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Domestic abuse and child protection change project: Changing the conversation, making a difference for children and families

Participants (including social work, police, domestic abuse and policy professionals):

Cohort 1: Action for Children, Barnardos, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Bedford Borough Council, Bristol City Council, London Borough of Camden, Coventry City Council, Doncaster Children's Services Trust, Hertfordshire County Council, Kirklees Metropolitan Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Leeds City Council, North Yorkshire County Council, Southend on Sea Borough Council.

Cohort 2: Bath and North East Somerset Council, Reading Children's Trust, Derbyshire County Council, Essex County Council, Hampshire County Council, Haringey Council, North Somerset Council, Redbridge Council, Salford City Council, Shropshire Council, Stockport Council, Swindon Borough Council, Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, Wirral Council, Leicestershire County Council.

About the project

The Project was one of a series of [Change Projects](#) run by Research in Practice. This Change Project aimed to support new conceptual and practice developments when responding to families where there is Domestic Violence and or Abuse (DVA). Drawing from international conceptual and practice developments, and family expertise, it sought to open up new possibilities for re-thinking why DVA is such a key driver of demand in child protection and how it might be responded to by approaches that are humane and socially transformative. Together these contributed to the broader aim of radically reconceptualising dominant practice and policy approaches in order to facilitate broad-based systems and culture change as regards to children's social care work with families in which DVA is a feature.

The Project supported participants to explore how their child protection services currently understand and respond to concerns about DVA and, using a local file audit and a range of research and practice expertise, support the development of new ways of working and approaches. Outcomes and learning from the project have informed the development of a range of resource outputs aimed at supporting practitioners and policy makers in work with families where there is a perpetrator of DVA, in order to achieve better outcomes for children and whole families.

Aims of the project

Led by Professors Brid Featherstone and Kate Morris the project aimed to support developments in child protection responses to concerns DVA. The project drew from research, practice and family expertise to consider:

- Why DVA has become such a key driver of demand in child protection?
- How might service responses be more humane, effective and socially transformative?

The Project was developed over 18 months and culminated in February 2021. Meetings were initially conducted in-person, prior to virtual online seminars being implemented, as the pandemic evolved. The Project included the triangulated perspectives and inputs from mothers and fathers with lived

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experience of DVA and the children's social care system, expert practitioners and leading researchers in the field of DVA and children's social work.

Deliverables

The final resource outputs informed by the Change Project function as 'standalone' resources suitable for use across a range of services and local authorities, in order to embed change and improve practice where this enables better outcomes for mothers, fathers and children experiencing DVA.

The resource outputs include:

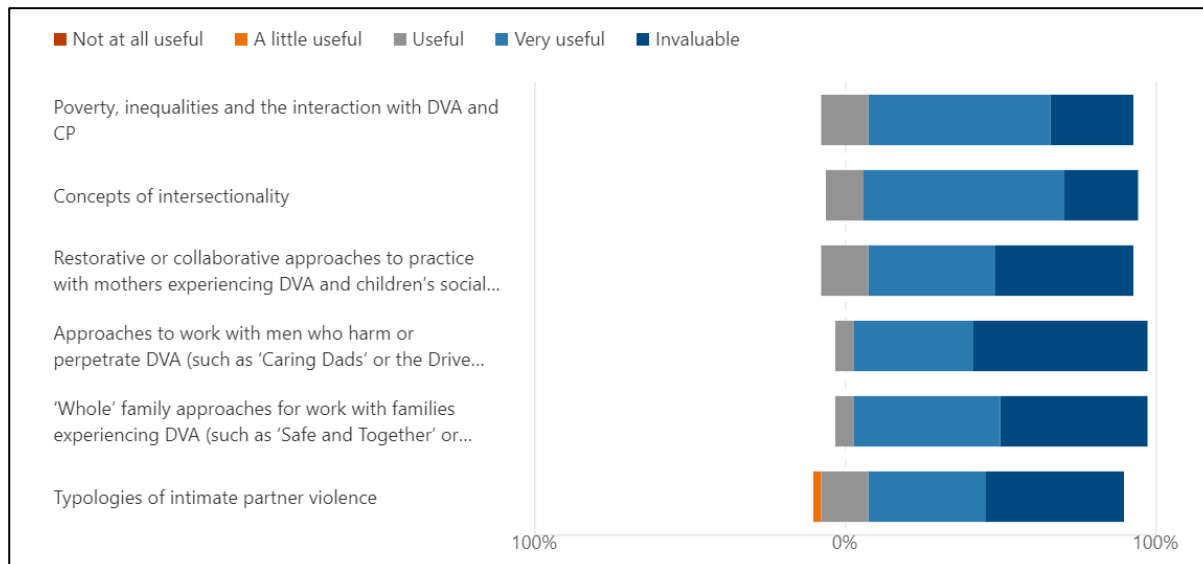
- **Co-produced podcast series (3 x episodes):** Rethinking children's social care responses to domestic abuse, lived experience podcast with a mother who has experienced DVA when navigating the child protection system.
- **Research digest short film series (x 6 films):** Six short films featuring Professor Brid Featherstone, presenting new and emerging research on key themes addressed during the Change Project, including (i) Intersectionality and the role of poverty and inequalities in the lives of families who experience domestic abuse, (ii) whole family approaches, and (iii) working with men who harm in families. The films are suitable for a broad readership in order to promote and embed evidence informed practice across child protection and domestic abuse services, as well as, allied professions.
- **Case file analysis summary report and accompanying webinar:** A summary report will be produced by Professors Kate Morris and Brid Featherstone, providing an insight into the national picture regarding child protection work with families where domestic abuse is an issue of concern. The report will be based on analysis of data from the case file audit conducted by Change Project participants. The report will be accompanied by a short webinar from Professors Kate Morris and Brid Featherstone, and both outputs will inform practice and policy-decision making across child protection services.
- **Practice-led podcast series (x 4 episodes):** Practice conversation series with Change Project practice leaders from across the country showcasing new and innovative practice and ways of working in the field of domestic abuse and child protection work.
- **Communities of practice:** A national communities of practice will be established by Research in Practice and led by Professor Brid Featherstone. The group will occupy a key role in establishing a national network of child protection professionals working in the field of domestic abuse, and will enable important opportunities for knowledge exchange, as well as to embed and disseminate key messages from the Change Project.

