

Domestic Abuse Commissioner

**Strategic Plan: September 2022 – September
2025**

March 2023

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The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Strategic Plan

Foreword

I am honoured to have been reappointed as the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for the next three years. Since my appointment as designate at the end of 2019, I believe that we have made great strides by mapping domestic abuse services, focusing on the family courts and trying to improve support for some of the most vulnerable survivors in the UK amongst many other things.

Every day I hear from victims and survivors of domestic abuse about the barriers and challenges they face getting support to help them and their children flee from an abuser, rebuild their lives or to navigate their way through the justice system. I receive correspondence from survivors; I meet survivors and we hold forums to hear directly about people's experiences. Last year we surveyed thousands of survivors as part of our mapping of services across England and Wales.

As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner these conversations have helped me and the rest of my office to shape the work that we do and the work that we will do over the next three years.

This three-year strategic plan is driven by what survivors have told us focused around the areas where I believe that my unique independent position and statutory powers can achieve the biggest changes.

Over the next three years my strategic priorities will be to stand with victims; improve support for the most marginalised survivors of domestic abuse; improve consistency in service provision and statutory services, to address the 'patchwork of provision' across England and Wales and bring together local partners and Government Departments to provide a holistic response to domestic abuse.

I strongly believe that if we all work together, we will be far more successful in tackling domestic abuse and I look forward to working closely with victims and survivors, statutory agencies and the Government as well as organisations from across the sector.

Our mission: No matter who you are or where you live, there should be a strong and comprehensive response to domestic abuse

1. Our vision is for a world where:

- Victims and survivors, including children, receive the support they need, when they need it, no matter who they are or where they live;
- Every part of society – from statutory agencies, to employers, to private industry and members of the public – recognise and understand domestic abuse, and play a role in addressing it;
- Action is taken to prevent domestic abuse, through early intervention, supporting children and young people, and working with perpetrators to change and disrupt their behaviour.

2. Our approach

2.1. We seek to

- *Understand* – through research and engagement with victims and survivors of domestic abuse, we will build the evidence base, including what interventions address the causes of and prevent domestic abuse, and help victims and survivors to cope and recover. This includes taking a gender-informed approach, understanding that domestic abuse is a form of Violence Against Women and Girls, recognising the impact of gender on all victims and survivors.
- *Influence* – as a thought leader, we seek to influence and inform policy and practice at a local and national level, raising awareness of domestic abuse and see best practice as common practice;
- *Challenge* – as an independent statutory body, we use evidence to advocate for change, and to hold local and national government to account as a respected critical friend and source of expertise;
- *Engage* – as a collaborative and pragmatic organisation, we work closely and constructively with the specialist domestic abuse sector, with stakeholders across local and national government, with parliamentarians, and with victims and survivors themselves to effect change.

3. Our team

- 3.1. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner was established as a statutory office holder through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. She is supported by a team of civil servants, who are employed by the Home Office but appointed by the Commissioner and operate under

her independent instruction; but are bound by the civil service code and civil service terms and conditions.

- 3.2. As of March 2023, the Office has a staff team comprising of a total of 21.2 full-time equivalents, split into the following four teams:
- Policy – 5.5 full-time equivalent staff
 - *The policy team work closely with policymakers across Government and in Parliament to develop and influence policymaking at a national level. Seeking expert advice and evidence from local practice, research, and victims and survivors, the team work to influence change in policy including through legislation, guidance, and funding.*
 - Practice & Partnerships – 4.2 full-time equivalent staff
 - *The practice & partnerships team ensure the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's work is rooted in the reality of the response to domestic abuse locally, across both statutory partners and domestic abuse sector partners. The team act as the 'eyes and ears' of the Commissioner locally; operating as a feedback loop between local practice and national policy and fulfilling the Commissioner's statutory requirement to share best practice.*
 - Domestic Homicides and Suicides Oversight Mechanism – 2 full-time equivalent staff
 - *Within the practice & partnerships team we have established a Domestic Homicides and Suicides Oversight Mechanism, a key commitment within the Domestic Abuse Plan. This small team support local and national delivery of Domestic Homicide Review recommendations and action plans through monitoring implementation and drawing together key themes in order to learn lessons and prevent future deaths.*
 - Research – 2.5 full-time equivalent staff
 - *The research team ensure the work of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner is rooted in robust evidence, working closely with researchers across academia, inspectorates and the specialist domestic abuse sector. They conduct primary research, as well as making best use of existing data and evidence to build our understanding of domestic abuse and the statutory response, supporting the Commissioner's*

role in holding local and national Government to account.

- Family Court Monitoring Mechanism – 2 full-time equivalent staff
 - *Within the research team, we have a small team led by an external Lead Researcher to pilot a Family Court Monitoring Mechanism, a key commitment from the Ministry of Justice’s Family Court Harm Panel report published in June 2020. The team are piloting the scheme in 3 court areas to monitor key outcomes for domestic abuse cases in the family court in order to identify issues and improve responses to domestic abuse.*

- Communications & Engagement – 3 full-time equivalent staff
 - *The communications and engagement team supports the Commissioner in all her public engagement work, including through working with national and local media, strategic communications, and raising awareness of domestic abuse. The team also includes a full time Lived Experience Engagement Lead, to ensure that the Commissioner’s work is grounded in the voices of victims and survivors, and to help hold local and national Government and agencies to account.*

- Management and office support: The Commissioner has 1 full-time Chief of Staff to oversee the staff team, and 1 full-time Personal Assistant and Office Manager.

4. Advisory Board

- 4.1. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 requires the Commissioner to establish an Advisory Board, comprised of no more than ten members who represent a varied range of interests and areas of expertise. The Commissioner has appointed the following individuals to sit on her Advisory Board, to offer advice to the Commissioner about her strategic direction and how to best fulfil her role as set out in law. The membership organisations (Imkaan, Women’s Aid Federation England, and Welsh Women’s Aid) have also been invited to bring a member organisation along to every Advisory Board meeting to bring a front-line perspective to the Board.

Membership

- DCC Maggie Blyth, NPCC Lead for Violence Against Women and Girls

- Mrs Justice Knowles, Lead Family Court Judge for Domestic Abuse
- Louise Gittins, Chair of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People Board
- Catherine Hinwood, Deputy Director, Health and Justice Team NHS England
- Baljit Banga, Executive Director IMKAAN
- Farah Nazeer, CEO Women's Aid Federation England
- Sara Kirkpatrick, CEO Welsh Women's Aid
- Ippo Panteloudakis, Head of Services, Respect
- David Challen, Domestic Abuse Campaigner
- Professor Liz Kelly, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit London Metropolitan University

5. Our powers & remit

- 5.1. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 establishes in law the office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, to provide public leadership on domestic abuse issues and play a key role in overseeing and monitoring the provision of domestic abuse services in England and Wales.
- 5.2. The Act requires the Commissioner to encourage good practice in:
 - preventing domestic abuse;
 - identifying victims and survivors, and perpetrators of domestic abuse, as well as children affected by domestic abuse;
 - improving the protection and provision of support to people affected by domestic abuse.
- 5.3. To do this, the Commissioner will continue to map and monitor provision of services, make recommendations to public bodies about their response, carry out research, work jointly with public authorities and voluntary organisations, and raise public awareness of domestic abuse. The Commissioner will consider both specialist domestic abuse services such as refuges or specialist victim services, as well as how mainstream services – including statutory services – identify, respond to, and ultimately prevent domestic abuse. This also includes services that work with perpetrators of domestic abuse to disrupt or change their behaviour.
- 5.4. The Commissioner will have the power to publish reports and lay them before Parliament. These reports will hold local commissioners, statutory agencies and national Government to

account and make recommendations on how they can improve their response.

- 5.5. Specified public bodies will be under a duty to cooperate with the Commissioner, and they and Government Ministers will be required to respond to each recommendation made to them within 56 days.

6. Independence of the Commissioner

- 6.1. The Commissioner is appointed by the Home Secretary, but is independent of Government, statutory agencies, and the domestic abuse sector. She is accountable to the Home Office for fulfilling her function as set out in the Domestic Abuse Act, but determines her own priority areas to focus on.
- 6.2. To safeguard and secure the Commissioner's independence, a statutory framework document has been developed which is agreed and signed by both the Commissioner and the Home Office as sponsoring Department. This framework document is published on gov.uk as well as the Commissioner's website, and sets out in more detail issues of governance, funding and staffing.

