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Findings Report

Project Bright Light

Transforming the police response to domestic abuse

November 2025

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Executive Summary

The Bright Light project, which took place between January and May 2025, aimed to lay the foundation for radically improving the police response to domestic abuse. It applied the ‘six Pillar’ methodological approach established by Operation Soteria. This involved close police-academic co-production to collect, analyse and interpret a range of data sources to examine the following six topics: (1) investigation and safeguarding; (2) disruption and deterrence; (3) victim-centred response; (4) learning, development and officer wellbeing; (5) data and performance; and (6) digital evidence.

Our data sources included: 3-year dataset of all domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the force during 2022-24; analysis of a subset of case files and digital processing notices; approximately 30 focus groups and 60 interviews with police; online survey of partner agency perspectives; multiple in-person site visits and online observations of meetings; review of body-worn video, force policies, guidance and templates along with other relevant information.

The overall aim of the research was to map the force’s current approach to domestic abuse to suggest evidence-informed, practical ideas to help transform how police operate in each of the six Pillar areas. Specific findings from each of the Pillars are described in sections of this report.

These findings coalesce into an overarching theme: the statutory definition¹ of domestic abuse is too broad for effective operational policing. Conflating various victim-suspect relationships into a single domestic abuse category challenges police operations and compromises the delivery of victim-centred, suspect-focused, and context-led policing. Consequently:

- There is a lack of clarity over how best to disrupt and deter suspects.
- Victims’ goals, interests and safety are subsumed, rather than central. The current response to victims often fails to deliver a procedurally just approach, compounding their negative experiences.
- Police data is distorted by flagging and recording requirements, obscuring the nature of the problem and how police respond to it.
- Compounding these challenges is the increasing volume of domestic abuse cases, particularly complex course of conduct offences, which existing police structures cannot effectively handle.
- A substantial proportion of this complex work stays with patrol, without officers being provided with the necessary training, time or resources to investigate them properly.

- Learning and development does not equip police officers and staff with the necessary skills and training to be able to tackle these investigations effectively, and these challenges are exacerbated when digital evidence is involved.
- Significant police time is expended on domestic abuse risk assessment, but the current tools and process-driven approach contribute to ‘incidentalism’, rather than assisting officers in identifying patterns of harm and responding appropriately.

These findings reflect significant and systemic issues affecting all police forces across England and Wales, leading us to propose [national policy implications](#). In addition, they point to the need for a transformational change programme based on these findings to enable police to consistently deliver victim-centred, suspect-focused, and context-led responses to domestic abuse.

Introduction

In 2021, Avon & Somerset Police pioneered Project Bluestone to radically improve its response to rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). This unprecedented police-academic collaboration gave rise to Operation Soteria, which has been described as “game changing”. It culminated in a co-designed National Operation Model (NOM) for RASSO, which has been implemented across all police forces in England and Wales. Recent inspections indicate that forces now have more dedicated specialist officers, investigators are better equipped to understand RASSO cases through a new specialist learning offer, including detail on how perpetrators target victims, and more capacity for cyber and digital investigations leading to more cases being referred to the Crown Prosecution Service.²

National Context

Domestic abuse is a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and therefore both a strategic priority for the National Police Chiefs Council and part of the government's pledge to halve VAWG within a decade. However, in recent years, multiple reports have highlighted significant failures in the policing response to domestic abuse, suggesting it is beset with a range of issues similar to the systemic problems that prompted Project Bluestone and Operation Soteria.

These include a low charge and conviction rate, poor victim experiences, high victim withdrawal rates, low levels of trust and confidence in the police's ability to keep domestic abuse victims safe, the low status afforded domestic abuse within policing, empathy fatigue and problematic attitudes towards domestic abuse victims amongst officers. A super-complaint by the Centre for Women's Justice revealed a 50% drop in prosecutions over three years, with many forces failing to use available protective measures like Domestic Violence Protection Orders and Restraining Orders.³ A recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found inconsistent risk assessments, inadequate investigations, and poor attitudes among officers, leading to a “postcode lottery” in victim support.⁴

Shared organisational issues have also been found in numerous local and national reviews of policing:⁵ a deficit in specialist knowledge, professionalism, and competence; under-resourced and inexperienced officers; poor data quality and data analytics to inform operational and strategic decision-making; ineffective and patchy learning and development approaches; and the poor use of digital forensic evidence in case building.

Project Bright Light

Building on the leadership shown by Avon & Somerset Police from implementing Operation Soteria Bluestone, Chief Constable Sarah Crew identified domestic abuse as an area in which the force needed to radically improve. With funding provided from the Avon & Somerset Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, a team of academics, many of whom were involved in Operation Soteria, were contracted to “critically interrogate” how the force deals with domestic abuse in order to “revolutionise” the response to this high volume and challenging crime.⁶ By drawing on key principles in the Soteria approach for rape and serious sexual offences, the project aimed to bring about a radical improvement in the police response to domestic abuse.

Methods

The research was conducted between January and May 2025 and was grounded in the methodological approach established by Operation Soteria.⁷ This involved close police-academic co-production and the application of a framework of six interconnected Pillars to guide the fieldwork: (1) investigation and safeguarding; (2) disruption and deterrence; (3) victim-centred response; (4) learning, development and officer wellbeing; (5) data and performance; and (6) digital evidence. Pillars 1, 2, and 3 are directly concerned with operational policing of domestic abuse and Pillars 4, 5, and 6 are enabling Pillars, providing crucial structural and strategic support for these activities.

Research objectives

Map the force's current approach to domestic abuse and identify its strengths, weaknesses and blind spots.

Develop evidence-informed, practical ideas to improve:

1. the quality of the frontline response (including by safer neighbourhood teams), investigations and safeguarding;
2. disruption and deterrence of known perpetrators from causing further harm;
3. officer engagement with and support of victims, both operationally (including by frontline patrol officers and safer neighbourhoods officers) and strategically through multi-agency arrangements;
4. the learning and development offer as well as well-being support for officers;
5. the collection and use of data to support operational and strategic domestic abuse policing; and,
6. the use of digital technologies within investigation, safeguarding and prevention.

Data collection and analysis

Each Pillar employed a mixed-methods approach, suited to its specific focus, which is described in the individual Pillar sections of the report. Fieldwork plans were approved by the ethics committees from each Pillar's relevant university and formal collaboration agreements were signed between each university and Avon & Somerset Police.

The data sources analysed for the project are summarised in the table below.

