

Using evidence for change

**Supporting multi-agency
communication in working with
domestic abuse in families with
children:**

A summary of evidence

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Introduction

This report brings together evidence from three linked evidence summaries from the NHS Education for Scotland (NES) Networked Evidence Search and Summary Service. These reports focus around the area of *Supporting Multi-Agency Communication in Working with Domestic Abuse in Families with Children*.

Each of the three reports that are included in this resource are formed around three areas of evidence:

1. Summary of evidence from published research (*Alison McAughtrie, NES*)
2. Evidence from Practice : Perspectives of managers and practitioners in Dumfries & Galloway (*Sheila Inglis, SMCI Associates*)
3. Evidence from improvement knowledge (*Sheila Inglis, SMCI Associates*)

Together, these reports combine evidence from research, practice and improvement to inform an action plan for further improving communication and collaboration across agencies in Dumfries and Galloway to support people affected by domestic abuse and violence against women.

What needs to change in the current system?

The overall picture from this research is of Dumfries and Galloway as an area which has already built robust relationships across agencies to support working with domestic abuse and violence against women. Nonetheless, as outlined below, there are a number of areas for improvement, to build on what is working well at present, and optimise multi-agency communication and collaboration.

Information and knowledge

The evidence tells us there is a need to:

- Address gaps in information sharing – e.g. sharing chronologies; health visitors not being informed when perpetrators are released from prison; delays in accessing police reports.
- Address under-reporting and under-recording of domestic abuse – e.g. by health professionals
- Make it easier to find out who to contact about a case.
- Ensure the right information always reaches the right people, including those who are not always in the current communication loops – e.g. teachers.
- Address the barriers caused by different languages being used across agencies, to ensure a shared understanding of the issues being discussed.
- Find ways to share the different types of data collected and stored in separate IT systems by different agencies. There are protocols in place for sharing data between criminal justice social work, wider social work

and housing/homelessness, but this data sharing is not in place with health, police and third sector.

Learning and development

The evidence tells us there is a need to:

- Provide a strategic, joined-up approach to training that achieves coherence and consistency across the breadth of agencies involved in supporting people affected by domestic abuse.
- Build a wider shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved in supporting people affected by domestic abuse.
- Provide training in three specific areas:
 - Confidence in identifying risk factors and exploring domestic abuse issues with women and children.
 - Communication skills for working effectively with women and children affected by domestic abuse and violence.
 - Assessment
 - Child protection training.
- Raise cultural and societal awareness of the problems of domestic abuse and violence against women.
- Embed learning in day to day practice.

Service improvement

The evidence tells us there is a need to:

- Consolidate and unify guidance, protocols and referral pathways from individual agencies. This is key to creating fully integrated approach to multi-agency collaboration in which all agencies are clear about how and when they are involved in the process, and how their contribution complements and supports other agencies.

- Continue to encourage multi-agency / joint visits, case conferences and team meetings.
- Address current gaps in engagement – for example in the DAVAW - to involve the full range of agencies, sheriffs, and frontline practitioners.
- Reconcile the different perspectives of risk, and the different ways of addressing risk, across the various partner agencies involved in dealing with domestic abuse.

What actions can we take to deliver these changes?

The evidence base points to a number of approaches that could help Dumfries and Galloway progress towards its overall vision for multi-agency communication to support people affected by domestic abuse.

The challenge will be to identify which of these actions are feasible in the short-term, within existing capacity and authorisation to act, and which require planning for further strategic support and investment, to enable them to happen in the medium to long term.

Information and knowledge

- Create a directory of roles and responsibilities; who to contact and when.
- Engage agencies in joint mapping of critical information flows, to identify and address key gaps.
- Use the Evidence Search and Summary Service to verify and update the evidence base for key interventions.
- Use the online information and knowledge resources sourced through this project to create resource packs that can help to build a shared knowledge base across agencies and support sharing of information with service users.
- Develop shared definitions of common terms and concepts – e.g. what is meant by domestic abuse, risk and risk assessment - to help build the common language essential to effective multi-agency communication.

Learning and development

- Scope the options for delivering a coherent strategic approach to training across agencies. This can include building on, and embedding consistent messages in, existing training opportunities where these are available – e.g. Women’s Aid multi-agency training; GIRFEC training; police sessions delivered in schools.
- Spread and embed the approaches that help to embed the learning acquired through training in practice:
 - Reflection
 - Individual and group supervision
 - Peer mentoring and support
- Provide guidance to ensure that any new training builds in these follow-up approaches.
- Gather information on the tools commonly used by practitioners at present to support people affected by domestic violence. Collate these into a shared toolkit that can be used in training sessions.

Service improvement

Use Horwath’s¹ progressive spectrum of multi-agency collaboration as a tool to:

- a) Assess the current status of collaboration in Dumfries and Galloway with respect to different agencies and different aspects of supporting survivors of domestic abuse;
- b) Plan where to focus efforts to progress to the next stages:

¹ Horwath, J. et al (2007). [Collaboration, integration and change in children’s services: Critical issues and key ingredients](#). *Child abuse and neglect*, 31(1) pp55-69.

Level 1: Informal local collaboration between individual practitioners.

Level 2: Case by case cooperation

Level 3: Formalised coordination

Level 4: Formal coalition

Level 5: Full integration

- c) Collate and review existing protocols and guidance across individual agencies; identify scope for harmonisation within overarching guidance.
- d) Engage agencies in process mapping to define referral pathways that support an overall integrated multi-agency approach.
- e) Encourage and empower practitioners to call multi-agency meetings to support individual cases when required.
- f) Pilot and evaluate implementing multi-agency practitioner forums, building on learning from previous experience.