection of all services to children in the County provided by all statutory agencies working with children. This found that some of the most vulnerable children and young people were not getting the protection they needed. Children and young people on the Child Protection Register represented a significantly smaller proportion of the population than in similar authorities and referrals of children in need were half the national average. (Please note that the Child Protection Register has been discontinued since April 2008. The requirement now is that children are recorded as being subject to Child Protection Plans. The purpose of this change is to move the focus from registration to actions by professionals to reduce significant harm. A list of children subject to Child Protection Plans is kept, and reported upon using the same indicators as the Child Protection Register). Children suffering domestic abuse were not specifically mentioned in the Joint Area Review report although inspectors expressed a general concern about domestic abuse services, and whether enough was being done to address the needs of children and young people exposed to domestic abuse. Attempts to obtain clarity about the precise nature of these concerns were not successful.
8. An action plan was put in place following the Joint Area Review, which included the following relevant action points:

**Review of the threshold criteria for referral of children to Children's Social Care**

- 8.1 A review was undertaken; the threshold criteria were amended in March 2006, and approved by the then Area Child Protection Committee (replaced in April 2006 by the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board). A key element of revision was the inclusion in the threshold criteria of children living in households where serious and/or recurring incidents of domestic abuse had occurred. All such cases coming to the attention of professionals working with children should be referred to the Children and Young People's Directorate Referral and Assessment Team, with parental consent. If parental consent is withheld, professionals must use their judgement to decide whether or not the likelihood of significant harm to a child will be increased by not referring and therefore whether to do so without consent.

**Development of an effective workforce strategy to improve recruitment and retention of social workers**

- 8.2 The recruitment and retention strategy has been in place for two years, leading to successful recruitment of 15 newly qualified social workers and a smaller number of more experienced social workers in the last eighteen months, from local and national recruitment campaigns. Investment has also been made in sponsoring Council staff working in the Children and Young People's Directorate to undertake the Social Work Degree training course. Five student social workers sponsored by the Council are in various stages of Social Work Degree courses at present and will return to work as social workers in due course. The strategy is regularly monitored, reviewed and has been refreshed in 2008. The current permanent social worker vacancy rate in Referral and Assessment Teams and Children and Families Fieldwork teams is 18%, reduced to 11% by use of temporary staff.
- 8.3 Overseas recruitment from USA and Australia will help address the shortage of more experienced and skilled social workers, and is expected to reduce the vacancy rate to 5% by January 2009. At the same time, work is ongoing to improve retention rates

of existing staff. This includes extensive induction and support to social workers in their first year after qualifying; post-qualification training programmes; payment of a Market Forces Supplement to social work posts in key teams; and planned development of a career structure linking qualifications and skills to a career pathway, with the aim of encouraging experienced and competent staff to remain with Herefordshire.

**Ensuring all professionals working with children understand the threshold criteria and apply them consistently in practice**

- 8.4 Training for key professionals to aid understanding of the threshold criteria for referral to Children's Social Care forms a part of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board (HSCB) training programme. HSCB revised the Safeguarding Procedures in October 2007, in a tripartite arrangement with Worcestershire and Shropshire. These are available electronically via the Council website. The Common Assessment Framework (a national initiative which all local authorities are required to have in place) is replacing the Herefordshire Child Concern Model in 2008/9, as Herefordshire's framework for supporting children with additional needs, and a programme of training is currently under way. This includes ensuring that all professionals understand their responsibilities for safeguarding children and how the Common Assessment Framework links with the work of Children's Social Care.
9. Since the Joint Area Review in 2005, the Children and Young People's Directorate has been annually inspected through the Annual Performance Assessment (APA). In 2007 the APA judged the contribution of services to improving Staying Safe outcomes for children and young people to be adequate. Thresholds for service were considered to be understood across agencies, and to have resulted in higher numbers of children receiving support. However, the APA also identified services to combat domestic abuse as a weak area requiring improvement. As indicated above, attempts to obtain clarity about the precise nature of these concerns were not successful.
10. The APA for 2008 has recently taken place and a draft letter from the inspectors was received on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2008. The final judgement is yet to be confirmed, and the letter is not yet in the public domain. However, the inspectors have indicated, under the Staying Safe judgement, that good progress has been made in identifying, assessing and assisting children, who through exposure to domestic abuse may have suffered significant harm.