Feedback and evaluation

Participants on the project were asked to complete a feedback survey, which closed on 31st March 2021. Feedback indicated that involvement in the Project has made a demonstrable and valuable impact, with participants describing the project as "transformative" and "inspiring". Further, 100% of respondents rated it 'excellent' or 'good' in terms of its contribution to their professional development.

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Participant responses demonstrated the extent to which each of the themes covered in the project impacted on their day-to-day working and practice development, as the following graph shows. These themes will form the basis for the development of the resource outputs outlined in the above section:



Applicability and impact at practice and strategic levels

Feedback also indicated that participants have already begun implementing learning from the Change Project across a range of key service areas, including in direct practice, localised policy, team training, casework management and supervision, and in commissioning processes. An example of the broad applicability of the learning from the Change Project in terms of how it has informed participants' understanding of the issues encountered by mothers, fathers and families experience DVA and child protection, is evidenced in the quote below. It also signals the substantive outcomes associated with the project and their tangible and direct application to areas at both a strategic and practice level:

“The department had already embarked on an improvement programme for how we work with Domestic abuse and the Change Project has prompted me to explore certain aspects of what we need to do - for example working with fathers/ caring dads and trauma informed practice in the context of DVA practice.

I was able to make a link into [another local authority] and explore the typologies of abuse. I have shared all my learning with our DVA strategy group and gained agreement for a change in how we approach casework. These were all ideas that I have had for a while but the Change Project allowed me to link into research base to support the recommendations and use evidence to convince people of why a better whole family approach will bring better outcomes, involving fathers will bring a different perspective and recognising the trauma involved for women” (Change Project participant).

Another example of the ways in which the insights and knowledge exchange opportunities facilitated by the Project have had a substantive impact as regards to practice reform within children's social care settings, is set out in the following quote:

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“[The Change Project] has really stimulated me to include the factors such as poverty in all communication and talk to social work teams about including them in the assessments. We have small units that take families from referral (CiN & CP) to close of intervention. The team manager and the 3 [social workers] discuss each family that comes in and create a plan. Sometimes they have 1 worker and sometimes they do a joint approach. To help consider the family deeply they now have the social GRACES laminated and go through each of them to talk about how best to approach and shape work with the family from the ‘get go’. We have introduced the requirement for family network meetings and done more work on skills to work with fathers and helping people to acknowledge their fears and making plans to help them be less scared of approaching them” (Change Project participant).

Foregrounding the voices of people with lived experience of DVA

A central component of the Change Project was the meaningful inclusion of the voices and perspectives of people with lived experiences of the issues addressed, at all stages, alongside contributions from practitioners and research experts. The following two quotes from participants articulate the transformative potential of including these voices:

“[T]he videos of the men and women's stories were very emotional and have stayed with me and really shifted my thinking about the work we need to do in DA and CP. I have used these to run training sessions with the staff in my DV Hub and it has evoked brilliant discussions” (Change Project participant).

“The lived experience sessions brought home to me again the impact of institutional re-victimisation and [how] services have to follow a set process rather than listening , hearing and responding to need - and how at times practice/responses can be blinkered and sometimes miss the bigger picture of what is happening for those who are impacted upon by DA - allowing for safeguarding - the immediate changes services wish to see are often unrealistic and counterproductive to what the family need and can immediately achieve - and do not reflect the issue of the trauma experienced (historic or current)” (Change Project participant).

Together all of these quotes demonstrate the extent to which the work conducted during the Change Project has made a unique and significant contribution to a growing evidence regarding the radical reconceptualization of dominant practice and policy paradigms governing this complex area of work. Reforms that will, ultimately, contribute to better outcomes for the full range of victim-survivors and whole families experiencing DVA, as well as hold those that harm to account for their behavior within the context of Children’s Social Care Settings, and beyond.