



### **WEST MERCIA POLICE AND CRIME PANEL 15 SEPTEMBER 2021**

## **HER MAJESTY'S INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY AND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES (HMICFRS) REVIEW OF POLICING DOMESTIC ABUSE DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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### **Recommendation**

1. Members of the Panel are invited to note this report.

### **Background**

2. On 23 June 2021 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) issued the fifth in a series of national thematic domestic abuse publications, looking at how the police responded to the unique challenges the Covid-19 pandemic placed on preventing and responding to domestic abuse (the first in the series was issued in 2014). A copy of the latest report is attached at appendix 1.
3. The report states the pandemic had put domestic abuse victims at greater risk, but also praised the police for making good use of technology and working with partners to find new ways to support victims.
4. The inspectorate found that many forces had fewer than usual reports of domestic abuse at the start of lockdown. But as time went on, reports returned to normal levels. By contrast, specialist domestic abuse services have seen very large increases in calls to their helplines and online platforms, such as webchats. Several helplines reported more requests for emotional support, worries about controlling behaviour and escalating experiences of violence and abuse.
5. The report contains three recommendations for all forces. The recommendations and the initial response to these by West Mercia Police is set out in the *Inspection report recommendations* section of this report.

### **Domestic abuse in West Mercia during the pandemic**

6. In line with the report findings, in the period immediately following lockdown, there was a small decline in reporting, followed by a steady increase back to more typical levels. Volumes remained above average until September, leading to a small, but not statistically significant increase compared to the previous year. Following the post-Christmas lockdown, there was a further fall in reporting. Overall, 20/21 saw a 3% reduction in recorded domestic abuse compared to 19/20. In the first quarter of 21/22 domestic abuse crimes and crime incidents saw a 3% increase on the same quarter in 19/20 and an 11% increase on the previous quarter.

7. Between April and December 2020 third sector support services across West Mercia saw a significant increase in calls for service; Women's Aid saw a two-third increase in calls for help. Again, this is in line with findings in the inspection report.

8. An example of how the force continued to reach out to domestic abuse victims during the pandemic is over the Christmas period the force shared regular posts, including a bespoke video, aimed at domestic abuse victims, and friends and family of victims. Within the video, there was representation of both genders, a range of ages, ethnicities and types of relationships. The content covered physical, mental, financial abuse and coercion and control. It urged victims to speak up and contact partner agencies if they needed support. In total these posts gained over 159,000 impressions on Facebook alone and were posted on a range of other platforms.

9. Pre Covid, in addition to the wider victim satisfaction survey, the force also ran a dedicated domestic abuse victim satisfaction survey. This was halted in March 2020 due to potential safeguarding issues, only recommencing in April 2021. The first results from this should be included in the quarter two performance report.

### Inspection report recommendations

10. The force has implemented a monitoring system for tracking progress against open recommendations arising from HMICFRS inspection reports. All recommendations are allocated to strategic leads, who update the tracking report on a regular basis. The Deputy Chief Constable maintains oversight of recommendations via the Service Improvement Board (SIB), where progress is subject to scrutiny and challenge. The PCC is represented at this meeting.

11. Policing in the Pandemic contained 3 recommendations for all forces. These were allocated to strategic leads who provided an initial assessment of the force's position and the work required to meet the recommendations. This initial assessment was taken to SIB in July.

12. The three recommendations and a brief summary of the West Mercia position is set out below.

#### 13. 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*

In West Mercia, a victim of domestic abuse can report their abuse using an online form on the force's website. The force remains committed to providing digital channels for reporting, which increases the options available to meet victim's needs.

The current processes in place ensure that crimes reported by digital routes are responded to in a timely manner and with supervisory oversight where appropriate.

Since the commencement of the digital desk in Feb 2021, processes have been reviewed and it is considered that the appropriate framework is in place to respond to victim's needs. Reality testing is scheduled to take place to ensure the supervision and monitoring frameworks in place is sufficient to comply with this recommendation.

#### 14. 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.*

The Force's Witness Care Unit keep victims updated throughout the court process, arrange pre-court visits if required and inform them of any changes with adjournments. Post-covid the unit are supporting 60% more victims and witnesses with the same staffing levels as pre-covid. The level of service currently given to a victim is delivered on an individual basis of need, however, the level of service given to vulnerable victims such as those of domestic abuse offences has not changed as they are recognised as a priority. The force has now secured additional Ministry of Justice funding to provide 2 additional Victim and Witness Care Officers for 12 months to support the team with the ongoing demand and focus on supporting the most vulnerable (including domestic abuse victims and Witnesses).

Domestic Abuse Risk Officers (DAROs) update victims on the investigation progress for high-risk cases to make sure the victim is informed from the start. They provide personal contact to victims with advice and guidance to assist and enable them to manage their vulnerability to domestic abuse. DAROs support and present information at multi-agency meetings, including, child protection and vulnerable adult meetings/conferences. If domestic abuse victims have been engaging with an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA), the DARO will explain the court processes and who to contact if IDVA are due to close their service. Victims can call the IDVA if needed during this time regardless whether the case is closed. They may also be engaging in group work or ongoing 121 work.

The Victim Advice Line (VAL) has two dedicated Victim Care Coordinators (VCC) to contact and offer immediate support to DA victims and survivors, where safe to do so; and depending on their needs, enable them to access ongoing specialist support. This tends to be done at the early stages of an investigation and it is unlikely that the VCC will continue to be engaged with the victim post-charge.

In addition, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has provided additional supporting letters to share with victims and witnesses to explain the current position and wider support available.

#### 15. 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 has previously been identified by HMICFRS as an outlier for its use of outcome 16 (Evidential difficulties victim based – named suspect identified – The victim does not support (or has withdrawn support for) police action). Ongoing work is in place to identify the reasons for this and to support officers in a more effective use of outcome codes. A domestic abuse reality testing exercise undertaken in North Worcestershire was part of the work used to identify where improvements need to be made. Moving forward supervisor CPD training will include input to ensure outcomes are applied more effectively and timely so that appropriate referrals to support agencies can be correctly classified. More information is being disseminated to officers via internal communications channels and via local domestic abuse SPOCs.

### **The PCC's responsibilities**

16. The PCC has a specific duty to respond to the Home Secretary when HMICFRS publish any recommendations within an inspection report. This is published on the force website. Ongoing oversight of the force response will be via the Service Improvement Board and through the PCC's holding to account programme as required.

### **Risk Management Implications**

None.

### **Financial Implications**

None.

### **Legal Implications**

None

### **Equality Implications**

None.

### **Supporting Information**

Appendix 1 – HMICFRS: Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic - 2021

### **Contact Points**

For the PCC's office: Andy Champness, Police and Crime Commissioner Chief Executive  
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