

Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales

Annual Report 2023-2024

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 14 (2) of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021

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Foreword

Domestic abuse affects 2.4 million adults in England and Wales every year. Behind that number are real people – victims and survivors who need safety, support and a system that stands firmly on their side.

Much of my effort this year has focused on the systems that survivors must navigate when they seek help. The Family Court remains the most common reasons people contact my office, and I was pleased to see the government accept key recommendations from my report on how it handles cases where domestic abuse is present, including a commitment to roll out the transformative Pathfinder Court model to more areas. We have also secured funding to establish a new monitoring mechanism to hold the Family Court to account for its response to victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Preventing domestic abuse from taking lives is one of the most serious responsibilities I carry. This year, I met with bereaved families whose loved ones were killed as a result of domestic abuse, and I am committed to ensuring their loss drives real change in the system. In January 2024, I launched a pilot of a new Domestic Abuse Related Deaths Oversight Mechanism, working to ensure that when a death occurs, the lessons are properly learned and acted upon.

The voices of survivors are the foundation of everything I do, and they make my work stronger and more legitimate. I am particularly proud of the launch of VOICES at the DAC, a platform that brings together policy makers, practitioners and researchers with victims and survivors of domestic abuse to make meaningful change.

My office continues to fight hard for the most marginalised survivors. Using my statutory powers, I found that all 43 police forces in England and Wales had shared victims' personal information with immigration enforcement - a deeply troubling finding that reached national headlines and increased pressure on government to act. No survivor should be deterred from seeking help because they fear the consequences for their immigration status.

I have also worked to ensure that the Online Safety Act, which received Royal Assent this year, properly protects victims of technology-facilitated abuse, and I have pressed for urgent action to secure sustainable funding for the specialist services that victims and survivors turn to for support.

None of this work happens in isolation. I am grateful to the specialist domestic abuse sector, whose dedication and expertise underpin everything that has been achieved. And I remain, above all, grateful to the survivors who trust us with their experiences.

There is much still to do. But this year's progress gives me confidence that, together, we can build a system that truly protects every victim and survivor.

Nicole Jacobs

Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales

Impact report

This report outlines the work undertaken by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office during the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and highlights its impact for victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's priorities

1. Standing with victims and survivors

Standing with victims and survivors of domestic abuse and elevating their voices is a key part of the Commissioner's approach. Hearing from victims and survivors is integral to ensuring her recommendations for change are led by the lived reality of those who have experienced, or are experiencing, domestic abuse.

Improving survivor engagement

The Commissioner and her team identified a disconnect between people who want their experiences heard to inform changes in the response to domestic abuse and the opportunities to do so. Often, the same pool of survivors and organisations – particularly by-and-for services and minoritised victims – were drawn upon for insights, with a failure to engage meaningfully or recognise the emotional and financial costs of taking part. While there was lots of good practice identified within the domestic abuse sector, more needed to be done to model good survivor engagement to statutory agencies, and to bring more voices into the conversation.

To close this gap, the Commissioner was proud to launch a new survivor platform - *VOICES at the DAC* - which brings together people with lived experience and the opportunities for them to influence change. The platform also hosts the office's principles of survivor engagement, aimed to model best practice to external organisations who are looking to engage for the first time or improve the way they build survivor voice into their work. The platform was launched through engagement with lived experience leads across the statutory and voluntary sectors, survivors already working with the Commissioner's office and an online launch event with accompanying social media.

The platform has already been used to drive participation in a survey run by the Commissioner's office on the criminal justice response to domestic abuse. The office plans to build the community around the platform in 2024-25, engaging more survivors and bringing their voices into more places where policy solutions are designed.

The Commissioner regularly receives correspondence from victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sharing their experiences, challenges and solutions for change. Across 2023-24, the Commissioner's team responded to nearly 400 pieces of written correspondence. This ensured that individual survivors had their experiences acknowledged, and their words could feed into consultation responses and regular engagement with government and other decision makers.

Throughout the year, the Commissioner also:

- Undertook a scoping exercise to understand the delivery of lived experience engagement with over 100 local authorities.

- Co-created a lived experience practitioner network with sector colleagues, including establishing a regular call for those delivering lived experience engagement work to share good practice.
- Hosted an online event to share examples of good practice with colleagues in 75 local authorities.

Children as victims in their own right

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognised children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right for the first time. This was a crucial step forward, however the Commissioner's report - *A Patchwork of Provision* - found that only 29% of victims and survivors were able to access the specialist support for their children that they wanted.

To strengthen the office's understanding of how this recognition was working in practice, the Commissioner's team arranged eleven online roundtables with professionals and practitioners working with child victims. Using extensive local contacts developed through the Commissioner's Practice and Partnerships team, the roundtables were attended by representatives from the police, education, health, social care and the specialist sector. Key themes emerged around the gaps in understanding of domestic abuse and best practice for child victims, local variation in the response to children and a lack of support and funding for organisations doing this work. These roundtables formed the basis of an insights briefing for local practitioners and government officials on the gap between the formal recognition of children's victim status and the practical support this should deliver.

During the year, the Commissioner has sought to influence many non-specialist agencies to ensure they have a better understanding of child victims of domestic abuse they may encounter. Using insights from local practice, the Commissioner and her team responded to multiple government consultations, including on the enforcement of Child Maintenance payments and children's social care.

To ensure children and young people are involved in shaping the Commissioner's understanding of the support they receive and what needs to improve, her office will be undertaking specific research in the coming year which centres their voices and experiences.

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

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 victim's 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.

This year, the Commissioner and her team worked to influence the passage of the Victims and Prisoners' Bill to include a 'firewall' between immigration enforcement and statutory agencies (in particular, police forces).

Using the Commissioner's statutory power to request information, she found that all 43 police forces in England and Wales (and the British Transport Police) had shared information about victims and survivors of domestic abuse with immigration enforcement between April 2020 and March 2023. This data, published in December 2023, built on the recommendations of her previous *Safety Before Status* report and emphasised the urgent need for action. The findings gained national media attention, covered by the BBC, Guardian and Independent.

Throughout the Victims and Prisoners' Bill's Parliamentary stages, the Commissioner and her team engaged MPs and Lords through written and online briefings as well as a roundtable which set out her priorities in the Bill around provision of community-based services and protection for migrant victims. The Commissioner also supported amendments to introduce a firewall at Commons Report and Lords Committee stages, sharing information briefs with MPs and Peers, and gave evidence at the Bill's House of Commons Committee stage. The Commissioner wrote to the Home Secretary, and responsible junior ministers in the Home Office and Ministry of Justice throughout the year to increase political pressure to act.

By the end of the 2023-24 reporting year, the Bill had yet to complete its remaining stages in the House of Lords, with further debate scheduled in April 2024.

3. Improve consistency in service provision and statutory services across England and Wales

Too often, who you are and where you live will determine access to the right support at the right time. The Commissioner's 2022 research report - *A Patchwork of Provision* - identified significant gaps between the support victims and survivors said they wanted to receive and what they were able to access – both in terms of specialist domestic abuse services and help from agencies like the police, NHS and councils.

Improving the criminal justice system

The police receive a domestic abuse-related call every 30 seconds. It is critical that all victims and survivors of domestic abuse have confidence in the police, and in the officers who investigate their abuse.

This year, the government introduced the Criminal Justice Bill to make changes to policing and criminal law with the aim of improving confidence in the criminal justice system. On reviewing the Bill, the Commissioner was concerned that there were missed opportunities in the Bill to address issues in the response to police perpetrated domestic abuse, something which has been revealed to be a major concern through high profile cases in recent years. The lack of action impacts all victims and survivors – by not dealing with domestic abuse perpetrators within police ranks, victims and survivors may fear that officers will not take their complaints seriously, or that a perpetrator could be investigating their case.

The Office has been working to address these gaps by urging ministers and officials to make changes to the vetting and dismissal process to root out officers with convictions for domestic abuse and violence against women and girls offences, so those who aren't fit to protect the public are removed from duty. The Commissioner gave evidence to the Bill Committee in the House of Commons, emphasising this need, as well as wider recommendations that would strengthen the Bill.

The Bill would make murder at the end of a relationship an aggravating factor, recognising that this is a particularly common trigger for homicide where there is a history of coercive control in the relationship. The Commissioner welcomed this proposal but would like to see the government take the opportunity to implement the wider recommendations from Clare Wade KC's Domestic Homicide Sentencing Review through this Bill. At the time of writing, the Bill is awaiting its Report stage in the House of Commons.

The Commissioner further emphasised the importance of implementing Clare Wade KC's recommendations on domestic homicide sentencing in her response to the Government's consultation on murder sentencing. She advised against the piecemeal approach set out in government proposals, and instead provided a series of recommendations to address the issue holistically.

Online safety

More than half of victims have experienced coercive control through social media, which can wreak havoc on their lives and seriously jeopardise their safety. The Online Safety Act received Royal Assent in October 2023, culminating years of influencing from the Commissioner and wider domestic abuse sector to ensure online violence against women and girls is properly recognised. The Commissioner was pleased to see the final Act include coercive and controlling behaviour as a priority offence, meaning social media companies have a duty to prevent and respond when it occurs on their platforms.

The Commissioner is a statutory consultee for guidance and codes of practice in the Act. This year, her office provided evidence to Ofcom to ensure the voices of victims and survivors of domestic abuse are present throughout the introduction of new laws. Her evidence emphasised the lack of resource within the specialist domestic abuse sector to support survivors experiencing technology-facilitated abuse, and the lack of capacity to research and build an evidence base on this type of abuse. This limits the effectiveness of the response victims and survivors receive when they reach out for support and must change.

The Commissioner also met with, and wrote directly to, the Ofcom CEO, Melanie Dawes, to highlight her concerns about the consultation process and encourage greater accessibility for domestic abuse victims and survivor and specialist third-sector organisations. She emphasised the need to futureproof regulations and enforcement, as well as to more clearly identify the links between online and offline harms.

As new measures are implemented, the Commissioner has joined sector partners in raising public awareness of technology-facilitated abuse, speaking in the media about the impact of perpetrators using 'stalkerware' and intimate image abuse.

The Commissioner and her team anticipate further consultation in the coming year as the regulator works through implementing the Act, particularly relating to child victims.

Local authority funding

Specialist domestic abuse services rely on funding from a broad range of funders, but the Commissioner's research found that most get their main funding from Local Authorities or Police and Crime Commissioners. These services are a vital part of a community's response to domestic abuse, but many are struggling to meet demand due to the short-term and insecure nature of the funding they receive. The Commissioner has consistently called for changes to ensure the needs of survivors are met, and statutory agencies recognise the value good support deliver to other services in their area.

In light of emerging concerns about the sustainability of local government finances, the Commissioner wrote to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, as well as all Leaders and Chief Executives of councils across England and Wales. The devastating impact of unstable finances on the specialist domestic abuse sector cannot be underestimated, so she reiterated her calls for a statutory duty to fund community-based services. This achieved broad and high-profile media coverage, including on Channel 4 News, BBC Radio 5 Live, LBC News, and in the Guardian.

4. Bring together local partners and government departments to provide a holistic response to domestic abuse

Learning from local practice

Tackling domestic abuse requires strong partnerships. This year, the Commissioner has strengthened the office's relationships with the specialist domestic abuse sector, specialist by-and-for organisations and statutory agencies throughout England and Wales through a rolling programme of visits.

These visits have enabled the office to see firsthand how local areas are responding to domestic abuse and gather evidence and insights which the office has used to directly shape national policy responses. These have including practice-focused responses to consultations on Children's Social Care and mandatory reporting, the state of policing, and honour-based and spiritual abuse.

A whole society approach to domestic abuse

A holistic response to domestic abuse means looking beyond the most typical places victims and survivors may turn to. With 2.4 million adults experiencing domestic abuse every year, wider society has a role to play in ensuring survivors receive the right support.

