



Evaluation of Early Intervention Models for Change in Domestic Violence: Northern Rock Foundation Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 2004–09

Summary findings

Dr Catherine Donovan, Dr Sue Griffiths, Nicola Groves

With Dr Hilary Johnson, Jeffrey Douglass

This research evaluates two domestic violence projects in the north of England funded by Northern Rock Foundation, assessing the outcomes of early intervention and multi-agency working for victim/survivors of domestic violence, their children and perpetrators.

Introduction

“If it wasn’t for them being there, I wouldn’t be here today.”

This report draws together for the first time estimates of the cost and impact of domestic violence in pilot areas in the North East and Cumbria, with new learning on early intervention initiatives and multi-agency working in this field. The evaluation report provides a detailed understanding of the complexities and challenges of the early intervention models adopted in the pilot areas, informed by the experiences of victim/survivors and professionals working with the pilot projects.

Key Learning

Letgo in Cumbria and Safer Families in Gateshead were set up as innovative domestic violence projects involving: (1) early intervention; (2) the provision of services to victim/survivors, their children and perpetrators; and (3) multi-agency working.

- **Early intervention was shown to be effective in both projects** based on assessment of: the prevention of further incidents, increased perception of safety, reduced risk, trust in the project and greater confidence in seeking help.
- **The potential for risk reduction depended on the type of relationship a victim/survivor was in** and what additional problems they might be facing. Four groups were identified each needing different levels of support.
- **The majority of victim/survivors in both projects reported improved health and well-being**, and expressed confidence in the projects.
- **Work with children produced generally positive results.** Both projects worked with significant numbers of children. The high level of referral from statutory agencies in Cumbria suggested the project there was filling a gap in existing children's services.
- **The Police and Crown Prosecution Service supported the aim of making perpetrators more accountable through the criminal justice system.** However, despite increases in numbers of reported incidents, the proportion of cases going through the criminal justice system remained small.
- **Multi-agency working was a key part of the initiative** but partnerships experienced difficulties in communication, power imbalance and staffing issues. Letgo's efforts to deal with concerns such as management and agency roles in the initial phase before going into operation produced greater success in creating a strong partnership culture.
- **Work with perpetrators proved the most difficult to promote.** Numbers engaged with the programmes were lower than expected and most agencies regarded this work as outside their remit.
- The urban (Safer Families) and rural (Letgo) projects had different needs and capabilities **Understanding the local context is an important consideration when initiating domestic violence services.**

Background

In 2003, a report was published on research commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation (NRF) to investigate the high number of domestic violence cases dropping out of the criminal justice system. The report, produced by Dr Marianne Hester, argued for rapid-response advocacy services for victims and their children, work with perpetrators and a more coordinated approach on the part of statutory and voluntary agencies.

In 2004, NRF set up the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project to put these ideas into operation. NRF funded two pilot projects – Safer Families in Gateshead and Letgo in Cumbria. Safer Families was established within an existing project in an urban area, while Letgo was an entirely new rural service. Their aims were to improve the health and well-being of victim/survivors and their children while making perpetrators more accountable for their actions through the criminal justice system. This was to be delivered by providing: an early intervention service to victim/survivors; a combined service to victim/survivors, their children and perpetrators; and coordinated working among the 11 partner agencies involved in each project.

NRF also commissioned an external evaluation, to provide support for learning throughout the lifetime of the projects and to assess their impact. The report provides details of the learning, including the views of victim/survivors and the professionals involved in developing and delivering related support.

The National Coordinated Community Response

The report also provides learning on how the projects adapted to a changing policy environment. After the projects had been launched, the government introduced the national coordinated community response for domestic violence, comprising three interventions: multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs); independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs); and specialist domestic violence courts (SDVCs). In response, project workers undertook IDVA training, a common risk assessment tool was introduced, and multi-agency working in the Gateshead project was boosted. The shift to the MARAC model in Gateshead also led to a focus on victim/survivors at highest risk.

