



The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
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11th August 2021

Dear Home Secretary

Review of Policing Domestic Abuse During the Pandemic

As required by statute, I am writing to you to respond to the Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report entitled, 'Review of Policing Domestic Abuse During the Pandemic'.

Tackling domestic abuse is of the highest importance to me. Policing has a significant role to play in achieving this aim, but partnership working must also form an integral part of our strategy. The pandemic has made this more apparent than ever. I am pleased to say we have been able to rise to the challenges presented by Covid-19 through effective partnership arrangements. This is echoed by the Chief Constable in her comment below:

'I welcome this report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services that examined the important topic of how police responded to Domestic Abuse during the Covid Pandemic.

There is no place for domestic abuse in society. It has a lasting and traumatic impact on those who suffer from and witness such abhorrent behaviour. Supporting victims of domestic abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice is a key priority in Gwent Police. When the pandemic started we took decisive action and introduced innovative approaches to ensure we were able to continue to safeguard victims and provide them with the necessary support. Such examples amongst many others was the promotion of Silent Solutions, Signs of Life Checks and adapting our approach to Operation Encompass in line with the closure of schools during lockdown.

Policing alone cannot deal with domestic abuse and a partnership approach is required. I am pleased that in Gwent we have strong relationships with our partners and during the pandemic all partners understood the challenge and worked together to support and safeguard victims of domestic abuse.

The report makes a sobering reference that there is only a 25% chance that a perpetrator of domestic abuse will be charged or cautioned. Quite simply this must change. Within Gwent, we

are looking at this to ensure we are conducting thorough investigations and all possible lines of evidence are considered so that the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved.

I am concerned by the backlog within the Criminal Justice System and the delay in bringing offenders to justice (however, this is an improving picture in Wales). This extends the impact of trauma for the victim and has the potential for re-offending and further harm to victims and families. I am pleased that the inspectorate has recognised this within the report, and I commit my support to partners within the Criminal Justice System to work with them to overcome this issue.

Whilst Gwent Police has made considerable progress over the last few years in dealing with domestic abuse, as recognised by the inspectorate, we are not complacent and will continue to focus and enhance our approach to ensure we deliver the best possible service to victims of domestic abuse and work to eradicate this intolerable wrong from society. We will consider the recommendations made by the inspectorate in this report as part of this work.'

As stated by the Chief Constable, Gwent Police took steps throughout the pandemic to ensure they were able to safeguard and support victims. These are crucial areas of service delivery and are vital to keeping victims safe and preventing further harm. I commend Gwent Police on the measures they have put in place to respond effectively to domestic abuse throughout the pandemic. Moreover, I am pleased to note that the good work of policing during this time has also been recognised by HMICFRS in their report.

Irrespective of Covid-19, Gwent Police have adopted a proactive stance to tackling domestic abuse and sought out innovative practices for continuous improvement. This approach established good foundations that enabled Gwent Police to navigate the challenges of the pandemic. As referenced by the Chief Constable in her statement, Operation Encompass, which was rolled out across Gwent in 2019, proved to be an important tool for supporting children experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic. I am particularly proud of how Gwent Police adapted their processes for Operation Encompass to ensure that children continued to receive support during the pandemic despite school closures.

Gwent Police's Domestic Abuse Safeguarding Team (DAST) continues to provide valuable support to frontline officers dealing with domestic abuse. DAST was established in order to quality assure Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour-based Violence (DASH) forms submitted by officers and offer guidance and expert advice to officers. Set up prior to the pandemic, DAST has been integral to improving the overall quality of Gwent Police's response to domestic abuse. I am reassured that the Gwent Police will continue in their pursuit of further enhancing performance in this area of business.

I share the Chief Constable's concerns over the backlog currently within the Criminal Justice System. My Office has worked closely with criminal justice partners in order to address this situation and we have seen a much welcomed reduction in the backlog. We will continue our work with Gwent Police and criminal justice partners in order to further reduce the backlog. It is vital that this issue be addressed in order that offenders are brought to justice at speed and further harm to victims can be prevented.

I also include below an update to the relevant recommendations contained within the report:

Recommendation 1:

We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should immediately introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework. The framework should assess the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.

We recommend that forces immediately review their use of a telephone based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing.

The force has not moved to adopt any new online contact methods and continue to provide the same level of support to victims as we did before.

Within Gwent any calls for service, including domestic abuse would be fully assessed for threat, harm, risk, investigation opportunities, vulnerability and engagement (THRIVE), which will inform decisions around call grading and deployment. All staff involved in the communications suite are highly trained in recognising risk and following guidance to ensure the correct level of service is provided to victims of domestic abuse.

Recommendation 2:

We recommend that forces immediately review their capacity to provide ongoing support and safeguarding to victims of domestic abuse whose case is awaiting trial at court. This should:

- **ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims to keep them up to date with the progress of their case; and**
- **enable the offer of access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays.**

As of Monday 12th July, a new Gwent Police Victims Care Unit was launched. The new unit is made up of 19 Victim Care officers and they will act as the central point of contact for victims from the point of reporting a crime to the conclusion of the criminal justice process. This includes all victims of domestic abuse.

The new unit will mean that victims of DA will benefit from regular contact with a victim care officer who will work alongside the investigating police team to ensure that they are fully supported and kept up to date throughout the criminal justice process.

It will remain the responsibility of the officer in the case to ensure that victims are regularly updated and to provide specialist support services where needed. The offer of support is also picked up through the DA safeguarding team and the Independent Domestic Violence Advisors. The new care unit will also be offering specialist support services.

Recommendation 3:

We recommend that all forces immediately review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This is to ensure that:

- **domestic abuse investigations guarantee all attempts to engage victims are explored, and that all possible lines of evidence are considered so that in all cases the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved;**
- **there is regular and effective supervision of investigations that supports the above point to be achieved; and**
- **the use of outcomes 15 and 16 is appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, are clearly recorded.**

The force recognises and understands that this is clearly an area of concern and have taken immediate steps to review the use of these outcomes in DA cases. An audit of outcome 15s and 16s is underway and this will review the matters listed within this recommendation. The Domestic Abuse Co-ordination Team will own any recommendations from this internal audit to ensure that the necessary changes to our processes and procedures are made.

I am proud of the dedication and decisive action taken to respond effectively to domestic abuse Gwent Police has displayed throughout the pandemic. At any time, domestic abuse is complex crime, but this has been especially true during the pandemic. I commend to you the efforts Gwent Police have taken to ensure that victims are safeguarded and receive the support they need during what has been a trying period for policing. I will now continue to support the Chief Constable as Gwent Police face a shifting environment and new challenges as public health restrictions ease.

Yours sincerely



Jeff Cuthbert B.Sc., MCIPD
Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent