

A link in the chain

**The role of friends and family
in tackling domestic abuse**

Summary report



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**citizens
advice**

Citizens Advice and domestic abuse

In a series of publications we explore the role of civil society in minimising domestic abuse. This report looks at the role of informal networks (friends, family, colleagues and neighbours) in recognising and supporting victims of domestic abuse.

We welcome the increasing political and national focus on challenging abuse through new laws, reviews of policy practice and funding commitments. The role of specialists - in the form of refuges, legal professionals and police, helplines or support services - is critical for many victims to leave abusive relationships and rebuild their lives. However most victims don't engage with these groups. We argue that to successfully minimise abuse, policy and practice must also consider the social context of abusive relationships.

We want to improve the support from the informal networks and frontline professionals who may be aware of abuse. And we consider how social and professional networks can help bridge the gap between victims and specialist support.

In considering the role of non-specialists, we don't seek to add additional burdens onto the public, or duties to frontline staff beyond their remit. By looking at the evidence and best practice, we consider how we can best support those who are already encountering abuse but lack consistent guidance or information about their role: not leaving a friend to feel guilty about not intervening or anxious about what to do; a housing official worried about an abusive partner returning to harass a tenant; an emergency doctor with concerns about the safety of discharging a patient.

Our focus on non-specialists doesn't detract from the critical importance of specialist domestic abuse organisations and advocates. Within this framing specialists may have a greater role to play, by both being a source that informal supporters can refer victims onto, but also by being available to advise and support these supporters. Our hope is that by mobilising civil society, victims' routes to specialist support is quicker and easier.

Citizens Advice is not, nor seeks to become, a specialist provider in this space. We aim to play a positive role in minimising domestic abuse by facilitating engagement and awareness amongst a cross-section of frontline staff, as well as friends and family, promoting the role of civil society in tackling the issue, and improving our own service delivery through training and selective enquiry in local Citizens Advice around the country. Through our public-facing campaign, we will promote the 'Talk About Abuse' framework, as well as the services that are already available, but are not always known about.

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Summary report

This is the opening summary chapter of *A link in the chain*. For further details on our research and methodology, please see the full report, available on Citizens Advice website.

Domestic abuse is a deep scar running through our society, and tackling it deserves to be a national priority. It is unacceptable that it is a common feature of many relationships: more than 1.5 million people experienced abuse from a partner in the last year alone; rising to almost 6 million who have been victimised as adults.¹ It can cause deep and lasting harm to victims, with repercussions continuing even after separation, and beyond the immediate family to friends, colleagues and communities. Harm can be physical and psychological, but detriment also can spill over into work and family life, homes and savings, credit rating and debt.

'No one asked. No one asked me and I just didn't tell'²

Despite the harm abuse causes, victims struggle to acknowledge and disclose what's happening to them and seek support.³ They face complex personal and practical barriers to admitting abuse and accessing help, as their lives are often intricately intertwined, in terms of emotions, networks and resources, with that of the perpetrator. Victims worry about implications of accessing services on their children, or assume they can only get help if they want to leave the relationship.⁴ Despite changing public attitudes, some people who have been subject to abuse feel stigmatised and so can be reluctant to admit and seek help, even to those close to them. Feelings of shame or blame aren't solely instilled by the perpetrator: in a recent survey of a cross-section of women, a third said they wouldn't want anyone to know if they were to be a victim of abuse.⁵

As individuals struggle to proactively seek help, many victims remain invisible to services, never accessing effective support. Abusive relationships escalate, going unrecognised and undiscussed, sometimes for years.⁶ Victims can become increasingly isolated, making the gap to trained specialist services (helplines, refuges, police or health professionals) yawn large.

¹ Crime Survey of England and Wales 2013/14 (2015). Estimated numbers of victims of intimate violence in the last year, by headline categories

² Lutenbacher, M., Cohen, A., & Mitzel, J (2003) Do we really help? Perspectives of abused women. *Public Health Nursing*, 20. 56-64.