The Commissioner was delighted to join the advisory board of the Employer's Initiative on Domestic Abuse, a membership organisation of small and large businesses looking to equip employers with the tools to support employees experiencing domestic abuse, this year. She will contribute to the campaign's important providing resources to employers, raise awareness of businesses' role in tackling domestic abuse and sharing best practice through the network.

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

Family justice

Problems in the Family Court is the main reason victim-survivors get in contact with the Commissioner and her office, and the Court's failure to recognise and respond to victims, including children, is well evidenced.

As set out in her 2022-25 strategic plan, the Commissioner published a follow-up to her report on the Family Court's handling of domestic abuse in July 2023. The report brings together input from victims and survivors, practitioners and sector experts, and outlines the key issues faced by victims and survivors when they come into contact with the family justice system. Failings raised with the Commissioner showed that the Family Court has become a tool of post-separation abuse for perpetrators and fails to centre the safety of child victims of domestic abuse. The report made several recommendations which were accepted by government, including:

- A national rollout of Pathfinder Courts – *the government committed to taking this forward.*
- The establishment of a national monitoring mechanism – *the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office has secured funding of £180,000 in 2023-24 from the Ministry of Justice to continue the Family Court Reporting and Review Mechanism (FCRRM).*
- Ensuring survivors have access to a specialist domestic abuse support worker – *Practice Directions have been amended following this recommendation to ensure IDVAs and ISVAs can access the Family Court.*
- Work to improve the voice of the child in proceedings – *the Commissioner will continue to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice as they update Family Procedure Rules to do this.*

Insights from the report, and from the Commissioner's wider work with victims and survivors of domestic abuse, informed evidence submitted to the Family Justice Council on so-called 'parental alienation'. The Commissioner highlighted the way allegations of 'parental alienation' are being used in the Family Court as a counter-allegation to domestic abuse and to undermine a child's expressed wishes and feelings. This evidence is to inform guidance for Family Court professionals, due to be published later this year.

In October 2023, the Commissioner appointed Rosemary Hunter and Amanda Burton as the lead academics for the pilot phase of Family Court Review and Reporting Mechanism (FCRRM), supported by two senior researchers within the Commissioner's office. This pilot is comprised of two parts:

- a scoping exercise to determine the available data sources and data access processes; and
- an intensive court study to gather and analyse data from three court sites to test alternative methods of data gathering and provide a systemic account of how these courts handle domestic abuse cases.

Part 1 commenced in late 2023 and preparations for Part 2 were well progressed by the end of the reporting year, ready for court observations and case file analysis in 2024-25.

Domestic Abuse Related Deaths

Preventing domestic homicides and suicides, and taking forward the learnings when they do occur, remained a priority during this year.

The Commissioner has continued to meet with bereaved families to ensure their experience of loss drives system change. This year, she and her team met with families who have lost loved ones to domestic abuse, as well as members of Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse, the Killed Women campaign, and attended events on domestic abuse related deaths hosted by the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, and Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice.

In January 2024, the Commissioner launched a pilot of the Domestic Abuse Related Deaths Oversight Mechanism. This mechanism will collect information from local areas from Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs), collate recommendations and consequent action plans, and hold local areas to account in implementing these recommendations. The pilot phase will work with nine Police and Crime Commissioners and 11 Community Safety Partnerships over 12 months to test the efficacy of two models, before developing a proposal to roll out the mechanism nationally.

In early 2023 researchers at the HALT study at Manchester Metropolitan University, led by Professor Khatidja Chantler, were commissioned by the Office to conduct analysis into the themes and trends for recommendations within Domestic Homicide Reviews (now Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews). The four thematic reports were drawn from a sample of 302 DHRs between 2012 and 2019, focused on criminal justice, physical and mental health services, children's services, and adult social care. These were presented to a range of local and national stakeholders, including strategic leads, academics and civil servants, at four webinars, ensuring relevant recommendations reached professionals and building momentum for greater coordination of recommendation implementations going forward.