Quantitative data sources		Qualitative data sources
Pillar One	All domestic abuse incidents & crimes recorded during 2022, 2023 and 2024 (approx. 115,000 unique occurrences) Violence Against the Person (VAP) cases (n=222) Data from internal evaluation of Operation Balearic deployments (n=89)	3 in-person site visits to gather perspectives from different units: patrol/response officers, detainee investigation team (DIT), criminal investigations department (CID), lighthouse safeguarding unit (LSU) - Online observations of DIT-CID handover meetings (n=10) - In-person observation of one NFA (no further action) Scrutiny Panel and analysis of all cases going through the Panel during 2024 (n=21) - Approximately 30 online 1:1 or group discussions with response officers, investigators and data analysts - Review of body-worn video, force policies, guidance and templates - National mapping exercise to gather relevant information from other forces
Pillar Two	27 case file analysis of incidents	2 focus groups with officers from CID, Response, Neighbourhood and DIT 1 focus group with the Covert team 6 interviews with Local Authority leads and the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner 5 interviews with perpetrator service leads 8 interviews with officers of different ranks 4 interviews with national/international experts - Observations of multi-agency meetings (2 MAPPA, 1 MARAC, and 2 DAPP)
Pillar Three	Online partnership survey sent to all statutory and non-statutory services working in the regional multi-agency domestic abuse landscape	14 focus groups with police officers and staff: call handlers, dispatch, response officers, investigations and safeguarding 2 focus groups with independent domestic violence advisors (IDVAs) 6 interviews with force strategic leads relevant to domestic abuse victims - Documentary and force system analysis
Pillar Four	None collected	8 focus groups with trainers, investigators, response officers and PCDA (Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship) providers at the University of West of England 4 interviews with leads for wellbeing and training - Review of the DA Matters learning material - Review of the wellbeing strategy and related policies

Pillar Five	All domestic abuse incidents & crimes recorded during 2022, 2023 and 2024 (approx. 115,000 unique occurrences) Case file analysis of 153 cases closed in Oct 2024 flagged as domestic abuse	• 4 interviews/discussions with performance, communications and crime recording staff • 1 cross-Pillar interview with the domestic abuse sector representative • Review of force data, analysis and crime recording documentation
Pillar Six	Analysis of 77 Digital Processing Notices (DPN) Review of 159 domestic abuse casefiles from two weeks in Feb 2024 and Feb 2025	• 17 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with response officers, domestic abuse investigators, digital media investigators, digital media advisors, and senior investigative staff (n=12) • Review of all digital policy and procedure documentation • Review of learning and development material related to domestic abuse and digital • A rapid evidence review using the search terms: “digital evidence” and “domestic abuse” using date parameters from 2015 to 2025

Limitations

This project took place within very short timescales (fieldwork commenced in January 2025 and findings were presented to Avon & Somerset Police in May 2025). The breadth and depth of the data collection and analysis achieved is therefore noteworthy but nevertheless required Pillar leads to focus on high-level findings and themes. We were unable to include victims within the research, nor were we able to follow through the prosecution and safeguarding processes to track outcomes. As such, more detailed, longitudinal analysis alongside an iterative process of interpretation and reflection with police Pillar counterparts was desirable yet not feasible with the time available.

Although the findings reported here are likely to be similar for police forces across England and Wales, it is important to recognise that variation does exist between and within forces. Therefore, the application of the ‘six Pillar’ approach to understand the policing of domestic abuse in other areas is warranted. This would reveal the extent to which these findings are generalisable, as well as offering new insights from conducting a similar research exercise in forces that are situated within very different geographical contexts and/or have notable differences from Avon & Somerset Police in terms of their operational structures, risk assessment tools and practices, and partnership arrangements.

Research Findings

Profile of domestic abuse in Avon & Somerset

ONS data indicates that in the year ending March 2024, 33,222 domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes were reported to Avon & Somerset Police, of which 22,993 were subsequently crimed, while in the same year there were 1,312 prosecutions and 997 convictions.

Despite recording a higher rate of domestic abuse-related reports as crimes compared to England & Wales as a whole (69% compared to 63%), the force has a lower per capita rate of recorded domestic abuse-related crimes and is arresting a lower proportion of suspects than the national average. There were 26 arrests per 100 domestic abuse-related crimes in Avon & Somerset Police in the year ending March 2024 compared to 46 per 100 nationally. In 2024, the force recorded its highest ever number of domestic abuse-related crimes but also a substantially lower charge rate – 4.8% compared to 7.3% in 2023.

Data we gathered from the force covering three full calendar years (2022-24), showed that the majority (65%) of domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by Avon & Somerset Police are committed by current or former intimate partners. This means that in one third of cases different relationship types are involved, including family members (26%) and other parties such as acquaintances and strangers (7%). It should be noted that data for the suspect-victim relationship was missing in about one-quarter of cases.

The ethnicity breakdown for all domestic abuse-flagged crimes is also complicated by substantial amounts of missing data. What was present shows that Asian suspects and victims are slightly under-represented, while Black and other minoritised suspects are over-represented, when compared to the general population in Avon & Somerset. The proportions of White victims and suspects are roughly in line with population estimates. To say anything more concrete would, however, require more in-depth analysis and much improved data.

When looking at domestic abuse between intimate partners in the Avon & Somerset Police data, it is perpetrated predominantly by males towards females in heterosexual relationships, with only a small proportion of offending occurring in same-sex couples. However, the inclusion of family violence within the domestic abuse category affects the overall profile by sex of suspects and victims. Domestic abuse committed by females, and between suspects and victims of the same sex, is more common in family violence contexts, for example between children and parents or siblings.

The profile of domestic abuse-flagged crime in Avon & Somerset shows it is a high-volume crime committed mostly by males against females in current or former intimate partner relationships. However, the high levels of missing data for suspect and victim ethnicity, suspect-victim relationship, and suspect data in general, make it hard to apply a victim-centred, suspect-focused and context-led approach to the investigation of domestic abuse. A detailed domestic abuse dashboard is available to officers and staff. However, the extent of missing data plus the lack of strategic analysis or dedicated thematic resource on domestic abuse means the dashboard does little more than report on criminal justice focused performance metrics. These can be a poor measure of what domestic abuse victims actually want from the police. Finally, despite the number of crimes recorded, the force sees lower than average arrest and charge rates.

Taken together, this profile creates a useful context for deeper exploration into what is going on at the operational, structural, and strategic levels. It is this exploration that is detailed over the following sections, focused on findings by Pillar.

Pillar 1 Investigation and safeguarding

Summary

- The statutory definition is too broad to permit a singular approach to policing domestic abuse. The demand on police from domestic abuse is large (over 20% of Avon & Somerset Police workload) and increasing every year. Notably, the types of domestic abuse offences increasing the most are complex, course of conduct and/or sexual offences such as coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB), stalking, non-fatal strangulation (NFS) and rape.
- These more complex cases are increasingly being held by frontline patrol officers, even though the frontline has inherent challenges making it the least suitable place for holding such investigations.
- Case allocation methods are counter-productive, leading to systemic inefficiencies and the potential for cases that require specialist input or investigative skill to be held by patrol officers rather than detectives. Consequently, a substantial proportion of domestic abuse cases do not have a suitable 'home' – they are too high-risk/complex for the frontline to effectively manage but not complex or risky enough to be allocated to CID.
- Specialism in the current delivery model is limited, and based on tools, training and interventions designed for intimate partner violence (IPV) although family violence (FV) and other types of cases account for a significant and growing proportion of demand.

Methods

The fieldwork for this Pillar aimed to answer three key questions:

- What are the current challenges associated with investigations for domestic abuse offences in the UK?
- How can these challenges be mitigated to enable more proactive, problem-solving, specialist approaches to investigating domestic abuse?
- What processes are in place for scrutinising investigative performance and generating wider learning?

The primary data source analysed was officially recorded domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the force during 2022, 2023 and 2024 (n=114,874 unique occurrences). This quantitative dataset was complemented by a range of other, mainly qualitative, data sources. These included (1) three in-person site visits focussed on gathering perspectives from different units: LPA (local policing area patrol officers and sergeants); DIT (team handling investigations involving detainees); CID (detectives

working in the criminal investigation department); and the LSU (lighthouse safeguarding unit) (2) online observations of DIT-CID case allocation meetings (n=10); online 1:1 or group discussions (n=30); an in-person observation of one NFA (no further action) Scrutiny Panel meeting held in the force along with analysis of all cases going through the panel during 2024 (n=21); a mapping exercise of specialist units operating in other forces; and review of body worn video, force policies, guidance and templates.

