

Safeguarding Children from the experience of Domestic Abuse

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The City of London Corporation is committed to protecting and supporting children who experience domestic abuse in their homes.
- 1.2 The NSPCC suggests one in five children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse at some point in their childhood. Although not all will be affected in the same way, living with domestic abuse can adversely affect children's healthy development, relationships, behaviour and emotional wellbeing.
- 1.3 This document sets out the City Corporation's current response to protecting and meeting the needs of children who experience domestic abuse, and our future plans to strengthen our response and improve children's wellbeing.
- 1.4 The recommendations identified in this document will not be delivered in isolation. The document sets out good practice and recommendations that will be delivered to safeguard children and meet the wider aims of our Children and Young People's Plan, Early Help Strategy, and the City Corporation's Thresholds Guidance.

2 Background

The City of London

- 2.1 The City Corporation is responsible for local government and policing within the Square Mile. It has a legal safeguarding duty to look after and protect children living within its boundary, which it delivers through a range of universal and targeted services.

Children living in the City of London

- 2.2 The latest Office for National Statistics estimates show that there are 8,760 people living in the City and the population is slowly growing. Twelve per cent of the City of London's population (1,090 children and young people) are under 18 years of age.
- 2.3 The City's children live mainly in dense pockets of housing – some of which experience high levels of deprivation. This is reflected in the fact that child poverty is present and persistent in some parts of the City of London.
- 2.4 The City of London has a diverse range of ethnicities and religious faiths. The number of children from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds is growing and projected to increase by 76% by 2041.

What is domestic abuse?

- 2.5 The definition of domestic abuse was updated on 31 March 2013 and is defined by the Home Office as:

‘Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse:

- *psychological*
- *physical*
- *sexual*
- *financial*
- *emotional*

Domestic abuse also encompasses controlling and coercive behaviour, ranging from exploitation of a victim to a pattern of threats and intimidation.’

2.6 Men and women, whether in a same-sex or heterosexual relationship, can experience domestic abuse in a variety of forms. However, research clearly shows that women are more likely to experience serious physical injury from male partners.

2.7 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 extended the definition of harm to include ‘impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another’. The term ‘living with domestic abuse’ includes:

- Children who are currently living where there are incidents of domestic abuse or where there is risk of incidents of domestic abuse taking place
- Children seeing or hearing domestic abuse outside their home
- Children witnessing the effects of domestic abuse on others

The impact of domestic abuse on children

2.8 Children who witness domestic abuse suffer emotional and psychological maltreatment.¹ Domestic abuse is a factor in over half of serious case reviews.²

2.9 Each child will respond differently to trauma and some may be resilient. A child’s response to the trauma of witnessing domestic abuse may vary according to a multitude of factors including, age, race, sex and stage of development. Domestic abuse can also affect unborn children and has been identified as a prime cause of miscarriage or still-birth. The risk of serious harm to women is higher in pregnancy.

2.10 A Government report has highlighted that children who have witnessed domestic abuse are 2.5 times more likely to have serious social and behavioural problems than

¹ Section 31 Children Act 1989: impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another (amended by the Adoption and Children Act 2002).

² Sidebotham, P. et al (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014.

other children.³ Children affected by domestic abuse tend to have low self-esteem and experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, anger, fear and aggressive and violent behaviours. This can also lead to bullying, lack of conflict resolution skills, lack of empathy for others and poor peer relationships, poor school performance and anti-social behaviour.

- 2.11 Children who are exposed to domestic abuse are at higher risk of direct abuse themselves. Research shows this happens in up to 60% of cases and the severity of the violence against the adult victim is predictive of the severity of physical abuse to the children.⁴ Physical and emotional abusers are more likely to sexually abuse their children.
- 2.12 Children are at risk of coercive participation in the abuse of victims such as being used as pawns or spies by the perpetrator to control the victim or being forced to participate in the abuse and degradation by the perpetrator.
- 2.13 There is also a risk of physical harm where a child attempts to intervene in, or is caught up in a violent assault.
- 2.14 Abuse in the home has negative social consequences with children feeling unable or unwilling to invite friends home or through the frequent disruption of their schooling.
- 2.15 The City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Board makes explicit the link between children witnessing domestic abuse and being vulnerable to exploitation; views of relationships can become distorted, limited and unhealthy leading to an increase in future vulnerability.
- 2.16 Children may remain at risk of harm where there is an imbalance of wealth between the parents. A victim may be deterred from seeking help where they fear that may lead to a loss of financial support for a child's activities or education.

Signs and symptoms a child is witnessing domestic abuse

- 2.17 The signs of children who are witnessing domestic abuse may not be always obvious, and a child might not tell anyone what they have seen. Children might be scared that the abuser will find out or be worried that the abuse will get worse. Or they might think that there is no-one they can tell or that they will not be believed.
- 2.18 It is often difficult to tell if domestic abuse is happening, because it usually takes place in the family home and abusers can act very differently when other people are present.
- 2.19 Children who witness domestic abuse may:

³ HM Government 2009

⁴ A study by Bowker, Arbitell and McFerron (1988) found that the more frequent the violence to wives, including physical violence and marital rape, the more extreme the physical abuse of the children.

- develop more slowly than others of a similar age
- become aggressive
- display anti-social behaviour
- suffer from depression or anxiety
- have poorer educational outcomes

2.20 The Royal College of Psychiatrists explain that:

'Younger children may become anxious. They may complain of tummy-aches or start to wet their bed. They may find it difficult to sleep, have temper tantrums and start to behave as if they are much younger than they are. They may also find it difficult to separate from their abused parent when they start nursery or school.'

Older children react differently. Boys seem to express their distress much more outwardly, for example by becoming aggressive and disobedient. Sometimes, they start to use violence to try and solve problems, and may copy the behaviour they see within the family. Older boys may play truant and start to use alcohol or drugs (both of which are a common way of trying to block out disturbing experiences and memories).

Girls are more likely to keep their distress inside. They may become withdrawn from other people, and become anxious or depressed. They may think badly of themselves and complain of vague physical symptoms. They are more likely to have an eating disorder, or to harm themselves by taking overdoses or cutting themselves. They are also more likely to choose an abusive partner themselves.

Children of any age can develop symptoms of what is called 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder'. They may get nightmares, flashbacks, become very jumpy, and have headaches and physical pains.

Children dealing with domestic violence and abuse often do badly at school. Their frightening experiences at home make it difficult to concentrate in school, and if they are worried about their abused parent, they may refuse to go to school.⁵

The impact of domestic abuse on victims and their ability to parent

- 2.21 A perpetrator will have significantly diminished ability to parent well. Domestic abuse very often co-exists with parenting that displays high levels of punishment, the misuse of power and a failure of appropriate self-control.
- 2.22 For victims, their parenting can be affected by the disruption of moving home, isolation from social networks and, in some cases, being physically prevented from fulfilling their parenting role. A perpetrator may also control the finances of a victim which can cause economic impacts, such as reducing the ability to travel, shop or make alternative choices. The psychological impact can include loss of self-confidence as an

⁵ <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk> Domestic violence and abuse - its effects on children: the impact on children and adolescents. Accessed 4 January 2017.

individual and parent, and affect the ability to provide appropriate structure, security or emotional and behavioural boundaries for children.