7. How does the Domestic Abuse Commissioner work in Wales?

- 7.1. The Commissioner's role is established through UK legislation and funded through the UK Government, and so has remit over only reserved matters in Wales. The Domestic Abuse Act specifies that the Commissioner can only carry out work that relates to reserved matters in Wales but can and does work collaboratively with partners in Wales. This includes working with the Welsh Government, Welsh Local Authorities, health boards, and the National Advisors for Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence, and specialist domestic abuse sector organisations in Wales.

8. Our work so far

- 8.1. Nicole Jacobs was appointed as Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner in September 2019 and received her statutory powers in November 2021 following the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act. Over this period, she has been building up her team and developing her priorities, in close consultation with specialist sector partners, statutory agencies, and other partners. She has commissioned research and mapping work in order to build the evidence base and inform her strategic priorities, making use of external expertise and engaging with victims and survivors to inform her work.

8.2. Reports published by the Commissioner so far have included:

- *Safety Before Status: Improving pathways to support for migrant victims of domestic abuse*¹
- *Safety Before Status: The Solutions*²
- *A Patchwork of Provision: Meeting the needs of victims and survivors across England & Wales*³
- *Improving the Family Court's Response to Domestic Abuse: proposals for an oversight mechanism for the family court*⁴

8.3. Reports commissioned by the Commissioner and delivered by specialist organisations have included:

- *Analysis of DHR recommendations by statutory agency, produced by HALT research through the University of Manchester.* This series of reports will draw together key themes from Domestic Homicide Reviews for particular statutory agencies, and four reports will cover recommendations for Adult Social Care, Children's Social Care, health services and the police.
- *LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Service Provision Mapping Study, produced by Galop.* This sets out the need for more specialist support for LGBT+ victims of domestic abuse, and maps the provision and availability of specialist 'by and for' LGBT+ support, as well as specialist support housed within other services.
- *CAPVA Rapid Literature Review, produced by Respect* – to draw together evidence and emerging practice to better understand and respond to Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse.
- *Support through Court, produced by SafeLives* – to understand the provision of specialist IDVA or ISVA support through criminal and family court.
- *A Hinterland of Marginality*⁵, produced by the Angelou Centre – to better understand the experience of victims and survivors with insecure immigration status, and produce recommendations to increase safety and access to support.

¹ This was based largely on two reports commissioned by DAC and delivered by The Angelou Centre and The University of Suffolk, which were also published separately

² This includes new research commissioned by DAC and conducted by the London School of Economics and the Oxford Migration Observatory to develop a cost-benefit analysis of different models of support for migrant survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds

³ This included commissioning work from Catch Impact, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation England, and TONIC to support the research

⁴ The pilot for an oversight mechanism was based on work commissioned by the DAC and conducted by Rosemary Hunter and Mandy Burton

⁵ The Angelou Centre (2021), *Hinterland of Marginality*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: The Angelou Centre

- *A review of the Home Office Migrant Victims' Review, produced by the University of Suffolk* – to review and understand the evidence and methodology used by the Home Office in their Migrant Victims' Review.
- *Mapping of strategic leads across England & Wales, produced by Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse* – to develop an understanding of where local strategic leads were located within Local Authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners, and health commissioners, and develop a database of local leads for future engagement.

9. What has informed our Strategic Priorities

- 9.1. Our strategic priorities have been developed over the Commissioner's first term as Commissioner, through her 25 years of working in the specialist domestic abuse sector, engagement with partners, statutory agencies, Government Departments, and victims and survivors. Our public survey, responded to by over 4,000 victims and survivors, provides a strong basis for the development of these priorities over the next 3 years.
- 9.2. Our priorities are informed by a few key elements:
 - which issues are most important to victims and survivors of domestic abuse;
 - existing work across the sector, Government, and statutory agencies;
 - where the Commissioner, with her unique position and powers, can add the greatest value and effect the most change.
- 9.3. As a result, the Commissioner has identified the following strategic priorities for the next three years. This strategic plan covers the period from September 2022 to September 2025.