Findings

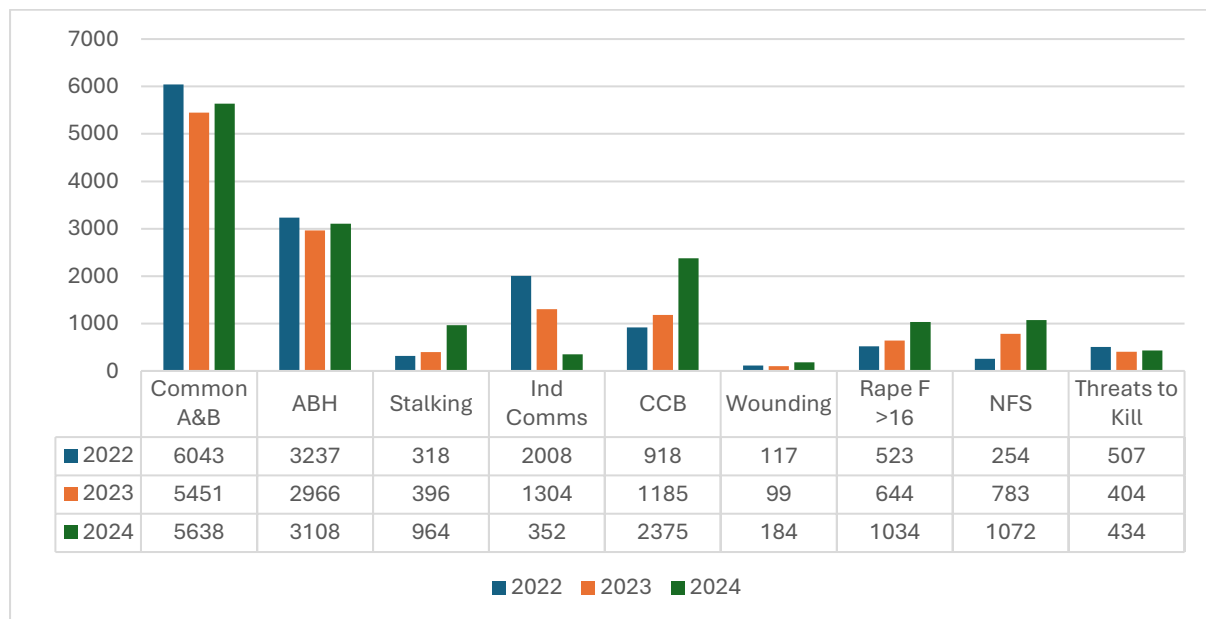
Demand and resources

The volume and nature of domestic abuse coming to police attention is changing in dramatic ways, and quickly. Crimes flagged as domestic abuse (of any type) recorded by the force increased from 22,130 in 2022 to 26,887 in 2024. This increased demand has not been evenly distributed across the force. Specifically, the domestic abuse workload of patrol increased significantly over the same period, whereas the domestic abuse workload of other units remained fairly stable. Patrol held 34.1% of all domestic abuse investigations in the force in 2022, but by 2024 this had climbed to 50.9%. In comparison, the increases for DIT and CID were modest (from 8.1% to 9.8% and 5.2% to 7.2%, respectively). Patrol's capacity to deal with the rising volume of domestic abuse cases has been compounded by a reduction in the number of officers FTE (full-time equivalent) over the same period (from 1160 to 1116). Conversely, officer FTE in DIT and CID showed modest increases over the same period (from 55 to 71 and from 645 to 669, respectively).

Domestic abuse is also changing in terms of complexity. From 2022 to 2024, there have been notable rises in the types of crimes that are more complex to investigate (see Figure 1). For example, coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) cases more than doubled, from 918 to 2375. Rape of a Female over aged 16 also doubled, from 523 to 1034. Stalking offences more than tripled, from 318 to 964. Non-fatal strangulation (NFS) cases increased five-fold, from 254 to 1072. Offences which require a course of conduct to be evidenced, which are sexual in nature, involve vulnerable victims and often involve digital evidence (which officers feel ill-equipped to handle, discussed in Pillar 6) are considered complex to investigate and need a higher level of skill, specialism and time than what is typically available on the frontline.

Patrol officers are the designated Officer in Charge (OIC) for investigating a substantial, and rising, proportion of the most complex domestic abuse workload. For example, in 2022 patrol officers held 30.2% of CCB cases, which rose to 50.2% in 2024. For NFS cases, the proportion held by patrol officers increased from 34.5% to 49.1% over the same period. A similar pattern was observed for stalking and rape (e.g., Rape of a Female over aged 16 doubled from 7.0% to 15.7%).

Figure 1: Volume of specific domestic abuse crimes



Source: Avon & Somerset Police 3-year dataset

It is reasonable to expect a certain amount of ‘noise’ within police data (e.g., some misclassifications, or third-party reports, or offences recorded through other process such as risk assessment or MARAC⁸). This is certainly a feature of the three-year dataset from which the figures above are derived (and will be discussed further in Pillar 5). However, even when separating out those cases which have been through a DASH risk assessment and were classified as high-risk, analysis revealed that patrol officers were responsible for investigating an unexpectedly large proportion of these cases. For example, in 2024 they were the designated OIC in 35.9% of all high-risk CCB cases and 28.3% of all high-risk NFS cases in the force. This represents 4-5 times the volume of these cases that were assigned to patrol officers to investigate in 2022.

The quotes below are indicative of a common sentiment we heard during our site visits and discussions with officers from different units and of different ranks:

‘I don’t see how anyone could do a decent investigation of a High Risk CCB case on the frontline.’

‘Frontline is the least suitable place for holding any type of complex investigation.’

‘We need to invest more in dealing with DA – giving it to a response officer tied to the radio is not a proper investment.’

The allocation of complex domestic abuse investigations to patrol officers was a reoccurring problem in the analysis of cases discussed at the NFA Scrutiny Panel (discussed in a later section). In attempt to address these issues, a new Violence Against the Person (VAP) process was instigated in one patrol team area. The aim of the

VAP process is to help overcome the problem of investigations being stalled (e.g., when the officer in charge goes on rest days) and to bring more perpetrators to justice. Analysis of a sample of 222 VAP cases (of which, 170 were domestic abuse) revealed dramatic improvements in the charge rate obtained by patrol officers leading investigations (1.5% under the standard process compared to 21.7% under the VAP process). This was a positive intervention by the force, designed to mitigate the challenges described above.

Investigative contexts and police performance

Although there are individual differences between officers investigating domestic abuse crimes in terms of their knowledge, skills, and experience (officer learning and wellbeing is discussed in Pillar 4), it is also important to recognise that the OIC's role and unit play an important part in determining investigative outcomes. The context in which patrol officers work is itself a hindrance to effectively investigating complex domestic abuse crimes. Their role involves providing the first response to a diverse, unpredictable array of incidents that must be dealt with as quickly as possible. The shift patterns necessary for providing 24/7 coverage create a pause in the investigative process (e.g., when the officer goes on a period of rest days) making it more difficult to swiftly progress lines of enquiry or keep victims updated in a timely manner. Given that patrol officers are typically the least experienced, and in contrast to previous decades officers with less than 5 years' service constitute half or more of the workforce in many police forces, these contextual challenges are even more difficult to successfully navigate.