3 Prevalence in the City of London

- 3.1 In 2015/16 the City Corporation's Children and Families service was contacted about 277 children for whom partner agencies or individuals had concerns. Fifty-seven (21 per cent) of these contacts were referred for a formal assessment by social workers, during which domestic abuse was identified as a factor in 31 (67%) cases. This is higher than national rates – where just under 50% of assessments identify domestic abuse as a factor.
- 3.2 It is difficult to draw inferences from this, as some individual cases are identified with more than one sub category in this group. With a total of 31 cases identifying domestic abuse as a factor, 25 flagged the child as impacted, 26 flagged the parent / carer as subject to / at risk of domestic abuse, and 7 identified another person in the household subject to / at risk.
- 3.3 The most common reason for referral is abuse and neglect (26.3%), this is lower than national and inner London rates which are 49% and 44% respectively. The City does however see a higher rate of referrals due to family dysfunction (23% compared to 18% nationally). There could be some overlap in the Abuse & Neglect and Family Dysfunction categories.
- 3.4 It should be noted the City's main referral sources derive from the police (33%) and local authority services at 21% in comparison to the national trend of 13%.
- 3.5 The difficulty of capturing an accurate statistical picture of domestic abuse where children are victims is nationally recognised. Reasons for this may include the hidden nature and consistent under-reporting of domestic abuse. This combined with the small number of children living in the City makes it hard to provide an accurate picture of domestic abuse in the Square Mile.

4 Practice opportunities

- 4.1 In 2013, NICE commissioned a review of the evidence relating to domestic abuse.⁶ It found that where children are exposed to domestic abuse, interventions aimed at both mothers and children together appear to have the most positive impact on outcomes.
- 4.2 The London Borough of Croydon's current Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Strategy outlines their proposal for a service quality standard for their response to domestic abuse and sexual violence. This proposed Kitemark will take groups through a process of support and validation so that they can be recognised for their contribution to the prevention and early intervention of domestic abuse and

⁶ Domestic violence and abuse: how health services, social care and the organisations they work with can respond effectively, NICE Public Health Guidance 2014

sexual violence. It is particularly focused on mobilising community resources by supporting community, voluntary and faith groups in developing their understanding of domestic abuse and sexual violence and their understanding of how to be proactive in tackling this in their community.

- 4.3 Within the third sector there are various programmes in place to safeguard children. The 'Caring Dads: Safer Children' programme targets fathers who are having difficulties in their family because of their abusive or violent behaviour. It looks to remedy this by looking at ways to improve and strengthen the relationship between father and child. With a focus on safeguarding the child, it is not run as a perpetrator programme.
- 4.4 The NSPCC runs a scheme to allow children and their mothers to talk to each other about domestic abuse, learning to communicate and rebuild their relationship. The scheme is called Domestic Abuse, Recovering Together (DART) and looks to teach women how domestic abuse happens and how it affects children in an interactive format. Children who attend take part in activities teaching them how to keep themselves safe.

5 How do we respond?

- 5.1 The City Corporation offers a range of different activities and interventions to those families who are in need which includes children who are exposed to domestic abuse.
- 5.2 The Children's Social Care and Early Help Service provide services that protect, care for and support children young people and their families in the City of London. Those most in need receive one to one support from Social Workers. Families receive support consistently and directly, and work in partnership with health and education to build family resilience and child development.
- 5.3 The Children's Social Care team have appointed a dedicated frontline staff member to focus on domestic abuse cases providing their expertise in providing measures to safeguard the child and victim from the perpetrator. As one of only three local authorities in London to have a Domestic Abuse Social Worker, we have at our disposal a professional focussing specifically on this issue.
- 5.4 The Early Help provision aims to identify need early, and provide advice, guidance and help quickly. This includes short breaks for children with disabilities, as well as intensive parenting support around child development. Early help can signpost families to voluntary sector organisations and to parenting programmes to offer early preventative identification and intervention.
- 5.5 All City of London Social Workers are qualified and able to support families experiencing domestic abuse. Additional training is provided in-house and allows our frontline staff to be able to identify signs of domestic abuse in a household. Other in-house services also include age appropriate safety planning, allowing each child to have a safety plan.