³ We use the terms 'victims' and 'perpetrators' throughout, but do not mean to imply that those who experience abuse should be reduced to 'victim' status and even that those who commit abuse should not be solely understood as 'perpetrators.'

⁴ SafeLives (2015) Getting it right first time.

⁵ YouGov poll of 2,244 women, carried out 3-5 Sept. 2014, carried out on behalf of refuge. <http://www.refuge.org.uk/2014/09/17/loose-women-and-refuge-launch-domestic-violence-campaign/>

⁶ SafeLives (2015) Getting it right first time.

Friends and family can be a key link in the chain to leaving abuse behind, as these are the individuals most likely to be aware of abuse early on. Informal networks can offer help by encouraging victims to reach out to specialist services or the police (acting as a conduit), or by offering practical and emotional aid themselves (supporter), from bolstering self-esteem to providing somewhere to stay.

To minimise abuse we must look beyond sets of binary relationships, between two partners, a victim and specialist, or perpetrator and the justice system. Policy-makers and practitioners need to consider the social context that abusive relationships exist in.

Informal networks deserve greater attention, because of the positive role they can play. But also because they are the ecosystem abuse exists in. Despite best intentions, social groups can also (unwittingly) sustain abuse. Those close to a victim can create an environment that may encourage or discourage a victim from taking steps to leave a relationship. This may be active or passive, explicit or tacit, but the attitude and engagement (or lack there of) from social ties, send signals both to the victim and to the perpetrator.⁷ Without others picking up on warning signs, creating a 'disclosing environment', or actively asking, victims can struggle to tell anyone about the abuse and seek help.

'I stayed [because] no-one helped me leave'⁸

Despite caring deeply about a victim, social networks aren't always best equipped to offer support. As a society we struggle to recognise abuse, particularly when it doesn't fit a stereotype of a powerful, male perpetrator inflicting physical violence on a vulnerable, female victim. Where abuse doesn't fit this mould - where people are friends with both parties, where abuse is emotional, or bound up with mental health issues, where the perpetrator is repentant, kind, funny or self-assured, where the victim is successful and confident in public, where the couple are no longer together, or casually dating, or the same sex - we may be less quick to spot and challenge abuse.

Even if aware of abuse, supporters may be unsure whether it is appropriate to engage. It's a sensitive subject, and people are understandably worried about doing the wrong thing or exacerbating the problem. Many may feel unable to start such a difficult conversation. If abuse is ongoing, those close to a victim may be frustrated by them remaining in an abusive relationship, struggling to understand why they won't leave; or refuse to accept the possibility of someone they know or care about perpetrating abuse. Where victims face dismissal or even blame following disclosure, this can shut down their willingness to disclose further or seek help.⁹ The first response is therefore critical.

⁷ Klein, R (2014) Responding to Intimate Violence Against Women, The Role of Informal Networks. Cambridge University Press

⁸ Quote taken from Twitter #WhyIStayed discussion

⁹ Klein R (2014) Responding to Intimate Violence against Women: The Role of Informal Networks Cambridge University Press

“Heads turned in the other direction. I don’t blame them. I forgive them. They were scared too”¹⁰

Despite the importance of informal networks in impeding or facilitating abuse, being likely to be the first point of disclosure, their role is given little consideration in research or policy development. Without detracting attention from the importance of intensive and specialist services for victims of domestic abuse (in the form of refuges, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates [IDVAs] or advocacy in the justice system), Citizens Advice wants to improve the support available from a range of sources. We need to better equip informal networks - the community in which the relationship takes place - to recognise warning signs, have confidence to ask, offer appropriate support and be able to refer on to experts.¹¹

This report suggests how can we cultivate a climate where disclosure comes earlier on. By looking at the evidence and best practice, we consider how we can make friends, family and the wider community more aware of the role they could have in facilitating or shutting down opportunities for victims to disclose, or seek remedy or redress. And we present ideas for government and third sector to best support those supporters, those who are already encountering abuse, but lack consistent guidance or information about their role.

