

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PERPETRATOR PROGRAMMES

## WHAT COUNTS AS SUCCESS?

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BRIEFING NOTE 1

The first of a series of briefing notes investigating the impact of domestic violence perpetrator programmes on the safety of women and children in the UK.

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**THIS BRIEFING NOTE SETS OUT THE KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH INTO WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN PROGRAMMES WORKING WITH PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. THIS RESEARCH WAS UNDERTAKEN AS PART OF A PILOT STUDY DESIGNED TO FEED INTO A LARGER PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PERPETRATOR PROGRAMMES (SEE END BOX).**



Whether domestic violence perpetrator programmes 'work' is contested by researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Some evaluations have concluded they do reduce violence, whereas others claim they do not and may even make things worse.

Much of the disagreement is related to three issues: variations in methodological and analytical approaches; disagreements over the interpretation of data; and differing definitions of what the term 'works' means.

Whilst there is now extensive literature exploring the methodological questions, rather less attention has been paid to unpicking the latter issue. It is this topic that we address in this briefing note. What does it mean for a programme to 'work', to 'be successful', to have 'positive outcomes', and whose perspectives on these questions should we be mindful of?

Previous studies have generally used a reduction in repeat victimisation - variously measured - as the sole indicator of success. This can range from the complete cessation of violence, to a reduction in further incidents compared with a comparison group. There are also debates around appropriate follow up periods (a cessation or reduction in violence at the end of the programme, three/six/twelve/more months later?), what forms of abuse are measured (physical violence only or sexual, emotional and financial abuse as well?) and what data should be used to assess success (perpetrator self report, police report, partner's report?).

Repeat victimisation, whilst a useful term, is also problematic. Even if the above questions could be clarified and agreed upon, reducing success to single 'incidents' fails to take account of the pattern of coercive control. Research and practice confirms this is at the heart of the problems and harms of domestic violence and indeed is a focus within many perpetrator programmes. The importance of coercive control in the lives of women and children and its impact on them is evident from qualitative studies in which many comment that it was not the physical violence that left them depleted and diminished but the fear, the build ups, the threats, the put downs, especially with respect to parenting. Coercive control is also a primary risk factor for intimate partner homicide. Repeat victimisation, then, as a measure of what 'works' is simultaneously broad and complicated but also narrow and simplistic if the goal of programmes is to enhance the safety and well-being of victim-survivors and children.

It is our contention that both the lack of evidence on, and narrow

approaches to, whether domestic violence perpetrator programmes 'work' has contributed to their restricted, short term funding and stilted development in the UK. Opening up the field through a research exploration of what counts as success has the potential to move the field on.

Some researchers (most notably Gondolf in the USA) have used multiple outcome measures and tried to move away from sole reliance on repeat victimisation, including for example women's perceptions of safety. However, this will be the first study to be underpinned by prior research on what success means for various stakeholders in perpetrator programmes (men on programmes, their partners/ex-partners, children, funders/commissioners and practitioners).

## RESEARCH METHODS

Research participants were self selecting and came from five UK domestic violence perpetrator programmes. We sought the views of four groups:

- 22 men who were on or had completed perpetrator programmes;
- 18 female partners/ex-partners of men on programmes (not all of whom were linked to the men interviewed);
- 6 funders/commissioners of programmes;
- 27 programme practitioners (including perpetrator group work facilitators, women's support workers and managers).

A total of 73 interviews were undertaken. All participants were involved with organisations who are signed up to the Respect Service Standard, which means that they provide an integrated support service to the partners and ex-partners of men attending the perpetrator programmes. The programmes work with men mandated by family courts and child protection as well as self referred and asked to attend by partners. They do not currently take men mandated by criminal justice system.

The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, focusing on their

expectations and experiences of perpetrator programmes and, crucially, on what success meant from their perspective. Whilst we intended these questions to be 'theoretical' most of the men on the programmes and their partners and ex-partners spoke directly about what had worked for them. Funders/commissioners were asked about how they define and expect programmes to measure success. Practitioners, who have the most extensive experience, were asked to reflect on what they thought success meant for perpetrators, their partners, children and funders/commissioners.