- 5.6 The Children's Social Care Team is able to spot purchase external services for higher risk cases. By undertaking spot purchasing we are maximising our involvement with other bodies through the use of dedicated and specialist organisations such as the Domestic Violence Intervention Programme (DVIP).
- 5.7 Through spot purchasing, the City is utilising services from neighbouring local authorities including the Tower Hamlets run Positive Change Service. This programme is aimed at Bengali and English speaking parents and children, working with both perpetrators and domestic abuse victims. The City is committed to engaging with all of its communities where domestic abuse is occurring.
- 5.8 Public Health commissioned services include health visitors and school nurses, mental health services for young people such as CAMHS (and enhanced CAMHS for Looked After Children). Vulnerable families in the City receive additional birth visits by the Health Visitor and every new parent in the City is offered an additional new birth visit by Children's Centre staff.
- 5.9 The City of London Police employs an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor, known locally as the Vulnerable Victims Advocate. They provide support to victims of domestic abuse and work closely with Children's Social Care as part of MAPF (Early Help Multi Agency Practitioner Forum).
- 5.10 The Children's Social Care Service Manager and the CHSCB have developed a Vulnerable Adolescents Steering Group, attached to the Multi Agency Sexual Exploitation Group. The group identifies concerns around domestic abuse (alongside other issues) and ensures the response benefits from the consideration of a range of partners.
- 5.11 The City Corporation's MARAC Coordinator sits within the Community Safety Team and is a central figure, managing the multi-agency information sharing protocols whilst retaining oversight of cases. The Coordinator also covers the role of the Domestic Abuse Coordinator, providing a holistic approach to safeguarding children living in a domestic abuse environment.
- 5.12 In 2014 the Department of Community and Children's Services (DCCS) commissioned a systematic review of Domestic Abuse and created a two year strategic action plan with child-focused elements which have been delivered. Actions included:
- including domestic abuse in the City of London Thresholds of Need document
 - training on domestic abuse awareness offered to all Children's Social Care staff
 - training identified for all social care staff to actively promote perpetrator engagement with perpetrator programmes to understand impacts on victims, their children and themselves
 - identification and commissioning of a whole family domestic abuse support service
 - updating the MARAC administration templates to include impacts and risk to

children in referral forms

- the development of a referral pathway for responding to disclosure of domestic abuse including identification of children
- identification of perpetrator in MARAC if working with vulnerable people or children for LADO referral

6 Recommendations

6.1 Following the recent City Domestic Abuse Forum, members identified areas for improvement and other recommendations the City Corporation could explore. This Forum consisted of voluntary sector organisations and statutory partners including, staff and officers from the City of London Police, front-line practitioners from DCCS, and representatives from the Imece Women's Centre, Victim Support, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation.

The recommendations put forward by the members of the Domestic Abuse Forum included:

- More faith based awareness amongst front-line practitioners – to ensure any intervention with children and families is sensitive and effective
- Promoting use of children's centres – to build children's confidence and to provide a safe place for children to play and belong
- A trusted mentor scheme within children's services and schools – to provide a safe person for a child to speak with, and promote a healthy model of relationships
- Activities for adults e.g. baking class, swimming – to strengthen victims' confidence and resilience, to build social networks, to be able to share a positive skill/leisure activity with their child(ren)
- More child-friendly options to report abuse
- Further awareness of specialised support regarding harmful practices – to ensure practitioners have a full toolkit of resources to be able to respond to individual/familial need
- Shadow/coaching from independent services and vice versa – in a child's natural environment
- Awareness raising in schools – to increase community understanding of domestic abuse and to provide a safe open discussion opportunity for children outside of the home
- Equine-assisted learning/therapy for communication – to build children's confidence and to provide a safe space and enjoyment of animals
- Non-threatening and non-stigmatising help and care 'interventions'
- Bengali specific services for City residents – to adapt services to meet need
- Raising awareness for DA in different cultures – preventative early help work for families

- Using technology to engage with children
- Domestic abuse training for teachers/identifying signs in children to enable an earlier response to need
- Healthy relationships education for children
- Family therapy for all members to attend together (without perpetrator)

6.2 Other areas identified for improvement:

- Provision for Dads – looking at ‘Caring Dads: Safer Children’
- To learn from the good practice of others
- To better engage with mothers and fathers whose first language are not English
- To make ourselves more accessible to children and families
- To work more closely with voluntary sector organisations
- To run effective public campaigns
- To provide coaching (rather than training) to our workforce