Standard police performance metrics reinforce what we heard from the officers in the quotes above. The force is operating in a challenging context of increasing demand. As previously mentioned, 2024 saw the highest number of domestic abuse crimes recorded alongside a declining charge rate – 4.8%, down from 7.3% in 2023. The overall domestic abuse charge rate for patrol was 1.5% in 2024 compared to 16.5% for CID. This performance gap is more extreme for complex domestic abuse crimes such as CCB (1.4% vs 21%) and NFS (2% vs 31.9%) and is worsening over time (i.e., the charge rate is declining for patrol but increasing for CID).

Due to the statutory definition of domestic abuse including both intimate partners and familial relationships, it was important to assess how this impacted upon operational policing. Analysis of the three-year dataset showed that the proportion of domestic abuse cases that involved Family Violence (FV) rather than Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) increased over time (from 22.8% in 2022 to 28.2% in 2024). The workload of patrol has the highest proportion of FV cases (39.8% in 2024).

The distinction between IPV and FV is important for understanding victims' reasons for reporting to police and their expectations about what happens as a result (discussed

further in Pillar 5). Most of the tools, training and interventions police have at their disposal for responding to domestic abuse were primarily designed for IPV rather than for FV cases (e.g., DASH, IDVAs, MARACs, DA Matters, etc.). Therefore, FV cases do not 'fit' into the standard pathway as well. This is apparent from analysis showing that the levels of missing DASH risk assessments were three times higher for non-IPV cases (34.1% compared to 13.1%) and the charge rate was about half (2.7% compared to 4%). Taking a context-led approach to investigations means recognising and responding to the different relationship contexts subsumed under the statutory definition. It also requires better recording of the victim-offender relationship (which was missing in about one-quarter of cases).

Safeguarding and risk

As described above, much of the domestic abuse workload remains with patrol, from first response through investigation and eventual case closure. But some domestic abuse does get allocated to other units to investigate, such as CID. The force's case allocation policy (recently revised) sets out the factors that should guide these decisions. Primarily this is based on the DASH risk assessment, however other factors must also be present for a presumption towards allocation to CID (e.g., NFS, weapon use, stalking, sexual offences, high-harm managed IOM offender, etc.). Consequently, there is the perception (backed by policy) that *'high risk DA is not necessarily a CID job'*. Thus, the current operational arrangements do not provide a natural 'home' for cases where *"the DASH is **not** screaming high risk"* but which are too complex or risky for frontline patrol officers to effectively manage. This situation results in systemic inefficiencies and the likely potential for cases that require specialist input or investigative skill to be held by patrol officers rather than detectives. Although officers said they were *"managing to overcome these hurdles, it still could be a daily battle"* to agree where to allocate certain domestic abuse cases.

Unlike most other forces, Avon & Somerset Police does not have a formal secondary review stage for quality assuring domestic abuse risk assessments. Expertise in risk assessment was held by the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit (LSU) – rather than routinely shared – and not formally recorded as a 'secondary review'. This meant the validity of the DASH risk grade was routinely called into question, further compromising the swift, consistent and fair allocation of cases. This arrangement also created missed opportunities for performance review, scrutiny, thematic learning and officer development around risk assessment and safeguarding.

There was a lack of knowledge/understanding from different investigative units about what the LSU does or could offer, and from the LSU a feeling of not being understood by the force.

'We are a bolt-on to operational teams, but we should be core.'

A common perception was that investigation and safeguarding activities took place in separate silos and were not joined up as well as they could be.

‘They should be tasking back, with info based on their knowledge to improve the investigation.... But we never hear from them.’

Scrutiny over investigative performance

Operation Soteria brought about the introduction of RASSO NFA scrutiny panels; fora where the police and CPS can, alongside support agencies and advocacy services, review the circumstances of cases resulting in a ‘no further action’ (NFA) decision. Such panels can bring thematic opportunities for learning and reflection or even result in the re-opening of specific cases. The panel met quarterly and was themed around three distinct areas: RASSO, domestic abuse and stalking/harassment. Analysis of all the domestic abuse cases going through the panel during 2024 (N=21) included a range of offence types: assault (n=11), non-fatal strangulation (n=3), stalking/harassment (n=6), criminal damage (n=1) and malicious communications (n=1). All but one case concerned an incident(s) of intimate partner violence. Most cases (15 of 21) involved parties (both victims and suspects) that were well known to the police. Key themes arising from consideration of the domestic abuse cases included: procedural compliance, time management and resource constraints, victim engagement strategies and safeguarding, case management, inconsistencies in supervisory review, and investigative strategies that failed to consider evidence-led prosecutions where the victim withdraws support for the investigation and/or failing to explore the full potential of ‘course of conduct’ offences such as CCB. Strongly reinforcing the quantitative and qualitative findings presented earlier, the most prevalent theme was problems arising from investigations led by patrol officers (17 of 21 cases). These cases generated concerns relating to how such complex and labour-intensive investigations could have been allocated to patrol officers, who were inexperienced and early-in-service. Time pressures, delays in victim contact/ updates, failure to explore relevant lines of enquiry, and files of poor quality being sent to the Crown Prosecution Service resulted in unsatisfactory outcomes in terms of the criminal justice process as well as victim safeguarding.

Implications

The statutory definition of domestic abuse is too broad for effective operational policing, as it encompasses a wide range of victim-suspect relationships, offence types, safeguarding concerns and justice goals. This is a challenge for providing context-led police investigations of domestic abuse.

The predominant approach in the UK has for some time been premised on a single domestic abuse pathway, with the primary tools, training and interventions available to

police designed for IPV, not all of domestic abuse (as defined by law). Incidents/crimes involving familial relationships and other types of cases now constitute a significant and growing proportion of domestic abuse cases. These are being put on same pathway as IPV cases due to a lack of bespoke and tailored tools, training and interventions being developed specifically for these cases. There is, therefore, an urgent need to change the current policing model of 'one domestic abuse pathway' and instead implement different domestic abuse pathways. At a minimum, sub-flags within the Home Office mandated domestic abuse flag⁹ could be applied to intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence (FV) as the most basic context distinction. To enable this, it will be necessary to develop ways to improve relationship identification and recording (including of the primary perpetrator). Police structures must change accordingly to serve these different pathways, and to provide a suitable 'home' for the large proportion of domestic abuse demand that is acknowledged to be too complex/risky for patrol but not 'serious' enough for CID. Otherwise, this structural mismatch will continue to result in inconsistent and inappropriate responses to victims, missed opportunities for disruption and deterrence of perpetrators, and negative impacts from ill-equipped patrol officers.

Pillar 2 Disruption and deterrence

Summary

- The landscape of provision for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions has problems in terms of complexity and scale. Together, this makes it difficult for frontline police officers and staff to be able to make appropriate referrals into interventions - not knowing what is available where, when and to whom.
- Disruption and deterrence efforts are muddled by the conflation of different domestic abuse contexts in the national domestic abuse definition, and there is no overarching, context-led, strategic vision around what domestic abuse perpetrator disruption and deterrence is intending to achieve beyond immediate victim safety.
- Police actions can range from deterring domestic abuse perpetrators to enabling them. Actions such as arresting the victim, colluding with the perpetrator, releasing without restrictions, and not arresting following breach of bail are not neutral actions; they can create more space for the perpetrator and more harm for the victim. However, there is an opportunity to reframe day-to-day policing interventions as more deterrence focused.

Methods

Q 1. Where do perpetrator disruption and deterrence interventions fit into community responses?

- 6 interviews with Local Authority leads and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (all areas of Avon & Somerset covered)
- 2 MAPPA, 1 MARAC, and 2 DAPP observations
- 5 interviews with perpetrator service leads

Q 2. What does the suspect journey look like in relation to disruption and deterrence?

