**ALDCS – Domestic abuse work during Covid-19**

**Introduction**

1. ALDCS undertook a survey in April 2020 of children’s services authorities’ responses to domestic abuse (DA) in the context of the Covid 19 crisis. Heads of Community Safety (HOCS) subsequently also conducted a survey which included some valuable data from the Metropolitan Police.
2. A report on key findings from both surveys was circulated to DCSs in May (attached).

**What the surveys told us (and did not tell us)**

1. Taking account of the relatively early stage in the Covid 19 crisis when these surveys were undertaken, they highlighted some important trends at that time (April and May 2020). These included that at that time there had been:

* 10% increase in DA contacts to children’s services
* 27% increase in DA police merlins to children’s services
* 20% decrease in DA contacts that become referrals
* Most boroughs were reporting an increase in MARAC referrals from the same period last year.
* Nearly half of boroughs reported an increase in IDVA referrals.
* Police recorded crime showed a 1.7% increase in DA incidents across London, but 5.5% decrease in offences and 4.1% decrease in DA Violence with Injury.

1. Importantly too there was significant variance between boroughs on most measures in both the ALDCS and HOCS survey. However, the trends above masked the fact that whilst some authorities were reporting very significant increases in DA contacts as compared to the same period in 2019, others were seeing significant decreases. The surveys showed too that, at that point in time(April) there had been **a significant increase in the numbers of contacts in relation to DA coming from police to children’s services alongside an overall increase (albeit smaller) in total DA contacts.** This was seen as being likely to be largely attributable to the rise in police merlins though the relationship between contacts and merlins differs across LAs.
2. It is noteworthy also that there was no statistical correlation between contacts, merlins and deprivation. Put simply, high levels of deprivation did not necessarily connote higher numbers of merlins or contacts in a local authority area. It was suggested that variations in local police practice in relation to DA were more significant and may have reflected what was happening at a local level during the early phases of the Covid crisis.
3. The ALDCS survey illuminated on significant challenges in ALDCS’ ability to compare and contrast responses to DA across different sub regions and local authority areas. It became clear that authorities record and report DA in different ways and that there is not consistency of approach in the way that incidents of family violence and abuse are recorded. For example, some areas separate out child to parent violence separately whilst others do not. It became apparent also that the survey had not consistently picked up new DA concerns on open cases, rendering it difficult to compare responses across different areas.
4. Qualitative feedback within the ALDCS survey indicated that:

* In some areas, reports of an increase in work relating to DA and conflict was very likely to be related to some of the pressures of lockdown on individuals and families
* There were also concerns about increased severity; some boroughs reported increased MARAC activities with reports of more serious injuries and more injuries sustained by both adults.

1. Both surveys therefore raised as many questions as they provided answers. Discussions were held with DCSs via sub regional forums to reflect on issues and ascertain whether there was any consensus for undertaking further work across London. The surveys were generally seen to have provided useful prompts to individual local authorities, helping them ask questions about levels of DA, how they were responding and whether there was sufficient social work involvement with families being referred.

**Related work**

1. In April 2020, a short practice paper ‘domestic abuse during Covid 19) was produced by a small group of children’s services leaders (appendix 2). This offered practitioners and managers:

* Some ‘Practice Prompts’ to support contacts and discussions with families
* Information about specific practice initiatives from local areas
* Information about resources and materials, including “sign-posting” documents about national/London-wide organisations and helplines.

1. **Domestic abuse – early intervention offer and pathway project.** This was established as a joint project between ALDCS, MOPAC and Respect/SafeLives. Its primary aim was to provide an additional resource for working with families where an early help response was indicated to help alleviate family stress and where there were concerns about the risk of domestic abuse and violence. The proposal involved the provision of accommodation to one family member to enable safe respite **together with wrap around intervention, delivered by Respect and SafeLives** and that has a focus on working with potential perpetrators. Its emphasis was explicitly on offering early

intervention. Fixed term funding for the project initiative was provided by MOPAC.

1. Recent feedback from SafeLives indicates that:

* 10 boroughs have expressed interest so far in the early intervention project and there has been good engagement in the development of the project.
* SafeLives has started to accept referrals from those boroughs (4 currently) with whom there is a signed ISA/MoU; others are expected to sign up in the near future.
* As of 26th September, SafeLives had received 6 referrals, 4 of which were accepted and with more in the pipeline; SafeLives expect referrals to increase awareness of the project develops.