10. Our Strategic Priorities

Standing with Victims and Survivors

- 10.1. The Commissioner plays a key role in raising the voices of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, and to advocate with them to local and national government.
- 10.2. Through engagement with victims and survivors, and the specialist services who support them, the Commissioner seeks to raise awareness of domestic abuse, to increase the priority given to domestic abuse in national and local policy and practice, and to amplify their voices on the national stage.

- 10.3. A solid grounding in the experiences of victims and survivors safeguards the Commissioner's independence and ensures that we remain focused on the right priorities. It also involves taking a gender-informed approach to domestic abuse, recognising that it is a crime that disproportionately affects women and girls and is a form of Violence Against Women and Girls. We also understand that taking a gender-informed approach for all victims and survivors, as gender will affect every person's experience of abuse and efforts to seek help.
- 10.4. An important element of this is also with holding perpetrators to account; and ensuring the perpetrators are brought to justice for their crimes, as well as supported to change their behaviour and thus prevent future abuse.

Improving support for the most marginalised victims and survivors who face the greatest barriers

- 10.5. The evidence is clear that victims and survivors from marginalised and minoritised communities face considerable additional barriers to receiving the support that they need. This includes Black and minoritised, LGBT+, Deaf and disabled victims and survivors.
- 10.6. Victims and survivors face marginalisation twice over: structural inequalities and marginalisation create additional barriers to accessing the support they need, and often less specialist support is unable to meet their needs sufficiently. This is compounded by the fact that specialist 'by and for' organisations, who are able to meet their needs, are disproportionately not funded by statutory funders and face greater funding precarity than organisations that are not 'by and for'. 'By and for' organisations are simply unable to meet demand for their services, with large parts of England and Wales not served at all by organisations that are led by and for minoritised communities.
- 10.7. This is only intensified for victims and survivors with insecure immigration status. Migrant survivors with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' are often locked out of accessing critical life-saving support through accommodation-based services, and are sometimes even denied community-based support. Migrant survivors also lack the ability to report their perpetrator to the police safely, due to information sharing between policing and immigration enforcement.
- 10.8. Therefore, it is a top priority for the Commissioner to address these injustices and focus on provision of support for the most marginalised victims and survivors with protected characteristics.

Improve consistency in service provision and statutory services, to address the 'patchwork of provision' across England and Wales

- 10.9. Too often, who you are and where you live will determines access to the right support at the right time. The Commissioner's national mapping work '*A Patchwork of Provision*' lays this bare and highlights the significant gaps in the provision of support across England and Wales. This is particularly the case for more specialist support provided through 'by and for' organisations.
- 10.10. Equally, victims and survivors report the vastly different responses they get from statutory agencies depending on where they live, and which individuals they interact with, whether this is the police, healthcare services, housing, or many more.
- 10.11. The Commissioner's priority must therefore be to address this 'postcode lottery' in the response to domestic abuse, to share best practice, and shine a light on poor practice.
- 10.12. The Commissioner will use her position to press national and local government to ensure that sufficient funding is available to provide effective and high-quality support services to meet the needs of victims and survivors. This must also include funding for perpetrator behaviour change programs, to reduce and prevent future abuse.
- 10.13. The Commissioner will also work with statutory agencies to identify inconsistencies and improve their response to domestic abuse – to ensure that victims and survivors receive a consistently excellent and supportive response from public agencies.

Bring together local partners and Government Departments to provide a holistic response to domestic abuse

- 10.14. The Commissioner is a strong proponent of the Coordinated Community Response; that is, that every part of the wider community and statutory agencies have a role to play in responding to domestic abuse, in partnership with specialist services.
- 10.15. The Commissioner's unique position allows her to work collaboratively across government and across statutory agencies to improve the response to victims and survivors. Victims and survivors often report that public services are disjointed, with agencies failing to work effectively together to support them.
- 10.16. Too often we see the impact where this is not the case; agencies not working together effectively to identify domestic abuse early and intervene, missing vital opportunities to support survivors until after escalation or further harm. We are clear that every part of the public sector and wider community has a crucial role to play, and all these players must work together to support victims and survivors effectively, and in a joined-up way.

10.17. We see this at a national level too; with disjointed funding or policy from different Government Departments adding additional barriers to accessing support or creating confusion or unnecessary bureaucracy in the way that services are funded or commissioned.