**Current Position**

11. Annual referral rates to Children's Social Care have increased by more than 50% in the last two years. It is not possible to link this directly to domestic abuse because specific figures for numbers of referrals primarily due to domestic abuse are not available (see point 13 below), but it is likely to be partly due to the revised threshold criteria for referral and to partly to increasing professional awareness of the serious adverse impact of domestic abuse on children.
12. Under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, social workers have a duty to undertake enquiries to ascertain whether any action is required to safeguard or promote the child's welfare, where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. Initial and core assessments of children in need will be undertaken, and services provided if required. The percentage of children receiving initial assessment of their needs has increased, as has the number of core

assessments being carried out. The number of children subject to Child Protection Plans has doubled, of whom, as indicated above, approximately 40% are children affected by domestic abuse. This reflects the greater awareness of the impact of domestic abuse and the need for inter-agency co-operation to combat the problem.

13. The Police Family Protection Unit informs the Referral and Assessment Team of all cases of domestic abuse to which they have been called, where children are involved, so that a decision can be made about whether assessment and intervention is necessary.
14. The recently implemented first phase of the electronic Integrated Social Care Solution, Frameworki, will support prompt and effective information gathering about children from Police and other agencies, to aid decision making about whether children affected by domestic abuse may be at risk of significant harm. It will also improve the management information available to the local authority in order to analyse the pattern of need and effectiveness of service delivery.
15. The primary local provider of services to women and children affected by domestic abuse is West Mercia Women's Aid (WMWA), largely funded by a "Supporting People" contract. (The "Supporting People" funding stream from central government, managed within the Adults and Community Directorate, is provided to support adults who need additional help to obtain and maintain appropriate housing. The Council commissions a range of such services through the Supporting People Commissioning Board.) Provision includes a 24-hour Helpline, refuge accommodation, and outreach support for women and children moving on from the Women's Refuge into their own accommodation, and to those who remain living in the community.
16. The Children and Young People's Directorate funds provision of services to children in the Women's Refuge and multi-agency work by WMWA, including training and awareness raising activities, children and young people's engagement and consultation in safeguarding issues. Mediation Herefordshire provides counselling services to children whose parents have separated.
17. Health Visitors have, for some time, routinely given pregnant or newly delivered mothers both verbal and written information and support regarding domestic abuse. As a result of last year's APA an audit was undertaken to assess the consistency of the information. An action plan is being developed to review the information given to women regarding domestic abuse and to increase training to support Health Visitors in this work.
18. It is recognised that additional services are needed for children living in the community who are affected by domestic abuse. This is being addressed in a range of ways. The Children and Young People's Directorate intends to commission additional support services for children in the community from April 2009, from within mainstream resources for 2009/10. It is anticipated that this will require allocation of £35,000. The Common Assessment Framework has been implemented locally, and training is under way for all professionals in Herefordshire working with children. Integrated locality teams are planned, which will work with children with additional needs and provide support and guidance to other professionals.
19. The Domestic Abuse Forum is a multi-agency body with specific responsibility for development of a strategy to address domestic abuse in Herefordshire. The Forum works in partnership with the Community Safety and Drugs Partnership, and

Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board. The Chair of the Domestic Abuse Forum is also the Vice-Chair of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board. The governance arrangements for the Domestic Abuse Forum and its links to the Children's Trust Board are shown in the Appendix 1 to this report. In 2008, the Domestic Abuse Forum has reviewed and refreshed its strategy for addressing domestic abuse and a number of service developments have been established or are planned, primarily through the Community Safety and Drugs Partnership, as indicated at point 20 below.

20. The Community Safety and Drugs Partnership have published a new Community Safety Strategy. Within that strategy, year one priorities are to support an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor Service, the establishment of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) and the establishment of Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts.