- 27 case file analysis of incidents
- 8 interviews with Avon & Somerset Police officers of different ranks

Q 3. What opportunities are there for increasing disruption and deterrence?

- 2 focus groups with officers from CID, Response, Neighbourhood and DIT
- 1 focus group with the Covert team
- 4 interviews with national/international experts

Findings

The landscape of domestic abuse perpetrator interventions is complex and under-scaled

Many perpetrator interventions were relying on inconsistent, short-term funding. This meant there was sometimes a reluctance to refer, because of uncertainty over whether the intervention was still running and/or who could be referred to it. In addition, it was difficult for perpetrator interventions to fully embed themselves into local partnerships because of this:

'It takes years to embed a process, and we'd never have that longevity. I think that's part of the issue actually - the wider partnership knowledge is impaired through the inability to guarantee delivery because of funding.' (Perpetrator Service)

A greater focus on prevention and on the root causes of domestic abuse was seen as key, while not taking away funding from victim's services. It was felt that '*we're always looking at what happens after*' (Perpetrator service) and the scale of the problem not being addressed by primary or secondary prevention. Expanding interventions beyond those deemed highest risk was also seen as important:

'If you look at a lot of the domestic homicide reviews, the vast majority of homicides are committed by low level or medium risk offenders [...] Where a lot of the high, high-risk offenders don't commit a domestic homicide because they've been so intensely managed by the police. So, so maybe our model is wrong in some ways.' (Police)

Sometimes, very small-scale interventions were allocated short term funding with the opportunity of demonstrating successful outcomes. However, there is a need to be realistic about what short-term/small pilots can achieve versus resources required and the evidence base they are able to provide.

What happens to domestic abuse suspects?

Our observations found that the highest risk offenders were being well managed, but this was at a significant cost in terms of both police and multi-agency resources. In contrast, incidents that came into the police that were not deemed high risk tended to have little or no intervention. We observed a mismatched patchwork of outcomes, provision and approaches which mainly resulted in nothing significant happening with the suspect. This was even the case where interventions were available for use – for example out of court disposals which were only used in a very small proportion of cases. There is the need for a broader, bolder and clearer focus on the use of different out of court disposals for domestic abuse in different contexts.

The situation was further muddled by the broad range of incidents that were flagged as domestic abuse. This included some that were incidents that took place within a domestic space but did not include ‘violence’ or ‘abuse’ as set out within the statutory definition. This had the impact of diluting disruption and deterrence focus and attention. There needs to be more of a shared vision or strategy in terms of what is or should be the objective of disruption/deterrence beyond immediate victim safety - a context-led theory of change. There should be a differentiation between ‘domestic abuse’ versus incidents that happen within a ‘domestic space’ and also a differentiation between intimate partner violence and family violence in terms of disruption and deterrent expectations and tactics.

Not just referrals or interventions - policing as deterrence

The same police action (e.g. communicating a conditional caution or bail conditions) can be delivered and received in different ways, in part due to how it is communicated by police staff and officers.

‘Basically 99% of policing is speaking to people.’ (Police)

‘You’re hoping that you could have that chat and that engagement with someone, and that’s going to prevent that further, maybe without needing police action. It’s basically kind of the lowest level option we’ve got in terms of going look, we’re here. We don’t want to come back.’ (Police)

There are opportunities to increase the deterrent effect by reframing day-to-day policing activities as interventions in their own right. For example, best practice guides could be developed and/or evidence-based example scripts with suggestions on what to say/what not to say. There could also be learning passed down from those trained and experienced in management of high-risk offenders.

Implications

For many decades there has been a focus (locally, nationally and internationally) on improving policing responses for victims – in terms of procedural and substantive justice. This has been important for many reasons, all of which are well-versed so not repeated here. However, a knowledge gap has opened up in responses to suspects in terms of research evidence, policy and practice. Bright Light identified where some of these gaps exist locally, which are likely to be replicated to different extents in different areas nationally and internationally. Given the extent of the gap, there are many implications for policing policy and practice but also for multi-agency partners and for academics. There are also many opportunities for improvements, including some of the areas listed above. Best practice for effective deterrent and diversion should be given greater urgency as a national policing discussion in partnership with multi-agency

partners and academics. This discussion should be about suspects at all risk levels not only those deemed to be at highest risk, and the context of the domestic abuse should be given greater attention. Placing a stronger strategic focus on responses to domestic abuse suspects does not clash with improving responses to victims – since responses can rarely be victim-centred if they are not also suspect-focused.

Pillar 3 Victim-centred response

Summary

- Victims encounter an inconsistent and problematic policing response, which some officers described as ‘embarrassing’ and likened to a ‘postcode lottery.’ Significant service improvements are urgently required.
- Operational challenges relating to officer understanding and attitudes, pervasive overwhelm and burnout, and a lack of organisational scaffolding and support continue to impede effective victim engagement.
- The policing response is risk-focused and reactive rather than person-centred or problem-solving. What victims may or may not need is lost to process and limited capacity, compounding negative experiences.
- Force domestic abuse improvement initiatives do not sufficiently engage with victim interests, context or voice, and there is a lack of clarity about what being ‘victim-led’ or ‘victim-centred’ means in practice.
- The partnership working landscape is challenging, with varying working relationships and key gaps in multi-agency partnerships creating a patchwork of provision. Victim-survivor access to crucial independent advocacy and support services, including specialist services, is impeded by limited and insecure funding.

Methods

- Interviews (6) and focus groups (14) with police officers and staff across different facets of the police response to domestic abuse, and focus groups (2) with specialist victim support services (74 participants consulted in total)
- An online survey sent to all statutory and non-statutory services working in regional multi-agency domestic abuse partnerships (IDVAs, victim support services, NHS, CPS; receiving responses from 6 organisations)
- Documentary and force system analysis

Findings

Inconsistent and poor level of service

Victims encounter inconsistent and problematic policing responses to domestic abuse. Although there were some examples of positive practice, there were many examples of poor treatment, such as: practice not being trauma-informed, inconsiderate and patchy communication, accessibility barriers impeding participation, particularly for minoritised and marginalised victims, and victims feeling not listened to, not taken seriously, and put at risk by police action or inaction.

The inconsistency was such that the level of service was likened by officers to ‘a lottery.’ Others described the police response to victims as ‘not good enough’ and ‘embarrassing’:

‘We let a lot of victims down. I had a...job...high-risk...it was embarrassing...I was quite ashamed, really.’ (Officer)

‘It’s not good enough that people are waiting days to, kind of, to be seen and heard and understand the process.’ (Officer)

‘Depends on each individual officer, some are great and go above and beyond and some are frankly disgraceful in their conduct.’ (Partnership respondent)

These findings echo longstanding concerns about the nationwide, pervasive failings of police responses to domestic abuse, raised by victims, advocates and academic research.¹⁰ Moreover, these results resonate with the multi-force Pillar 3 findings of Operation Seteria,¹¹ which identified similar inconsistent and poor police treatment of victims of sexual violence, amounting to ‘systematic procedural injustice’ that erodes police legitimacy.