Accountability and transparency – using data and research to improve the response to domestic abuse

10.18. As set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the Commissioner plays a critical role in holding national and local Government to account, sharing best practice and shining a light on poor practice across England and Wales.

10.19. The Act provides the Commissioner with a unique set out powers that will enable her to seek information and then hold agencies to account in their response to domestic abuse. She can request information, as well as require any public body to respond to her recommendations publicly within 56 days.

10.20. A strong and robust evidence-base, data gathering, and transparency of information will enable the Commissioner to do this effectively, as well as support victims, survivors, and the specialist domestic abuse sector to also make use of transparent data to expect more from their public services.

10.21. In particular, the Commissioner will establish a Family Court Monitoring Mechanism, and a Domestic Homicides and Suicides Oversight Mechanism. The Family Court Monitoring Mechanism will pilot in three court areas to collect data on how domestic abuse is dealt with in the Family Court, identify how victims and survivors are supported, and enable Government, agencies, and the court system itself to better identify and evidence problems in order to address them. The Domestic Homicides and Suicides Oversight Mechanism will draw together recommendations from Domestic Homicide Reviews (and other relevant reviews) in order to support local areas to implement actions, and escalate any more structural problems with implementation. It will also identify and analyse key themes in order to better learn lessons across England & Wales and prevent future deaths.

In order to deliver on the Commissioner’s strategic priorities, the following particular issues will be addressed through publication of reports under Section 2 of the Domestic Abuse Act:

- **Provision of Domestic Abuse Services across England and Wales** – this is initially set out through our report *A Patchwork of Provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors of domestic abuse in England & Wales*. This report illustrates the ‘postcode lottery’ in the response to domestic abuse, and particularly the additional barriers faced by victims and survivors

from minoritised communities, and the disproportionate lack of funding faced by specialist 'by and for' services. The Commissioner will continue to focus on this work and making use of this data and evidence to press for increased service provision for all victims and survivors, including their children.

- **Family Justice** – problems with the Family Court remains the most common issue that victims and survivors contact the Commissioner's Office about. Problems with the Family Court and how it supports victims and survivors and keeps children safe are well evidenced, including from the Ministry of Justice's Harm Panel Report, and our *Improving the Family Court's response to domestic abuse* report. We will be publishing a follow-up report setting out further recommendations on how to improve the response from the Family Court, and will publish the outcomes of the Family Court Monitoring Mechanism.
- **Migrant survivors** – victims and survivors of domestic abuse with insecure immigration status face some of the most significant barriers to accessing support. Not only can perpetrators use their immigration status as a tool for coercion and control – a concept known as 'immigration abuse' – but the lack of access to public funds by some survivors locks them out of seeking safety through refuge or other safe accommodation. Equally, the lack of a 'firewall' between immigration enforcement and the police prevents survivors from reporting their abuser to the police safely. Therefore, the Commissioner has published two reports, *Safety Before Status*, making recommendations to improve access to support for all victims and survivors, regardless of their immigration status. The Commissioner will continue to work closely on this issue with the specialist 'by and for' sector and government.
- **Domestic Homicides and Suicides** – following the establishment of the Domestic Homicides and Suicides Oversight Mechanism, the Commissioner will publish annual reports setting out key findings and analyse key themes from domestic homicide reviews and other relevant reviews. This will include recommendations for local agencies as well as national government to support implementation of DHR recommendations and action plans to better learn lessons and prevent future deaths.
- **Children** – The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognised children as victims in their own right for the first time. This was a crucial step forward, but still, just 29% of victims and survivors told the Commissioner that they were able to access the specialist support for their children that they wanted. The Commissioner will therefore undertake work to better understand how children should be supported and will publish recommendations on how to improve this response.

- **Criminal Justice** – While the response to domestic abuse can and must go much further than the Criminal Justice System, it remains a critical part of the picture, and a poor response from criminal justice agencies is a common issue raised with us by survivors. Equally, we have been concerned by the significant drop in criminal justice outcomes since 2016, despite increased recording of domestic abuse offences by police. We will work with partners to develop recommendations that will bring about a more effective criminal justice response to domestic abuse, to better support victims and bring perpetrators to justice.

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