All the interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis programme (NVivo). We present below the core themes that emerged.

## WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO FEMALE PARTNERS/ EX-PARTNERS

Six themes emerged, starting with the most frequently mentioned, they were:

- respectful/improved relationships;
- expanded space for action;
- support/decreased isolation;
- enhanced parenting;
- reduction or cessation of violence and abuse;
- man understanding the impact of domestic violence.

The first thing to note here is that ending violence comes relatively low down (fifth) in this list, with the most noted and valued outcome establishing a **respectful/improved relationship**. Whilst this might require, by definition, violence and abuse to be absent, this was implicit in women's responses. For those who stayed with the men the changes which were referred to included doing more as a family, feeling happier, having a better, stronger partnership and staying together as a couple.

The words used to describe what was different about the men included them being more thoughtful, supportive, respectful, calm, or alternatively less moody. Open and respectful communication

was at the core of these shifts, for example being able to talk about difficult issues, negotiate, express opinions, open up and talk about feelings. Many women spoke of having a new sense that their partner was willing not just to listen but also to hear and understand their point of view, and that of their children. Everyday acts, such as making a cup of tea in the following example, symbolised deeper realignments in relationships that were associated with increased respect.

**“Well we can all walk back into the house without feeling a bit scared to be honest ... I mean now I text him because he gets in before me, I text him at the lights and he has a cup of tea ready for me and ... he'd never have done that before - I would spend ages out of the house just walking around the shops so I didn't have to go home.”**

**(partner of man who completed programme)**

Being able enter the house without being scared, stay out late without feeling she would have to ‘walk on egg-shells’ the next day, spend time with family and friends are all examples of what we term **expanded space for action**.

One of the impacts of living with domestic violence, and especially coercive control, is that women and children adapt their behaviour in an effort to prevent further outbursts: they narrow their space for action and live within the parameters the perpetrator sets. Being able to stretch this space was important to women, reflecting a sense of greater safety. Again the examples focused on mundane everyday eventualities which had previously terrorised them, for example, no longer feeling scared about making a ‘mistake’, such as breaking something or getting a bank charge. A decrease in tension created a better atmosphere, which in turn meant women felt safer and more comfortable. It is easy to underestimate the importance of such shifts, but one woman described this as getting her life back and others that they felt able to move forward in life,

for example go to college, university, or start a business.

Expanded space for action also linked with **access to support**, which resulted in **decreased isolation**.

Many women described the women's worker/project as a 'safety net'. Support and understanding were important in their own right, helping the women gain strength and confidence. Access to support was also said to have increased accountability, in that the woman had someone to believe and support her to take action if the violence and abuse continued:

**“It's almost like you feel there's a safety net there, you know, because he is accountable because there's a line, which you know, there's like a boundary line which you can't cross really and if he does, he's going to have to take the consequences of it. So that's reassuring in itself.”**

(partner of man who completed programme)

**Enhanced parenting** refers not only to the fact that children benefited from the changes noted above, but also that parenting the children together was enhanced, with family activities more common, men being more attentive to the needs of the children and/or access no longer something to be dreaded. For both current and ex-partners, being able to trust the man with the children played a significant part in this.

**The reduction or cessation of violence and abuse** did overlap with already noted themes. For example, partners and ex-partners spoke of wanting the men to be less obsessive and controlling by, for example, sending them fewer, and less harassing texts and not subjecting them to interrogation about where they had been and with whom. These everyday intrusions were as often mentioned as physical assaults, again pointing to the importance of not just focusing on isolated incidents of violence. One woman's hope was that by the end of the programme they would be able to have a 'normal argument'.

**“Basically that if we argue it doesn’t end up with physical violence - that it can be a normal argument and I don’t have to worry about my safety.”**

**(partner of man on programme)**

Some also mentioned the ability of their partner or ex-partner to **understand the impact of domestic violence** as success, by which they meant he developed a sense of what it had been like to have lived under his regime of control for so long.

