



HM Inspectorate
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Building choice in domestic abuse perpetrator interventions: reflections on what clients, victims and practitioners need

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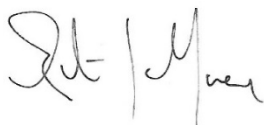
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Nicole Renehan and David Gadd, setting out the key ingredients for effective work with domestic abuse perpetrators. They highlight the importance of: (i) establishing a sense of safety for victim survivors; (ii) developing and maintaining effective and trusting relationships with perpetrators; and (iii) stimulating their curiosity and interest in positive change. Providing integrated support for victims can provide them with the necessary space for action, while establishing a sense of safety also supports the building of working relationships with perpetrators, so that they feel able to reveal, reflect and learn. Crucially, research shows that positive outcomes are more likely when practitioners are supported to develop and maintain positive working alliances. Sustaining change also depends on whether perpetrators perceive it to be worthwhile, bearing in mind that it can be difficult and painful, and persuading them of the necessity and value is highly skilled work. Close attention thus needs to be given to building and maintaining a proficient, experienced and valued workforce, and to providing individual practitioners with the necessary time, resources and headspace to support those who present serious dangers to women and children.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

As the Probation Service moves towards a 'new generation' of programmes for domestic abuse perpetrators, it is important not to forget the lessons of the past. It is more than two decades since the inception of the *Duluth Domestic Violence Pathfinder*, the first probation-led programme for domestic abuse perpetrators in England and Wales. Despite the lack of an outcome evaluation, and a report critical about the early stages of its implementation (Bilby and Hatcher, 2004), the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme, and an alternative Community Domestic Violence Programme, were rolled across all probation areas by 2005. The evidence in terms of what worked for domestic abuse offenders remained elusive nonetheless, with only one post-hoc evaluation more than ten years later suggesting marginally better outcomes for abusive men who at least start a programme (Bloomfield and Dixon, 2015).

Both programmes were disbanded in favour of *Building Better Relationships* (BBR), currently the only accredited programme in probation for domestic abuse perpetrators, now about to be retired with a very limited evidence base against which to judge its effectiveness. As BBR is replaced with *Building Choices*, it is crucial that we learn whatever lessons we can about how to intervene safely and effectively with perpetrators of domestic abuse.

We do, however, know that the BBR era will not leave the interventions landscape unblemished. Two ethnographic studies, two inspections, and an evaluation feasibility study all raised substantive concerns regarding the quality of its implementation, unsustainable waiting lists, a less than impressed probation client group about the service received, and a stressed and overstretched workforce (Renehan and Gadd, 2024; Hughes, 2024; Teasdale et al., 2023; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023; 2018). The most critical lesson of Duluth – that effective work with men who abuse cannot be secured without adequately supporting their partners – has not always been heeded. It will need to be if *Building Choices*, a more generalised strengths-based programme, is to enhance the safety of adult survivors and their children at risk of repeat victimisation, and to protect any new partners that men – who have been domestically abusive – form relationships with.

Both the Home Office and the VCSE sector have agreed clear standards in terms of working with domestic abuse perpetrators (Home Office, 2023; Respect 2022). These include centralising victim safety; multi-agency working; timely, accessible and gender-informed interventions; and suitably skilled and supported intervention practitioners who can foster motivation for change. Fostering motivation, of course, relies upon the quality of the relationship between practitioner and client, something that can be hard to achieve for practitioners with high caseloads. The working alliance, therefore, should not be subordinated in any intervention, generalised or otherwise.

There is scope for this within the *Building Choices* model, though it still requires considerable elaboration. Three elements provide the scaffolding of a preliminary, optional module 'for those that need it':

- establishing a sense of safety
- building working relationships
- stimulating curiosity in change

In this *Academic Insights* paper, we argue that these three elements should form the bedrock of – and be embedded throughout – any safe and effective intervention. We explain some of the challenges that must be surmounted if the Probation Service is to achieve this.