By broadening the range of people who might help open the door to escape from abuse, we hope this will in turn reduce the number of cases which escalate to profound and chronic harm, major state intervention, or in the worse cases, end in preventable death. This can be achieved partly by providing individuals with advice and information which equips them to recognise the signs of abuse, broach the topic safely, and respond appropriately. But it also relies on there being a clear and accessible route to specialist support.

This report draws on new primary evidence as well as secondary literature to discuss the reality and extent of domestic abuse in our society, explore the barriers to help-seeking, particularly around lack of recognition of non-physical abuse, before moving on to explore the role of informal networks in tackling this issue.

A civil society campaign: ‘Talk About Abuse’

We set out the evidence and argue for the need for a public-facing campaign about domestic abuse. Rather than targeting the victim or perpetrator, there is space for a civil campaign which addresses friends and family, those who may have worries about a relationship, but lack confidence or a framework with which to engage. Alongside this publication, Citizens Advice have developed materials to kick-start a national campaign, which include steps to encourage society to safely and appropriately ‘Talk About Abuse’. These resources are freely available, and we

¹⁰ Quote taken from Twitter #WhyIStayed discussion

¹¹ This model doesn’t minimise the role for specialists. Indeed, the hope would be for a greater number of people contacting specialist services, earlier on in any abusive relationship.

welcome and encourage others in society - community and faith groups, employers, hairdressers, pubs, music venues, sports teams - to consider displaying these resources. More fundamentally, we encourage people to consider those close to them, and if they have concerns, to safely ask about abuse, using the clear framework we have developed, with input from specialists.

Our 'Talk About Abuse' campaign approaches the problem of abuse by harnessing the will and resources available in civil society, rather than seeing this as an issue which requires a government-led policy lever. That said, there is a core role for government if they are to minimise abuse, earlier on in relationships.

The Chancellor has committed to review how to provide sustainable funding for refuges and other vital specialist services. The Welsh Government are also reviewing their specialist services in light of the recent enactment of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. This review is much needed and should be considered in the context of a wide range of community support mechanisms, like IDVA and outreach services. The review remit includes consideration of what could prevent the need for individuals needing refuge provision. We recommend the government structures the review to answer three questions, which are vital to reduce abuse escalating in relationships:

Q1: How can the public better recognise non-physical abuse in their or each others' relationships?

'But they never hit me'

Across the last four decades, consecutive Governments have taken steps to articulate and criminalise domestic abuse. As our understanding of abuse has grown, so the Government's focus has broadened, from debates in the 1970s about men being violent to their wives, through to the introduction of a new offence to criminalise coercive or controlling domestic abuse this year. Other changes - from making explicit that harm can be caused from a 'pattern' of behaviours as well as discrete incidents, that it can occur between family members as well as couples, between former partners as well as current, and regardless of gender or sexuality - expanded the definition further.

Each of these iterations is welcome. Every development better reflects the realities of abuse, is more inclusive, and illuminates how difficult it can be for a victim to seek help or leave a relationship. Yet, a broad definition of abuse in the Home Office won't be effective in preventing, minimising or responding to perpetrators, unless it has meaning for real people - unless this definition equips people to spot and challenge abuse.

Society is unsure what constitutes coercive or controlling behaviours, and lack confidence in recognising domestic abuse: we lack a working definition

of abuse. As part of the review, the UK government should work with researchers, specialists and the media, as well as devolved governments, to promote and illustrate a working account of abuse that the public can recognise, building on their successful campaign targeted at young people, and current campaigns by the Welsh government. This should broaden beyond stereotypical presentations of physical abuse, to accounts which resonate with people who are actually experiencing or witnessing abuse. Part of this should promote early signs of abuse, and examples of coercive controlling behaviours.

Q2: What needs amending to ensure all different parts of policy and society share a common, consistent and applicable account of abuse?

'Where can I go and what will I live on?'

We need a common description of abuse that is applied across government (local, regional and national), and is understood by relevant services providers in both the public and private sphere. As part of the review the UK government should engage with civil society institutions, from charities to banks, that have a role to play in recognising and responding to this broader account of domestic abuse. There may be useful lessons to learn from the Welsh Government.