Operational and organisational challenges

Underpinning this service landscape, we observed a high-level of commitment by many officers and staff to domestic abuse victims, including an informed leadership team focused on innovation and improvement:

‘I love working on domestics because there’s the complexity, there’s a depth to it, you know that that is someone’s day to day life, and it’s really important.’ (Officer)

However, and again reflecting findings nationally, we also observed challenging organisational attitudes, a lack of fundamental knowledge, and domestic abuse still being viewed as frustrating work:

‘...He [a police officer] was just thinking... you “won’t get anything out of her.” And you just think, well actually, she’s really scared of him...You clearly don’t have enough education on the matter...it’s quite damaging.’ (IDVA)

Importantly, these challenges were discussed in relation to officers being stretched too thinly to engage adequately with victims – with many feeling unsupported, overwhelmed and burned out:

'We're so bogged down by it all, we have compassion fatigue. We're just in the day-to-day grind of it and I worry we miss important stuff.' (Officer)

A mechanistic, process-driven response

We also observed that the policing operational response is not attuned to victims. It is process-driven, risk-focused and reactive, rather than being person-centred or problem solving. This means that what victims may or may not want or need is lost to process and limited capacity.

'It's copy and paste, isn't it?... No matter how violent or how nonviolent it is, you get the same template.' (Officer)

We were told of a '*handover culture*,' with a lack of 'ownership' for domestic abuse cases across the force, whereby victim engagement becomes displaced or secondary to process. While supportive victim interactions were seen as crucial to building victim trust and confidence in the policing process, these were not seen as '*part of the job*' in many operational roles.

There was also a lack of organisational knowledge and scaffolding to support officers in adopting an appropriate, context-led approach, which is essential for effective investigations and safeguarding.¹² Beyond relationship type, areas of particular concern included cases involving children, honour-based violence, minoritised communities, and victims with insecure immigration status, disabilities and/or neurodivergence.

Ineffective partnership working

The partnership and multi-agency working landscape was recognised as being crucial to effective domestic abuse responses, especially for safeguarding and supporting victims, and to best address their variety of needs and interests. However, echoing the policing context, partnership working was described as '*challenging*', impeded by a patchwork of service provision and inconsistent working relationships within and across force areas:

'Cultural feedback for the police from the IDVAs... [they] didn't know what IDVAs did... I think one of the quotes was, oh, we thought you were just like a cup of tea and tears.' (IDVA)

Different force regions offered different levels of support to victims, for example with some areas unable to provide an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) to victims assessed as 'standard' or 'medium' risk, and others operating waiting lists. We also observed the need for more holistic and strategic engagement with domestic abuse across the multi-agency space, especially with the family courts, and for efforts to reduce service delivery inconsistencies and the unnecessary duplication of work.

Victims lost in policymaking and improvement activities

While there was much activity underway seeking to improve policing responses, this was hampered by a complex governance system which creates silos, duplication and disconnection from operational challenges on the ground. This lack of joined up working risks there being a gap between the aspiration and achievable reality of domestic abuse improvement activity.

Moreover, much of the focus in innovating policing responses does not sufficiently engage with victim interests, experience or voice. Officers also struggled to navigate the complex, sometimes conflicting practice, policy and legal frameworks relating to domestic abuse victims – leaving uncertainty about what a ‘victim-centred’ or ‘victim-led’ approach to domestic abuse means or looks like in practice:

*‘The victim focused stuff for me is...what is victim focused?... No one’s actually told me what the victim thing is. It depends who you are on how you take it.’
(Officer)*

‘How can we then have victim centred approach when there’s an evidence-led prosecution element to it? I think it would be too difficult.’ (Officer)

More broadly, officers recognised that a criminal justice investigation is not necessarily what victims of domestic abuse want from police action or is the ‘best outcome’ for a case. They shared concern that the current police response – which focuses on arrest and investigative outcomes – does not always address victims’ goals or interests and constrains the actions that officers can take to safeguard and assist victims:

‘With the...pro arrest stuff we feel hamstrung when [officers making an arrest] isn’t what she wants.’ (Officer)

‘It just occurred to me then, because we’re so focused on criminal justice outcomes, aren’t we? It’s like that is our business. But actually, our safeguarding role sometimes takes a back seat.’ (Officer)

A broader and more nuanced understanding of how the police can uphold their duty to take ‘positive action’ is required to improve the outcomes, safety and experiences of victims.¹³

Implications

Significant improvements to police responses to domestic abuse are urgently required. These must focus on improving the quality and consistency of service delivery to victims, and seek to embed a context-led, procedurally just approach. Although these

findings are based on the landscape at Avon & Somerset Police, they speak to national issues in the policing response to domestic abuse (as discussed in the Introduction to this report). National efforts must continue to address organisational challenges in policing that underpin poor victim service, championing an ethos of it being ‘everyone’s business’ to engage positively with victims. Effective partnership working and a joined-up multi-agency approach, inclusive of the family courts, will be key to addressing these challenges. Crucially, victims must have access to adequately funded independent advocacy and support services, including specialist services. Finally, more work is required to understand and develop practice around what a ‘victim-centred’ and ‘victim-led’ approach to domestic abuse looks like in practice. This includes developing a contextual understanding of ‘positive action’ which better addresses victims’ goals, safety and interests.

Pillar 4 Learning, development and officer wellbeing

Summary

- The relationship with learning is transactional. There is a reliance on informal experiential knowledge gained from what has been done before, rather than formal knowledge gained through the entry pathways. The knowledge is not being delivered in an applied way, and it is not currently enabling a context-led approach to dealing with domestic abuse. Furthermore, the specialist learning delivered through the 'Domestic Abuse Matters' training programme is forgotten and not underpinned by sequenced and regular Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- Demand on patrol and a lack of specialist knowledge is leading to high levels of emotional labour. Officers are feeling intense responsibility to 'get it right' but do not have the adequate learning required to provide the confidence or capability to do this effectively.
- The local force wellbeing strategy is not considered salient or trustworthy by the officers. There needs to be more consideration to how the commendable activities being implemented map to desired outcomes and officers need to be genuinely supported to access services available.
- The lack of specialist knowledge particularly plays out in the risk assessment process. The lack of understanding of how to apply contextual information is evident in the way officers describe their approach to completing the risk assessments.
- Significant risks arising from the current approach including to the organisational reputation, individual officer well-being, and the safety of victims.

Methods

- 7 Focus Groups – Police Constables, Trainers, Detective Constables, Detective Inspectors /Inspectors, Neighbourhood Police Teams and Detainee Investigation Teams
- 4 Interviews – Wellbeing leads and one trainer
- Review of DA Matters training materials
- Access and review of any supplementary learning resources
- Discussions with colleagues delivering the Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) at University West of England
- Oversight of local Wellbeing Strategy and local policies

Findings

The learning climate is transactional and there is limited blending of formal learning into operational relevance

The professionalisation of policing through further education and the Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) aimed to improve the police response to complex crimes and embed a more consistent approach for the public.¹⁴ Currently the learning and development climate resulting from the PEQF is not effectively linking the formal knowledge delivered to officers with either the practical policing tools or the complex and different contexts of domestic abuse. The relationship with learning is transactional and this creates an overreliance on informal knowledge and the use of intuition as officers do not necessarily see where the conceptual learning they acquire in a formal learning environment applies to the practices or the victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.

‘There’s a big gap in terms of you get taught about things at university and it gives you an understanding. But I found it quite hard to be able to use that in learning practically in the job.’

Limited contextual understanding about domestic abuse, in part, explains why patterns are missing and logged as separate incidents. The lack of application of formal learning is compounded by the value placed on more experiential knowledge gained over time as a serving officer. This results in more significance being placed on intuition and experiential knowledge than formal learning. Where different forms of knowledge are present, there is a requirement to “weave them together” as new knowledge in policing is always assessed through the lens of experiential and local knowledge.¹⁵ As this officer claims:

‘You do learn by doing the job, it’s a vocation and I think this is what we seem to have lost. We have turned policing – and I appreciate you’re academics – but we have turned policing into an academic subject, whereas policing is a vocation.’