2. The importance of good working alliances

The quality of the relationship between practitioner and client has been hailed as the cornerstone of probation practice for improving reoffending outcomes. A good alliance is built upon genuine care, mutual trust and respect, and a belief by both parties that an intervention can improve the lives of those subject to it (Horvath and Greenberg, 1989; Horvath and Luborsky, 1993). Too often in practice, working relationships between practitioners and people on probation can be tokenistic in the absence of the time, supervision and skills that practitioners need to develop such relationships (Millings et al., 2023).

The remit of safe and effective interventions does, of course, go beyond the interpersonal dynamics of an intervention, and is contingent upon good working relationships within and beyond the organisation in which programmes are situated. At the organisational level, the success of an intervention will rely on clear lines of communication, processes and respect across different sections of both: (i) the service in which it is embedded; and (ii) the wider community coordinated response to domestic abuse of which it is a part (Home Office, 2023).

In the subsequent three sections, we outline areas of good practice for safe and effective domestic abuse perpetrator interventions that acknowledge the importance of good working relationships at the interpersonal, organisational, and community levels. We argue that interventions need to take seriously the safety of victim survivors, the time and resources practitioners need to build working relationships with clients and colleagues, and the skills required to stimulate curiosity in change. Practitioners must, however, be able to sustain hope for change among a client group that is, perhaps by definition, threatened by the recognition that people they depend upon have different perspectives to their own and who can become more resistant to such mindfulness when other life crises present.



2.1 Establishing a sense of safety for victim survivors

The most critical development priority of any domestic abuse intervention should be the safety of victim-survivors, including children (Home Office, 2023). In UK probation practice, probation officers have long maintained the overall responsibility for managing risk (Bullock et al., 2010), and when multi-agency partnerships and arrangements (such as multi-agency risk assessment conferences and Integrated Offender Management) work as intended, this can enhance victim safety (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023; 2018). The tumultuous periods of *Transforming Rehabilitation* and unification did, however, yield a poor service for victim-survivors. This has left many women and children at risk of re-victimisation. A 2023 thematic inspection revealed that only 27 per cent of sampled cases had managed the risk of domestic abuse effectively, a consequence, the inspectorate found, of poor information sharing and engagement between police, children's social care, and specialist domestic abuse agencies (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023).

A key role for establishing victim survivor safety is that of the Women's Safety Worker, previously known in probation practice as the Partner Link Worker and, currently called, the Domestic Abuse Support Officer. The role of a safety worker is integral to domestic abuse perpetrator interventions, and the provision offered to victims should be on a par with that provided to offenders (Home Office, 2023). Safety workers contact and then support women whose partners have been referred to an intervention. They can play a key role in:

- assessing risk
- safety planning
- signposting to and maintaining connections with other services as part of a coordinated response
- communicating any risk to probation and intervention practitioners
- managing victim survivor expectations about what interventions can realistically achieve (Home Office, 2023; Woolford and McCarthy, 2023; Bullock, 2014).

When domestic abuse perpetrator interventions include integrated support for victims, research demonstrates that this can enhance women's safety and provide them with space for action for themselves and their children (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015).

The role of the safety worker has, however, long been perceived as secondary – or outsourced – in the probation context, leaving some victims feeling disillusioned about the service they have received (Woolford and McCarthy, 2023; Bullock, 2014; Bilby and Hatcher, 2004; Eadie and Knight, 2002). Safety workers have complained of poor resourcing, a lack of training and supervision, and of successive government failures to learn lessons about the kind of services that victims and their children need (Woolford and McCarthy, 2023). These legacy failures have culminated in chronic understaffing, unmanageable workloads, and a service in which safety workers feel stressed, unprepared, unsupported, and afforded insufficient time to listen to and support victims.

If it is to deliver on its mission to 'prevent victims by changing lives', the Probation Service must put victims and survivors' voices at the centre of domestic abuse interventions. In the absence of independent research evaluation, it remains imperative to abide by the professional standards of best practice for safe and effective intervention work (Home Office, 2023, Respect, 2022). Engagement with a safety worker is, of course, purely voluntary on the part of the victim, some of whom may have long moved on from the abusive relationship, do not receive timely contacts, or may be too reluctant to engage with criminal justice processes that

have been slow, and which have ultimately failed to protect them previously (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023; Bullock, 2014). Timely and supportive communication with the partners, ex-partners and children of domestic abuse perpetrators is therefore an essential prerequisite of effective intervention.