#### **Independent Domestic Advisor (IDVA) Post**

21. Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA) work from the point of crisis with survivors of domestic abuse; their work is typically short to medium term and they work within a multi-agency setting to manage the risk that survivors face. As of January 2008 Herefordshire employs a full time IDVA. This post is hosted by West Mercia Women's Aid and is a 3-year pilot funded by Supporting People.
22. The IDVA is now at capacity supporting women across Herefordshire. The post holder has received referrals for 120 women (who are carers to 125 children) to her own service since January 2008 and is currently supporting 25 women. It is recognised that as the post becomes more established less development work needs to be undertaken (e.g. informing Police and Courts about the role) and therefore there is an expectation that the numbers of women supported will increase.
23. As a result of the success of the role the numbers of women being referred are increasing greatly. It is therefore necessary to expand the service with a second part time post. Government Office West Midlands (GOWM) has agreed to provide £20,000 GOWM funding to contribute to the first year of the post. Release of funding from GOWM requires a commitment to match funding and evidence of sustainability. A business case has been developed by a sub group of the Domestic Abuse Forum to present to the Community Safety and Drugs Partnership and GOWM, which it is anticipated will be successful. There are no additional costs to the Council as a result of this development.

#### **Dedicated Domestic Abuse Court**

24. Victims of domestic abuse are often reluctant to be witnesses in Court because of their relationship with the defendant, particularly where children are involved. Many feel vulnerable and intimidated, and find the prospect of going to Court daunting. Domestic abuse is a historical problem that requires a very modern approach to eradicate it once and for all. An independent report concluded that Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts provide better support for victims and more effective, streamlined ways of dealing with domestic abuse. Accreditation by the Ministry of Justice is required for a Court to acquire the status of Specialist Domestic Abuse Court.
25. As a first step towards this, Herefordshire established a Dedicated Domestic Abuse Court in May 2008, which aims to tackle domestic abuse by ensuring the Criminal

Justice system is more receptive to the needs of victims. The Court operates weekly and all domestic abuse cases going through the Magistrates Court are heard in this Court. All magistrates who sit on this bench in this Court have received training in domestic abuse (many of these magistrates have also attended specialist training in domestic abuse). The Crown Prosecution Service advocate in this Court is a specialist in domestic abuse, which avoids the risk of compromising the safety of the victim when considering sentencing. The setting up of a Dedicated Domestic Abuse Court in Herefordshire demonstrates that this crime is being taken extremely seriously, by the Police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the magistrates who are making decisions that have a profound effect upon people's lives.

26. The Court is working towards accreditation from the Ministry Of Justice to become a Specialist Domestic Abuse Court; it is expected that this will be achieved by the end of this financial year. Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts are a fundamental part of the government's efforts to improve the support and care on offer to victims of domestic abuse. A multi-agency approach is central to the success of these innovative Courts: Police, prosecutors, Court staff, the Probation Service and specialist support services work together to identify, track and risk assess domestic abuse cases, support victims and share information so that more offenders are brought to justice. There are no additional costs associated with this development.

#### **Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC).**

27. The main purpose of the MARAC is to provide a framework for a multi-agency approach to reduce the risk of serious harm or homicide for a victim and to increase the safety, health, and wellbeing of victims, both adults and children. In a MARAC local agencies meet to discuss those victims of domestic abuse in their area who are at the highest risk of harm. Information about the risks faced by those victims, the actions needed to ensure safety, and the resources available locally are shared and used to create a risk management plan involving all agencies. The MARAC model of intervention involves risk assessment in all reported cases of domestic abuse to identify those at highest risk so that a multi-agency approach may be taken. Evidence suggests that this reduces recidivism even among those most at risk.
28. The first MARAC in Herefordshire will take place in November 2008, chaired by West Mercia Police. To enable the Herefordshire MARAC to run smoothly and efficiently a post of co-ordinator is required. Government Office West Midlands have given a commitment to provide a one off grant of £15,000 to support Herefordshire with the administrative costs of establishing MARACs, which includes a co-ordinator post. Herefordshire have to match fund and demonstrate sustainability prior to GOWM support. This has now been achieved; funding for a MARAC co-ordinator has been agreed through the Community Safety Partnership, funded by the Police. The co-ordinator role has been advertised and is expected to be in post in early 2009.

## **Recommendation**

**That the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee notes the progress made in provision of services to children and families affected by domestic abuse in Herefordshire.**

### **Background Papers**

- None identified.