## **WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO MEN ON PROGRAMMES**

Three core themes emerged. Starting with the most frequent, they were:

- enhanced awareness of self and others;
- reduction or cessation of violence and abuse;
- improved relationship with better communication.

Enhanced awareness of self and others covers the ability to monitor and understand self and others’ feelings and emotions and use this knowledge to guide thinking and action. The men talked about a range of examples that fitted under this heading including: emotional self awareness; self control; empathy; and responsiveness to others. They described themselves as being more patient, having a greater ability to control and moderate their own behaviour, having different reactions to situations and generally being able to engage better with everyone. The ability to self-reflect, clearly something that is required in programmes, and improved communication skills were important and valued gains for some men. This chimed with women’s responses, especially when men talked about their new found ability to listen and understand her point of view. Understanding the impact of domestic violence on others was an important part of this.

The **reduction or cessation of violence and abuse** was discussed more often and more explicitly than in the interviews with women, undoubtedly in part because programme content focuses on this. Many men maintained they had already made this change.

**“I’m not physically abusive to my wife and I never ever will be now. The verbal abuse is not there. I’m not perfect and if she annoys me I may say something I shouldn’t, but it’s nowhere near what it used to be.”**

(man on programme)

Having an **improved relationship with better communication** also emerged as a strong theme for men. Being honest within a relationship was mentioned regularly, as was being able to rebuild and sustain it. The men recognised that going back to previous patterns was not an option if the frequently mentioned goal of not losing their partner

was to be an outcome of the programme and their change of behaviour.

One man, for example, explained that he had previously attended a number of anger management courses but that these had simply taught him to remove himself from the situation rather than to be able to openly and honestly communicate his feelings:

**“... I’ve just found that, you know, if you communicate with people from an open, honest place, you’re generally going to get that back. If you, you know, if you’re communicating with someone with fire, with aggression - they’re going to be defensive ...”**

(man on programme)

## WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO FUNDERS/COMMISSIONERS

Three themes emerged from the interviews with funders and commissioners:

- safety for women and children (including safe child contact);
- increased well being;
- quantifiable measures.

Of the four, this group of participants found the questions on what success meant to them the most difficult to answer.

One was not able to answer at all. Others preferred to say what success 'was not' rather than being able to pinpoint what 'it was'.

Most frequently mentioned was **safety for women and children (including safe child contact)**. This included the ability to engage in a safe way men who were not in contact with the criminal justice system.

**Increased well being** was the next most frequent category, with funders and commissioners

concerned not only with the well being of women, but also for their children and for the men on programmes.

**Quantifiable measures** were mentioned by a minority of funders/commissioners, with only one citing what might be classed as 'traditional output measures' (number of people on programme, number of completers etc.) and others problematising this. At the same time, some of those who were sceptical of the traditional output measures still welcomed some quantifiable information.

**“I think numbers give an indication ... but I'm not impressed by large numbers; I don't believe them actually. I think that small steady progress is believable. I don't think that churning X number through programmes just to please funders is going to achieve much.”**

(programme funder)

It is interesting here to note that this funder ‘distanced’ herself from ‘other funders’. This was common within the interviews. Whilst only indicative, it may be that there are stereotypes of funders at play and that there is considerable scope for expanding what counts as evidence of success from their perspective.

## WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO PRACTITIONERS

*In practitioners’ views of what success means for partners/ex-partners*, four overall themes emerged. In order of frequency they were:

- safety and freedom from violence and abuse;
- empowerment/having a voice;
- enhanced/safer parenting;
- improved well-being.

**Safety/freedom from violence and abuse** was the most prominent, linked to the stated goals of programmes, and included both being and feeling safer for women and children. Most emphasised

ending violence and abuse, with some offering a more qualified reduction in violence or risk and others ending physical violence and reducing emotional abuse. The latter two possibly reflect a desire not to over claim what programmes could achieve. Feeling safer was sometimes expanded upon through phrases like *‘no longer living in fear’*.