2.2 Building working relationships

Establishing a sense of safety is also key to building working relationships with domestic abuse perpetrators, so that they feel able to reveal, reflect and learn from behaviour that causes harm. While many will deny the harm they have caused, this can be because they are ashamed of their behaviour and regard it as unmanly to have lost control or to have harmed and intimidated people who they care for and who have cared for them (Gadd, 2000; 2002). The effectiveness of an intervention relies heavily on the quality of the relationship between practitioner and client (Holmes, 2023) and the extent to which it can establish a degree of emotional honesty, even if the full facts of the harms caused remain obscured (Renehan and Gadd, 2024). In psychotherapy, the therapeutic alliance is viewed as key to change and has been adopted into the probation literature (Tatman and Love, 2010). According to the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath and Greenberg, 1989; Horvath and Luborsky, 1993), a therapeutic alliance entails:

- **trust:** how comfortable the client feels, and whether they are confident about the therapists' ability to help them
- **mutual respect and collaboration:** whether both parties feel understood, respected, and agree about how therapy will improve the client's situation
- **the client's perception:** that the therapist is genuinely concerned for their welfare, appreciates them, and is honest about how they feel even when the client says or does something wrong.

These aspects of the working alliance can be measured using self-completion questionnaires which both the client and supporting professional complete.

Research shows that when practitioners are supported to develop and maintain a working alliance, engagement, attendance rates and outcomes are improved, including for those with poor mental health and substance abuse issues, so long as they rate the alliance highly (Dunn and Bentall, 2007; Goldsmith et al., 2015). In line with working alliance principles, and their own professional identities, probation-based intervention facilitators underscore the importance of:

- adopting a non-judgemental approach
- humanising the clients they work with
- having the time and skills necessary to support them to understand their violence (Renehan, 2021; Morran, 2008).

However unpalatable their rationalisations, men on probation for domestic abuse offences value the opportunity to talk about what they perceive to be the emotional antecedents to their abuse which, when fully acknowledged by practitioners, present unique opportunities to work with them in more thoughtful ways (Gadd and Corr, 2017). While standards for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions emphasise the importance of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, they also note that interactions should be respectful and fully cognisant of the client group often presenting in emotional disarray (Home Office, 2023).

In practice, however, the therapeutic alliance risks becoming superficial in the context of an overstretched and unsupported workforce, once again 'resetting' to deal with the crisis of overflowing prisons (Philipps et al., 2024; McKiernan and Farley, 2024). Divisions sewn by *Transforming Rehabilitation* are still being repaired. Sickness levels are high. The number of practitioners choosing to leave the service increased by 10 per cent in 2023 compared to the previous year (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023). Concerningly, two thirds of probation officers who left were the most experienced in the workforce (ibid).

The impact of professional pressures on those receiving probation services has been palpable. Programmes are mired with high initial attrition, low completion, hostilities towards intervention facilitators, and a client group ambiguous about whether criminal justice interventions really contribute towards them building better relationships (Renehan, 2023; User Voice, 2023; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023; 2018). For clients who yearn for 'effective and trusting relationships', such dynamics create barriers to building a working alliance, while the pressures on the probation workforce mean that many men on probation are 'left out in the wild without proper support' and get 'dumped' onto programmes that risk doing 'more harm than good' (User Voice, 2023).

Moving forward, the challenge will be to build genuine working relationships across the Probation Service, and to equip all practitioners with the time, supervision and skills needed to build and maintain working relationships with their clients, and of course, to respectfully challenge them when they seek to justify behaving abusively. This will ensure that:

- the provision on offer to domestic abuse perpetrators and victim survivors is coordinated
- experienced practitioners are valued and retained
- they have the resources needed to provide reflective spaces in which perpetrators can be persuaded that change is worth the effort and motivated to sustain it when new life crises come.

