



# Wiltshire Community Safety Partnership

## Domestic Abuse Local Learning Review: Learning Briefing

### Working with perpetrators of coercive and controlling behaviour

#### Local Learning Review

Community Safety Partnerships have a statutory duty to carry out a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) when a person aged 16 or over dies as a result of violence, abuse or neglect by someone that they are related to or in personal relationship with, or who was a member of the same household.

The purpose of a DHR is to establish learning and change practices to reduce future harm.

Wiltshire's Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) have taken steps towards being more proactive in protecting domestic abuse victims, by reviewing cases that fall outside the criteria for a DHR, but where there is potential for learning. On this basis, the partnership chose to examine the case of Adult R to identify learning which could prevent future risk of serious harm to others.

Adult S attempted to murder his wife, Adult R, on two separate occasions. Adult R survived but suffered significant injuries and harm. The learning from this, and other cases of serious injury in domestic abuse, is as important as when a death occurs. This report, therefore, is not a DHR but a Local Learning Review (LLR), examining the circumstances in which a victim of domestic abuse was seriously harmed by a coercive and controlling partner.

WCSP have produced this learning briefing to help professionals better identify and understand coercive control, including recognising when you are at risk of being coerced or controlled by a service user, and what you can do.

#### Coercive control

##### What is coercive control?

Abuse isn't limited to physically hurting someone. Since 2013, coercive or controlling behaviour has been recognised as a form of domestic abuse in the government definition. The Serious Crime Act 2015 made coercive and controlling behaviour in an intimate or family relationship an offence, with up to five years in prison for perpetrators.

**Coercive behaviour** is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation, or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

**Controlling behaviour** is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape, and regulating their behaviour.

Coercive control is often hard to identify but there are signs that someone may need help. [You can access the Safe Lives guidance to learn more.](#)

## Our recommendations

- 1. Ministry of Defence (MOD) domestic abuse policies should be promoted and widely used by staff.** The MOD have policies in place to support victims of domestic abuse and facilitate information sharing within MOD welfare services. There should be a renewed emphasis on ensuring that operational welfare staff are aware of these policies and that they are routinely used. Internal auditing would give assurance that military personnel who are affected by domestic abuse, and their families, are supported effectively and consistently.
- 2. MOD welfare services should make effective use of civilian domestic abuse support services in supporting military personnel and their families.** The most appropriate support for victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse within the armed forces may sit outside of the MOD. Consequently, MOD welfare staff should be aware of, and have contacts with, local support services in order to signpost victims, or perpetrators, in a timely manner. There should be a specific emphasis on supporting people affected by coercive control, as a 'hidden' form of domestic abuse.
- 3. Disrupting perpetrators' abusive behaviour will help us reduce the number of victims.** Agencies should review how they work with perpetrators of domestic abuse. Existing services should be encouraged to work with perpetrators to enable behaviour change and break the cycle. By reducing the number of repeat offenders, we can reduce the number of victims of the same perpetrator. New ways of working with perpetrators should be sought, and training made available to increase professional confidence in this area.
- 4. Multi-agency domestic abuse training in Wiltshire should help all professionals to regularly review the potential harm from a long-term risk factor.** This training should be open to those working with both adults and children, and should emphasise that time passing without incident is not evidence of a reduction in risk from a fixed risk factor, such as a perpetrator of domestic abuse.
- 5. There should be planned and co-ordinated multi-agency support for a victim who may be the subject of media interest.** Professionals should identify how they can work together to mitigate any potential harm or distress through a coordinated approach and nominated lead agency.
- 6. Agencies should be confident about repeatedly offering support to victims, whilst remaining sensitive to their experiences.** Victims of domestic abuse may well be reluctant to engage with services. A victim may develop a good relationship with one professional and feel able to engage with that person. If so, other services should work together with that professional to ensure that the victim is aware of all the available help, without being expected to welcome an excessive number of professionals into their lives before they are ready to engage.
- 7. Universal services, especially maternity services, are in a unique position to support victims of domestic abuse.** The risk of domestic abuse is known to be higher during pregnancy so maternity services should promote professional curiosity amongst staff and increase staff confidence to act upon any concerns about domestic abuse.

8. **Where there is serious injury or harm to a victim of domestic abuse, a MARAC referral should always be made, without exception.**

This will ensure risks are assessed by multi-agency partners and an appropriate safety plan produced. A referral based on professional judgement should be made if the victim does not agree to complete a risk assessment. All agencies should have systems in place to offer assurance that adequate and appropriate MARAC referrals are being made. The WCSP should provide wider scrutiny of this.

9. **Members of the public, friends and family can be vital in helping to identify and support victims of domestic abuse.**

Helping the wider community spot the signs of domestic abuse, particularly coercive control, will help communities access support earlier. Clear messages should be promoted explaining what people can do if they are worried about a friend, neighbour or loved one.

10. **Professionals working across Wiltshire need to know how to identify coercive and controlling behaviour, as well as how to confidently challenge.**

Professionals should be trained to spot the signs, symptoms and consequences of coercive control. This is not only to identify and support victims, but also to increase awareness and reduce the risk of being groomed themselves by service users, and how to manage this. The WCSP will seek assurance that adequate training is being offered across agencies and that policies are in place to support staff who may be unknowingly at risk of grooming by service users.

11. **Professionals working with domestic abuse, particularly coercive control, should have regular protected time with a manager or colleague, to support decision making.**

Practitioners working with perpetrators who are coercively controlling require time to reflect on the information they have and how services can best meet the needs of the victim and their family. Colleagues not directly involved in case work can help to provide an objective view on how risk can be most effectively reduced.

12. **Employers should be aware of the role they can play in supporting staff members who are victims or perpetrators of domestic abuse.** The WCSP will seek assurance that multi-agency partners have up-to-date policies for supporting staff in place, and that those policies are promoted so that staff are aware of them and can access support easily if they are a victim or perpetrator of domestic abuse.

## What next?

- These recommendations have been used to create an **Action Plan**, to ensure that agencies in Wiltshire use this learning to make changes to the way they work.
- The **WCSP Domestic Abuse subgroup**, made up of senior professionals from agencies who work with those affected by domestic abuse, will monitor and guide the progress of the Action Plan, ensuring agencies do what they have agreed.
- These recommendations have also been incorporated into **Wiltshire's Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Plan 2019 – 2020**. This ensures that any work being done as a result of the learning from this LLR will align with other domestic abuse work already being done in Wiltshire.
- Domestic abuse training offered to professionals through the **Wiltshire Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership**, will be updated to incorporate the learning from this case.