**Empowerment/having a voice** reflected the awareness of practitioners that domestic violence is about power, and that women’s power over their body and life is diminished by it. Within this was a recognition that women and children frequently censor their own voices in efforts to avoid conflict. Restoring power (sometimes referred to as agency) to women, through an understanding that they deserve better than this, enabling them to see that they have options and choices, placing responsibility for violence on the perpetrator and enhancing their sense of self worth, were all considered positive outcomes. ‘Having a voice’ specifically referred to being able

to speak her mind without fear of the potential consequences, and even prior to this having the space that safety provided to explore what her own independent perceptions and decisions might be. One critical component was that she had felt able to decide whether, and on what terms, to end or continue with the relationship. We also include within this theme knowing that help and support was available, and that they could access it in the future, including being prepared to report further violence and draw on a safety plan.

**Enhanced/safer parenting:** here workers were reflecting on the fact that women often feel distressed about the impact of domestic violence on their children but at the same time are required to comply with court ordered contact, a context which can often exacerbate the risks to children which a woman has tried to reduce by separating from the abuser. They also reflected women's concerns about the impact of domestic violence on their capacity to parent. Safety here was, therefore,

multi-layered: it was material in terms of safe contact and safety at home, but also a bedrock on which women could rebuild and undo harms that living with domestic violence had already done to their children and their relationships with them. Practitioners noted here: better relationships with fathers; safe contact; children beginning to thrive; positive co-parenting. Several also mentioned children not learning that abuse was normal.

**Improved well-being** referred to the corrosive impacts abuse has on women's sense of self, so enhanced self-esteem and self-worth were hoped for outcomes of interventions. Being less stressed/improved mental health, feeling better in one self, the ability to grow and manage change, being able to move on and deal with the abuse were all referred to a number of times. Some noted the very individual and specific signs for a particular woman, such as having a haircut, feeling able to choose to put on make up, becoming comfortable enough to take a coat off before group support sessions.

We note here how strongly some of the perspectives of practitioners echoed what women themselves reported.

*Within practitioners' perspectives on what success means to men on programmes* four overarching themes emerged:

- awareness of self and others;
- reduction or cessation of violence and abuse;
- more respectful relationships;
- programme attendance and engagement.

**Awareness of self and others** was the most commonly cited desired outcome for men, presumably reflecting that practitioners believe this to be the foundation of choosing to change and being able to maintain this after completing the programme. Recurring concepts here were: respect for partners and children; empathy; the ability to reflect on behaviour and feelings; ability to 'be in' relationship with others; taking responsibility for their actions and their impacts on others; willingness

to seek help; ability to identify what they had changed and why it made a difference; capacity to name and discuss problematic behaviour.

**Reduction or cessation of violence and abuse** was a close second, with a strong focus on stopping physical violence. Many noted that this should be followed by abandoning abusive and controlling behaviour more broadly, and one saw success as not even being tempted to resort to previous behaviours. Whilst the majority were aiming for a total cessation of violence, a minority argued that less ambitious changes could also be seen as some level of success, referring to: 'just small changes'; fewer police callouts.

**Respectful relationships** encompassed changes in relation to partners and children whether or not they continued living together as a family; indeed being able to accept separation and make the best of it was as 'successful' as re-making relationships within the family. Within this theme changing attitudes to, and expectations of, women featured strongly, including

adjusting their sense of masculine entitlement. Recurring phrases here were: women and children not living in fear; understanding what a healthy relationship was; everyone being happier; men being less depressed.

**Programme attendance and engagement** reflected awareness among workers that programme completion is linked to the likelihood of ending violence. Their perspectives went beyond this, however, emphasising it was men's engagement in their experience that made the difference: whether they disclosed recent abuse, how honest they were with themselves and other group members. Several, however, commented that getting someone back after the first session always felt like success.

Practitioners had much to say about ***what success might look like for children***, with four prominent themes:

- safer, healthier childhoods;
- better family experiences;
- children's future relationships;
- school performance.