In some instances, the choices that need to be developed – such as the decision to accept a relationship is over and/or live apart from one's children – will be painful ones. Men who have been domestically abusive typically have to navigate between leaving a relationship they have harmed irreparably and suffering housing precariousness, continuing to blame the victim or accepting responsibility, apologising to the victim and their children in the uncertain hope that some semblance of a parental relationship can be salvaged, and acknowledging substance dependencies that keep painful feelings at bay, including the hurt of past traumas and mistakes (Gadd et al., 2019).

2.3 Stimulating curiosity in change

It is well established that many domestic abuse perpetrators on probation are liable to present in crisis and have long histories of being both troubled and troubling (Gilchrist et al., 2003). Many domestic abuse offenders carry with them the unacknowledged traumas of abuse and neglect from their childhoods, and become emotionally reliant upon the partners that their insecurities have been projected onto in abusive ways. Men who start becoming abusive as teenagers often have limited experiences of loving and trusting relationships as children, and some of those who lived with domestic abuse as children do unfortunately sometimes blame abused mothers for failing to protect them from abusive fathers and/or stepfathers (Gadd et al., 2015). Early traumas are often compounded by social exclusion, substance use, and criminalisation that can exacerbate their emotional and financial dependency upon those they

abuse. Inevitably, some perpetrators become so defensive about their own failings or so fearful of abandonment by those they have terrified, that it becomes very difficult for them to fully contemplate what they have done and how it has impacted on those they have harmed.

Of course, practitioners should also address the different 'forms of power, control and exploitation' that perpetrators of domestic abuse engage in towards their partners (Home Office, 2023). Since the 2021 *Domestic Abuse Act*, this obligation has become better formalised in law with the criminalisation of both 'coercive control' and non-fatal strangulation. Practitioners working with men should draw connections between the motives for gender-based violence and wider patterns of gender inequality and sex discrimination, for these are connected socially to many men's tendencies to lay claim to authority in their intimate relationships (Downes et al., 2019). Such understanding among men on probation needs to be integrated into the learning of techniques to reduce the risk of violence (Home Office, 2023), such as taking time out, taking stock, and coming back to communicate in ways that cultivate interest and curiosity in the perspectives of partners, who might otherwise have been criticised for failing to live up to their expectations, judging them, or making them feel insecure (Wistow et al., 2017).

Within criminal justice contexts, it is difficult to establish the kinds of professional relationships that might facilitate such contemplation safely. The focus of many interventions is one of deficits in cognition to the detriment of considering actual life challenges or acknowledging the emotions carried, often terrifyingly but unspeakably, through manifestations of rage and the infliction of hurt on loved ones. The result can be client groups that feel unheard, that remain mystified as to what led to them being violent in the first place, and who feel somewhat abandoned when groupwork programmes that promised to help them change conclude (Renehan, 2023). These issues can be doubly complicated for men who present with mental health difficulties, whose intimate relationships are 'transactional', and/or who are neurodivergent, especially when diagnoses have not been made or worked through (Renehan, 2024; Gadd et al., 2019).

3. Conclusion

There is considerable scope for the development of much better intervention work as a new generation of programmes are introduced in probation, as well as inherent dangers in assuming that an overstretched workforce can find the time, resources and headspace needed to support and change a sizeable population of men who present a serious risk of harm and fatalities.

Policymakers need to be fully apprised of the risks of assuming that the accreditation of new programmes is an instant panacea to these challenges, and they should be encouraged to support thorough evaluations so that best practice can be embedded and continuously improved. There must be a programme of training and development that goes beyond that devolved to the online environment, as well as investment in clinical supervision and support for staff working daily with the uncertainties of managing the behaviour of men who present a constant danger to women and children.

Probation practitioners must work in harmony with interventions staff, all of whom must be fully equipped with the time and knowledge required for the emotional engagement that some men require (User Voice, 2023). Building trusting relationships in professional practice is the key to motivating people to change. Sustaining change depends heavily on whether the men who have been abusive perceive that the pain which change entails is worth the bother. Persuading them of this is highly skilled work that relies heavily on maintaining a proficient workforce that knows itself to be valued by managers, ministers and the public alike.

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