The Commissioner and her Office contributed to government policy on this subject, responding to consultations including:

- Changes to DHR legislation (August 2023);
- Firearms licencing (August 2023); and
- Murder Sentencing (March 2024).

Influencing international responses

The Commissioner is committed to learning from international best practice and sharing the strengths of approaches taken across England and Wales.

This year, the Commissioner's office organised a delegation trip for the US National Domestic Abuse Hotline, convening helpline providers and key officials as part of a first-of-its-kind cross-country learning exercise. The two-day visit had more than 50 participants, including the Hotline's CEO and a representative from the White House Gender Policy Council. The Commissioner and partners were able to share best practices and trends

in helpline operations, interventions for partners who cause harm, and research on technology-facilitated abuse.

The Commissioner and members of the team attended the European Conference on Domestic Violence in Iceland, presenting to an international expert audience on the office's research and practice insights. The Office participated in sessions on the Family Court, migrant survivor experiences and delivered a symposium on the Commissioner's 2022 - *A Patchwork of Provision* - report. Throughout the year, the Commissioner has also engaged with equivalents from Australia, Northern Ireland and New Zealand. This international engagement raised the visibility of the office's evidence and generated comparative learning that is now shaping the Commissioner's recommendations to improve support for survivors in England and Wales.

Administrative and governance

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner receives funding from the Home Office as its core financial settlement on an annual basis. These funds are managed in line with the Framework Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that the Commissioner holds with the Home Office.

While the Domestic Abuse Commissioner is responsible for day-to-day management of the budget, overall spending, procurement and recruitment rules are set by the wider Home Office, and the overall accountability for the budget sits with the relevant Home Office Director General. The Commissioner may also receive additional funding from other parties to carry out work, as set out in the Domestic Abuse Act (2021).

Financial statements

Statement of net expenditure for year ended 31 March 2024

(Rounded to nearest £1000)

23/24	BUDGET (£000)	ACTUAL (£000)	SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) (£000)
PAY	739	1067	(328)
NON-PAY	261	148	113
GROSS	1000	1215	(215)

*Pay breakdown includes pension and social security contributions. This financial year departments were able to make an average pay increase up to 4.5% for all civil service staff, plus an additional 0.5% for lower pay bands. Civil servants were also awarded a flat one-off cost of living payment of £1500 per full time equivalent across the Civil Service.

Office operating costs

(Rounded to nearest £1000)

23/24 NON-PAY BREAKDOWN	BUDGET (£000)	ACTUAL (£000)	SURPLUS/DEFICIT (£000)
IT AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS	-	4	(4)
STAFF TRAVEL AND OTHER	-	28	(29)
CONFERENCES	-	(5)	5
OFFICE RELATED	-	28	(28)
OTHER EXPENDITURE	261	92	169
GROSS	261	148	113

Staff report

Staff headcount as of March 31 2024 for salaried staff, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, was as follows:

	Permanent- F	Permanent - M	Total	Temporary - F	Temporary - M	Total
Public appointee	-	-	-	1	-	1
Grade 6	1	-	1	-	-	-
Grade 7	4	-	4	1	-	1
SEO	2	-	2	6	-	6
HEO	1	-	1	7	-	7
EO	-	-	-	2	-	2
Total	8	-	8	17	-	17

Advisory board

The Commissioner's Advisory Board is required by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and membership is at the formal invitation of the Commissioner.

During the 2023-24 period, the Advisory Board met three times and was chaired by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner.

Name	Date of appointment
Baljit Banga	February 2023
Catherine Hinwood	February 2023
David Challen	February 2023
Dr Liz Kelly	February 2023

Farah Nazeer	February 2023
Ippo Panteloudakis	February 2023
Louise Gittins	February 2023
Maggie Blythe	February 2023
Mrs Justice Knowles	February 2023
Sara Kirkpatrick	February 2023
ACC Samantha Millar*	January 2024

** ACC Samantha Miller replaced Maggie Blythe as representative of the National Police Chief's Council.*

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