The completion of risk assessments, peer review and the opportunities for reflective practice

In addition to the limited blending of formal learning with standard police procedures there is very limited feedback given to officers when they deal with domestic abuse, allowing no space for reflection and informal learning. Establishing routine points for critical reflection at stages of rape and serious sexual offending investigations has been shown to promote action-based learning with options to change the direction of decision making, if required.¹⁶ The need for feedback and reflection was central in this research, particularly in the context of risk assessments.

'I think when we're writing them it's like a one-way street, you're writing a BRAG or a DASH and it gets sent off, but no-one asks you any questions backwards. You never get feedback from your BRAGs or DASH whether you've done a good one or a bad one, it's gets sent off, but nothing comes back to you.'

Officers do not receive sufficient support to facilitate the application of formal knowledge about the contexts of domestic abuse when they complete risk assessment forms. Furthermore, the lack of feedback they are given on their work leaves the process transactional and a 'tick-box' exercise where the completion of the form becomes the outcome as opposed to it being a tool to drive further safeguarding activity. This results in officers applying their own assumptions to this process:

'It's your perception isn't it, the risk? We don't get any training, and I find that quite challenging, to be honest because how do I know? I often have this argument, how do I know what the risk is? I can look at previous but if there isn't any, we don't have the tools I don't think to assess it properly.'

Learning is disjointed and lacks connectivity

Currently the learning officers receive in relation to domestic abuse is considered insufficient by the officers interviewed. The foundational core knowledge, attitudes and skills required for this complex crime are not delivered in a sequenced manner from the start of an officer's career which is then built on through the career journey.

'I can't recall any kind of specialist approaches on, "Okay this is your first time meeting a victim of DA, let's think about approaching it this way," or "Let's make sure we're covering these points." I don't think that exists.'

Officers are not equipped with the specialist knowledge required to respond to domestic abuse effectively. As demonstrated with rape and sexual offences in Soteria¹⁷ learning is not prioritised over demand and continues to be viewed as an abstraction. We found no evidence of sequenced continuous professional development related to domestic abuse which should reinforce the foundational knowledge delivered through the PEQF and the specialist DA Matters course. Officers who had received this training had predominantly forgotten its content.

'I recognise the name of it, but I can't remember going to a specific DA Matters Day, or having one online, to be honest.'

The lack of specialist knowledge and level of demand impacts on levels of emotional labour and professionalism

As discussed with Pillar 1's findings, the level of complex demand, particularly at patrol level, coupled with the limited specialist knowledge held by the officers, is leading to

high levels of emotional labour. Offices feel intense responsibility for the victims they are handling, and they are aware that they cannot currently dedicate the time needed to victims of domestic abuse.

‘Sometimes you can’t help them, or sometimes they don’t want your help. I find when I come away from those situations, I probably end up dwelling on that more because I know they’re left in either a sad home life or a dangerous situation, and that tends to bother me more than gruesome scenes or things like that.’

Officers’ sense of professionalism is being affected by their inability to deal with the complexities of domestic abuse, which is compounded by their perceived inability to effectively support the victims. They do not feel competent and capable to deliver what is needed in the field and this impacts negatively on their wellbeing.

‘I know I go home, and I think a lot about the job. Not that it’s having an effect on me, but you do go away kind of thinking, ‘Oh, I should have done this. I could have done this maybe a bit better.’

The inability to effectively understand the complexity of domestic abuse is also impacting on the completion of risk assessments. Currently the DASH form is used transactionally and any formal learning that should facilitate context led approaches is limited due to the chasm between conceptual knowledge and police practice. The result of this is that the risk assessments are considered the outcome rather than a tool to drive further safeguarding activity.

‘You’re thinking, “She’s got her phone, she’s got her panic alarm in, she’s been given this, she’s been given that. The victim contact officer, she’s got a great relationship with her,” so you kind of leave knowing that everything’s been properly done and resourced. Whereas we’re kind of going home to constantly think, “Oh, I wonder if he’s going to kill her?”

Wellbeing

The findings indicate a genuine need for salient and meaningful strategies at a local level for officers who respond to domestic abuse. There is a huge commitment locally to address wellbeing and recent positive action in this space was clear. However, the strategies and policies lacked salience with the officers who questioned the genuine nature of the wellbeing offer. Officers described an inability to speak out about their experiences and local assumption that they would deal with the issues themselves. Hence the current input was considered as ‘lip service’ and that the current reality for officers misunderstood.

‘I think it became a bigger issue for me when I became a detective and I really struggled with the workload and the culture within that environment, and the

expectation that you are superhuman and you can, you know, absolutely be on top of the investigations, you should work 20 hours a day and you're rubbish if you can't achieve that, and so that caused me some problems.'

Given the issues with demand alluded to by other Pillars, there is clear evidence of the need for improvements in the wellbeing space. Officers felt that the realities of working practices and the demands that affect them were not heard by the senior team.

'I don't think they have a real understanding of particularly them, and then also with us the number of crimes that we hold, the pressure that we're under on our duty days, the overtime that everybody's doing. I don't think there's a real understanding of that.'

Implications

Learning and Development for domestic abuse is inefficient and there are missed opportunities to tie key concepts and practices together, from recruit training onwards. A more coherent scaffolded process which builds on foundational knowledge at the start of officers' careers would be more efficient and effective for officers, the police organisation and the victims of domestic abuse. There is a specialist national curriculum for domestic abuse in 'DA Matters'. However, officers report limited recollection of the content and, given learning from Soteria and its relevance to domestic abuse, this curriculum needs a thorough review. The Pillar 4 review of this national domestic abuse learning material concluded that there is limited evidence in the curriculum for content relating to conducting context-led investigations or the use of digital evidence. These factors are imperative for understanding domestic abuse particularly in relation to risk assessment and initial investigations. Given the findings from Pillar 1 about the volume of complex cases that response officers are holding, this is concerning. In the curriculum review there was no evidence of learning related to adult vulnerability, referrals and multi-agency working – these gaps need addressing urgently.

Wellbeing activity nationally needs to be more focused on prevention. Forces need support to develop transformational plans over lists of activities which lack salience with the workforce. There is limited understanding of how activity maps to outcomes and no clear process for monitoring progress. Problem definition and the collection of data on wellbeing is very limited.

Pillar 5 Data and performance

Summary

- There are two contexts subsumed under domestic abuse: family violence (FV) and intimate partner violence (IPV). These are very different suspect-victim relationships, but they are currently responded to by police in the same way.
- Justice goals for FV and IPV victims are different but, in both cases, victims often contact the police for reasons other than an investigation, yet this is the only basis for performance metrics.
- Investigations for IPV can be impaired by an approach marked by ‘incidentalism’. There is little recognition that an incident often takes place within a wider pattern of abuse.
- Headline recorded crime statistics mask a series of complexities and may be misleading.
- There are a range of data issues that make it hard to conduct strategic analysis on police domestic abuse data.

Methods

Pillar 5’s work on Project Bright Light drew primarily on two data sources. To gain an overview of the volume and nature of domestic abuse cases Avon & Somerset Police are dealing with we analysed a large dataset of over 100,000 domestic abuse-flagged cases from a 3-year period (all incidents and crimes coming into Avon & Somerset Police during 2022-24). This was supplemented by in-depth case file analysis of a smaller subset of 153 of these cases, all finalised in October 2024. In addition, we conducted several interviews with police staff working in strategic roles relating to data and performance, crime recording and communications. We also reviewed key force documents and policies relating to domestic abuse with relevance to data and recording.