Early intervention: work with victim/survivors

Both projects demonstrated that early intervention was effective. Engagement with the project made it less likely that a victim/survivor would experience a repeat referral or report a repeat incident to the police. Some victim/survivors came to understand their experience as domestic violence and became more confident in seeking help. Risk assessment showed the majority of victim/survivors to be at reduced risk following engagement with the project, and victim/survivors' own perceptions of risk were also found to be lower. The majority of victim/survivors in both projects reported improved health and well-being, although for some the improvement was variable. The majority also expressed confidence in the project. The Letgo evaluation identified four groups of victim/survivors for whom outcomes were different: typical, complex-typical, complex-atypical and non-intimate partner relationships. The first group ('typical') were most likely to experience a risk reduction. The 'complex-typical' group – with additional problems such as alcohol/drug use, disability or a history of abuse – stayed engaged with the project for longer and were less likely to experience risk reduction. The 'complex-atypical' group – with additional problems similar to the previous groups but with atypical relationships – needed most from the projects in terms of time and effort and were least likely to experience risk reduction and/or improved safety. This helped the project understand factors affecting risk reduction. It was also felt that an early means of assessing victim/survivors' needs would enable services to target workloads and funding and identify gaps in provision.

Work with children

Both projects provided one-to-one and group work with children. Although data are limited, they suggest that considerable numbers of children, particularly in Cumbria, received a specialist service that might not have been available elsewhere. Mothers were reluctant to talk about the effect on their children of domestic violence, but some were more prepared to comment on their children's improved health and well-being following contact with the project. Some commented on the wait for their children to be seen, suggesting a need for increased capacity in this type of work.

Work with perpetrators

The aim to increase perpetrators' accountability through the criminal justice system achieved limited success. Despite increased numbers of arrests and charges brought against perpetrators, the proportion of cases progressing through the courts remained low. While cases referred to Safer Families in particular were in the high or very high risk category, sentencing did not appear to reflect this. Work with perpetrators within the projects also encountered difficulties, with numbers signing up for the voluntary programmes remaining low. Although some social workers and the police in Cumbria actively encouraged perpetrators to enrol on the programmes, partner agencies generally did not see this work as part of their remit. Some practitioners were also reluctant to deal with potentially violent men.

Multi-agency working

Both projects encountered some challenges with multi-agency working. These included issues with: communication and information sharing between and within partner agencies; establishing credibility of new services; sufficiently senior management representation on strategic boards; management and accountability; and recruiting and staffing. In both projects, multi-agency working appeared to narrow over time to a core of criminal justice, housing and children's agencies. However, this may be a reflection of the limitations of the data available on other links with other services. The relative success of the Cumbria project in developing multi-agency working appears to be due to their ability to build on the strength of the existing partnership. With no pre-existing projects they were also able to design their services together to meet local needs. Learning for future projects suggests that a development phase is important to establish a strong foundation, paying attention to matters such as assessing and building the strength of existing multi-agency working, planning how the project will develop and be managed, and agreeing monitoring and data collection procedures. Constructive work at this stage enables projects to deal more effectively with the challenges that may arise in the operating phase.

Evaluating the projects

Longitudinal evaluations present a particular challenge. A strong baseline and effective data collection mechanisms are key to demonstrating long-term impact. The relationship between evaluator and projects is vital to extracting effective learning throughout the lifetime of the work. A range of data collection methods were used along with interviews with senior management, practitioners and victim/survivors. Data collection difficulties arose in both projects, and gaps in agency data created problems in tracking cases across the partner agencies. Involving victim/survivors in the evaluation was also difficult, reflecting the experience of other researchers in this field.

Conclusions and recommendations

- **The early intervention model was shown to be effective and the evaluation recommends that this work should continue to be supported.**
- Early identification of victim/survivors with complex needs enables projects to target resources appropriately.
- The number of children involved with both projects highlights a need for specific services for children.
- Targeted work with atypical groups, including children and young people who abuse their mothers, should be considered.
- Alternative sources of funding for this work may need to be identified to ensure sustainability of these services.
- For perpetrator programmes to be better used, clarification of agencies' roles and training and support for practitioners are needed.
- In setting up new multi-agency projects, careful attention needs to be paid to the development phase to allow for development of strong and effective networks.
- Data collection and monitoring methods, including ways of tracking cases across agencies, should also be identified and agreed in the development phase of future work.
- Future research should include looking at outcomes for standard and medium risk victim/survivors, as well as agencies' current focus on high and very high risk cases.
- Sentencing should be further monitored to try to identify why sentences do not appear to reflect the current concentration on high risk cases.

More information

■ Full report

The full report on this study is available to download free of charge from the website below.

Published by Northern Rock Foundation
The Old Chapel, Woodbine Road, Gosforth
Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 9BH

Tel: 0191 284 8412

Email: generaloffice@nr-foundation.org.uk

www.nr-foundation.org.uk

This publication is published as part of the Foundation's policy and communications work. The views expressed, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

© Northern Rock Foundation November 2010.