**Safer, healthier childhoods:** children's safety has become a specific focus for programmes, both whilst living with the perpetrator and where child contact is an issue. Again safety was deeper than physical safety encompassing: physical and emotional health and well being; happiness; freedom from fear and/or having to protect their mother or siblings. Some workers took the risks to children very seriously making reference to decisions to remove perpetrators from the household if children 'were terrified' and that appropriate child contact decisions were made by the courts and other professionals. Improved well being has been subsumed into this category, which was in part linked to having access to support (within and outside the family), being able to talk openly about violence, express their feelings and feel that they were heard.

Linked to this was a hope for **better family experiences** which included many significant factors: children not witnessing violence; children feeling included in family

life; safe separation of the parents with ongoing positive and safe interactions from both parents. Also featuring strongly were hopes that children would feel more secure and less torn and would know or feel that their parents loved and were interested in them. For some, witnessing an 'ongoing apology' from the father and accountability for future behaviour was also important.

**Children's future** relationships were mentioned as a very strong theme, and linked to the ubiquitous, though strongly contested, cycle of abuse theory (that children who live with domestic abuse are more likely to be abusive in future relationships). Some responses were more immediate, referring to: knowing violence is wrong; improved and more stable peer relationships; for teenage boys, positive interactions with girlfriends; for teenage girls seeking more equal relationships.

**School performance** is known to be affected by living with domestic violence, simply because concentration suffers where sleep is interrupted and children are

anxious. Relocation and the impacts of domestic violence on children's demeanour and behaviour may also be factors here. Improved school attendance and performance was, therefore, an indicator of greater stability, as were the simple facts of sleeping better and being less tired.

With respect to ***funders/commissioners***, practitioners identified six themes:

- quantifiable programme outputs;
- the reduction or cessation of violence and abuse;
- wider changes to men's behaviour
- decreased financial costs to society;
- safeguarding children;
- more accurate multi-agency assessments.

That **quantifiable programme outputs** was most frequently mentioned clearly reflects the imperative to demonstrate value for money. Some funders, however, were recognised as having more

nuanced perspectives, recognising that a quality assessment may reveal that individuals were inappropriate referrals.

**Reduction or cessation of violence and abuse** was an unsurprising criteria since this is the stated aim of programmes against which funders assess. Some also referred to an interest in **wider changes to men's behaviour**, including getting back into work or education, reducing alcohol use, and having a better quality of life.

**Decreased financial costs to the public purse** is another common measure which enables funders to justify investment. Demonstrating reduction in the level and frequency of criminal justice, social work, health and other statutory service interventions were at the core of 'added value' arguments.

**Safeguarding children** emerged as a theme in its own right, including children being safer, enabling safer child contact, and being able to close child protection cases. This reflects both the increase in commissioning from social services and growing awareness that too little attention has been paid to

the outcomes of programmes for children.

**More accurate multi-agency assessments** were seen as important to some funders/commissioners. Here the contribution programmes could make to multi-agency risk management plans was emphasised. For example, a full assessment, which revealed the extent and length of abuse, can be fed into Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) or similar forums, and shift the attitudes and interventions of partner agencies. In particular, detailed information on perpetrators had the potential to widen the focus from the victim and increase the emphasis on addressing the risks posed by the perpetrator.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT COUNTS AS SUCCESS?

By merging and condensing the themes, we conclude that 'success' can be broken down into six key criteria, which apply whether the partners stay together or separate.

1. An improved relationship between men on programmes and their partners/ex-partners which is underpinned by respect and effective communication.
2. For partners/ex-partners to have an expanded 'space for action' which empowers through restoring their voice and ability to make choices, whilst improving their well being.
3. Safety and freedom from violence and abuse for women and children.
4. Safe, positive and shared parenting.
5. Enhanced awareness of self and others for men on programmes, including an understanding of the impact that domestic violence has had on their partner and children.
6. For children, safer, healthier childhoods in which they feel heard and cared about.

'Success', then, means far more than just 'ending the violence'. It would be quite possible for the physical violence to stop but at the same time for women and children to continue to live in unhealthy atmospheres which are laden with tension and threat. Instead, we propose this more nuanced understanding of success in which the more subtle, though ultimately life enhancing, changes are recognised.

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