There needs to be consistency across different policy areas, and parts of civil society, about domestic abuse, and what support or safeguards are available for victims.

- Commitments from different government departments, affecting housing, benefits and legal aid, for example, must share a consistent depiction of abuse.
- Evidence requirements for demonstrating abuse should be common across different departments, and these should be reasonable and accessible for any victim, to ensure support materialises on the ground.
- Legal aid must be available in practice; currently too many victims struggle to meet the evidence requirements or pay financial contributions required.
- Safe and appropriate housing should be easily available: some victims are being offered unsafe accommodation or deemed voluntarily homeless.
- Those leaving abuse must be exempted from the Housing Benefit under 21 restriction and the two child restriction proposed for tax credits, just as they are from the single household Universal Credit payment requirement.
- Local authority Housing Benefit staff and HMRC tax credit staff are trained to understand what domestic abuse is and where the exemptions apply.

Members of the review should engage with cross-section of different actors, outside government as well as within, to ensure that other policy areas are

equipped to recognise and respond to abuse. If financial abuse, for example, is to be addressed, there needs to be collaboration with creditors and banks (including local authorities and HMRC) to develop common frameworks for recognising and responding to this form of abuse.

Q3: How can anybody who has concerns about abuse easily access the information, guidance or support they need?

‘I needed help but didn’t know how to access any or if there was any available to me’

In England there is a complex map of information and support available around domestic abuse. Even amongst our Citizens Advice network - designed for information and referral - we have struggled to map what resources are available for whom, and how to access them.

There’s a good reason specialists offer tailored services to specific groups: female victims may only feel safe amongst other women; LGBT victims may worry about having to ‘out’ themselves; male victims can fear stigma about being a victim; and BAMER victims may have specific cultural or language needs. Local, specialist and tailored services can minimise barriers to seeking help, so there can’t be a one-size-fits-all model for specialist provision.

That said, the user journey needs to be improved to ensure members of the public are able to find and access support - quickly and intuitively - whoever they are, and whatever type of abuse they may be worried about. There are nationally-funded helplines, but they are unable to answer all calls, have different opening hours, and are tailored for different audiences. Anyone should be able to easily be able to understand what counts as abuse, and whether it is a criminal offence, through to the steps of applying for legal aid or collecting evidence.

As the UK government considers a much needed sustainable funding model for specialist services, they should also apportion funds for (further) accessible digital services around abuse. Web chat for information and support should be considered across the UK (with appropriate safety considerations). The option of asking questions or discussing a relationship online, rather than voice-to-voice, or face-to-face, may make it easier for people to seek help sooner, and this functionality should be considered in any case to free up helplines and more intensive services for those who wish or need to use them.

The review should consider whether investing in a digital 'front door' for information and advice that is well designed and inclusive¹² (but with clear signposting to specialist services for particular groups) could help support victims and friends and family with understanding their options, their risks and where they can - confidentially - get further support. While for many issues, users simply google their question to find answers (making Google the 'homepage' for most sites), given the sensitivity of domestic abuse, the safety concerns it raises and the fact it touches on a complex web of issues, it may be valuable to have a single, well-designed digital 'front door' to give victims confidence in the information, the ability to browse and ask around the issue, safely and confidentially.

If England did develop a single digital front door, they could learn from the Welsh 'Live Fear Free' site, hosted by the government, but written and supported by partners across the sector, with a single helpline number, accessible for all, and open 24 hours a day.

Easy referral shouldn't just be available for victims, friends and family. The review should work with specialists, and advice services that refer onto specialists (medical professionals, social services, housing providers and so on) about how referrals could be simplified.

Given the depth and scale of the problem, we need cross-party, cross-government and cross-sector engagement to tackle the issue.

¹² Having an inclusive single digital service does not imply funding should be apportioned evenly to all services, or the services themselves should be gender neutral.

Our aims

To provide the advice people need for the problems they face.
To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

Our principles

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.

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