**Scope and appetite for future ALDCS work on domestic abuse**

1. The May 2020 report (as attached) raised a number of questions about the potential scope for future work, including unpacking factors behind DA trends across different areas, sharing good and emerging practice in the Covid 19 context, and working with partner agencies (and particularly police, community safety, MOPAC and violence against women (VAW) organisations). The need for further work with the VAW sector was highlighted in discussions about the early intervention project (see above).
2. DA has not hitherto been highlighted as an improvement priority for ALDCS; that may be an entirely appropriate judgement, however, the all-pervasiveness of DA as a core practice issues in children’s services, and particularly children’s social care, indicates that there could be considerable benefit from sharing good and emerging practice across London.
3. Domestic abuse is an issue that often foreshadows exploitation and other forms of abuse and neglect of children. For example, there is some evidence that growing up in a family where there is domestic abuse may be a risk indicator of future involvement in serious youth violence. Ofsted has given considerable focus to domestic violence issues; see for example, the report on joint inspections of the response to children living with domestic abuse (2017).

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/680671/JTAI\_domestic\_abuse\_18\_Sept\_2017.pdf

1. It may be the case that the attention which has necessarily been given to ‘new’ types of abuse exploitation have distracted professional attention from developing practice to address the day by day impact of domestic abuse on children’s lives as well as those of their parents and carers.
2. In sub regional DCS discussions, there was focus on issues relating to:

* Data gathering and analysis
* Good practice in context of Covid 19
* The Covid 19 early intervention project, including work with perpetrators
* Wider system issues, especially those relating to the relationship between children’s services and the police and VAW organisations. The London Safeguarding Children Executive have an important role to play in relationship to partnership working.

1. **Data gathering and analysis.** There was clear consensus that there was no appetite or real benefit to be gained by undertaking another survey. DCSs were more interested in exploring further practice improvement related issues.
2. However, a number of DCSs felt that pan London work on the recording and use of data could be beneficial in creating common standards and consistent ways of recording DA incidents and agency responses. This could be an element of future LIIA work.
3. **Good practice in the context of Covid 19**. Building on the work of undertaken as part of the Practice Paper, discussion in sub regional groups focussed on the potential for cross authority sector led improvement work. There was considerable appetite, depending on other priorities, to progress this work further, possibly via LIIA and/or the Practice Leaders group. There is also relevant learning from the Covid recovery work.
4. Practice issues warranting further attention included:

* **Disclosure -** Helping women/non abusing partners to disclose abuse, particularly in the Covid 19 context. Many women will feel safer disclosing abuse to non statutory agencies; this is indicated by the reported very high ‘traffic’ on domestic abuse organisation websites during Covid. Discussions with women at risk will inevitably be more difficult when the abuser is in the house/room all the time.
* What can children’s services learn from the work of these organisations and what might be best practice for helping women and children at risk of domestic abuse to access help? It was noted that during Covid 19 there have been fewer professional ‘eyes’ on children and families, rendering extended families and the general public potentially even more important avenues for seeking help.
* **‘Front door’ responses** to police referrals/merlins
* Practice with families where there is **child/adolescent violence towards a parent**/carer (could involve work with youth offending services)
* **Work with perpetrators** – what works, learning from, and the contribution of the voluntary sector across London
* **General work with families** – with children, non abusing parents etc.
* **Role of schools** – identifying, supporting non abusing parents (impact of operation encompass – police project).

1. **Covid 19 early intervention project –** ALDCS will want to review learning from this project in terms of issues around work with perpetrators, early intervention and working with key partners.
2. **Wider system issues** – The analysis of the two surveys, DCS conversations and discussions with MOPAC around the early intervention project underlined the impact of professional cultures and values on responses to domestic abuse.
3. Discussions about establishing the early intervention project brought into quite sharp relief how perceptions of children’s services by some VAW organisations can detract from effective joint working. Some VAW organisations feel that children’s services do not consistently and/or fully appreciate the seriousness of domestic abuse for women, and that thresholds for intervention are too high, with detrimental and sometimes tragic effects on women’s (and children’s) safety. There is arguably a need to develop a more nuanced and shared narrative about how children’s services and VAW organisations can work together in the interests of children and women.
4. It may also be useful to review evidence from practice in London and elsewhere (see, for example, the Family Safeguarding model) to see how embedding domestic abuse workers within social care teams has a beneficial impact on breaking down barriers between agencies.
5. **London Safeguarding Children Executive** (chaired by Sean Harriss, Chief Executive, Harrow; Martin Pratt and James Thomas are ALDCS representatives).DCSs suggested that the outcome of these surveys and related Covid 19 work should be brought to the attention of the London Children’s Safeguarding Partnership. This would provide an opportunity to consider possible variations in police practice as well as in other agencies, and how local areas can better monitor and respond to domestic violence (e.g. via use of police data, MARAC referrals and feedback from service providers).

**Recommendations**

1. It is recommended that
2. ALDCS consider the above issues, and decide whether or not domestic abuse should be given additional priority in the work of LIIA going forward, particularly as they relate to data gathering/analysis, sharing good practice and the early intervention initiative.
3. A report on the domestic abuse surveys and related issues is taken for discussion to the London Safeguarding Children Executive. This report (and appendix) could be used as the basis for such a discussion.

Annie Hudson

October 2020