Findings

There are two primary domestic abuse contexts requiring a different response

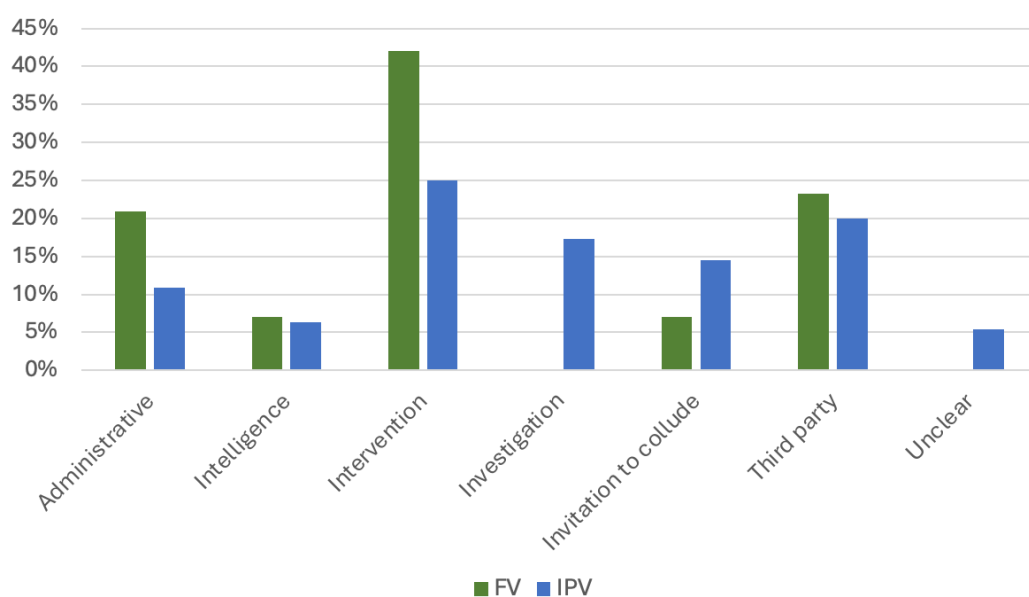
As other Pillars have found, the concept of domestic abuse as defined by the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) is incoherent, creating tensions and unintended consequences in practice. In line with the statutory definition of domestic abuse, we found two primary contexts under the broader umbrella heading of domestic abuse: family violence (FV) and intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV makes up around two thirds of domestic abuse

and FV around one quarter (other relationship types make up the remainder). Both contexts currently receive the same crime recording, flagging, risk assessment and police processes.

In terms of data, this is creating confusion and distorting the real nature of police-recorded domestic abuse crime. For example, the 'personally connected' element of the definition combines family perpetrators (such as siblings or cousins) with intimate partner perpetrators. Because the Act states that domestic abuse can be a single incident, one-off crimes committed by family perpetrators are being responded to in the same way as long-term patterns of abuse committed by current or ex-partners. However, these are different contexts—for the suspect, the victim, and the investigation. They are different suspect-victim relationships with different characteristics committing very different forms of perpetration. They require a different policing response.

A telling example of this contrast can be seen when looking at the different 'justice goals'¹⁸ of victims, that is what they are seeking from police contact. These goals can extend beyond an investigation or exclude an investigation entirely, yet most police performance is only measured against whether an investigation proceeded to charge. This means there is not currently a wholly victim-centred approach to performance measurement for domestic abuse. While justice goals differ between individual victims, we found there are also key differences between the two primary domestic abuse contexts (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Victims' justice goals by primary context (FV and IPV)



Source: Avon & Somerset Police case file dataset

The proportions of IPV and FV victims who wanted the details logged for intelligence but not for the case to be formally investigated, and who had the report made by a third party, were similar. It was much more likely in IPV cases for the contact to police to be made by the primary perpetrator, something we have termed in the figure above as an ‘invitation to collude’, as they are using the system to further abuse by making a report in which they position themselves as the victim.

The most notable finding, though, is that for FV an investigation is rarely, if ever, wanted: of the cases we looked at there were no FV victims who contacted the police directly seeking an investigation. Instead, many FV victims wanted the police to provide an intervention to diffuse or end what was happening or had contacted the police for support with an ongoing problem, such as a family member’s mental ill health or a need for separate housing. Though this was also seen for some IPV victims, who contacted the police seeking an intervention outside of a criminal justice response, such as civil protection, it was more common in cases of FV.

Below is an example of an officer describing one FV victim’s justice goals. In this case, another family member had contacted the police about the victim’s daughter, who was the suspect.

‘She stated that she never reported the matters to us, as it is her daughter and it is not a decision she takes lightly however she did say that something had to be done as she could not manage any more [...She] declines to make a statement to police purely because she doesn’t want to go to court against her daughter and that she wants her daughter to get some help.’

This case was flagged as domestic abuse and closed under outcome 16, which is often taken to mean the victim withdrew support from the investigation. Performance metrics would typically see this outcome as evidence of a failed justice response. However, what we can see here is that an investigation was, in fact, never wanted, similar to Operation Soteria findings on ‘telling not reporting’ in rape cases.¹⁹ Additional ways of measuring performance against the different justice goals of domestic abuse victims are needed, as is a greater recognition that the outcome of an investigation alone is a very narrow metric for a victim-centred policing response, particularly in cases of FV.

Incidentalism is obstructing crime detection and investigation

Jeff Hearn²⁰ coined the term ‘incidentalism’ in his work on perpetrators of domestic abuse to describe how they explained their abuse as ‘incidental’ or ‘only an incident’. We saw a similar approach in the case files, again partly encouraged by the wording of the statutory domestic abuse definition, which encompasses a single incident. Patterns of previous crimes/incidents from the same suspect against the same victim were common in the domestic abuse-flagged cases we looked at, especially in IPV cases, but these previous records were not being joined up in the investigation. Rather, they were

being seen as a string of single incidents. Therefore, building on Hearn's concept of incidentalism, we suggest not only that perpetrators of domestic abuse might dismiss their actions as just an incident or incidental, but also that this is how their behaviours are being recorded in force crime management systems and responded to by operational policing. As Pillar 1 found, patrol officers rarely have time to access and understand the bigger picture of what they are responding to. This is being compounded by police data systems that make it difficult for officers to easily see a historical overview of the suspect and victim.

We found evidence that the offence of Coercive and Controlling Behaviour (CCB) – a course of conduct crime, by definition – is also being investigated as an incident, making it extremely difficult to evidence. For example, we saw cases not meeting the threshold of a crime even though the case history suggested there had been a pattern of recent domestic abuse that could evidence the type of course of conduct that constitutes CCB. It appears that officers are expecting to respond to an incident that will evidence a course of conduct (and thus the offence), rather than understanding that CCB can emerge through bringing together previous incidents that have been recorded about this suspect against this victim. Some of these previous incidents may have been crimed, investigated or not proceeded with. This should not mean they cannot be used as part of the course of conduct needed to evidence the crime of CCB. Greater explanation and clarification of this, including more guidance on how to evidence CCB across previous police contacts with victims and suspects, is needed to improve its detection. More systematic analysis of domestic abuse-related non-crime incidents is also needed to explore the potential for under-criming due to incidentalism.

Police-recorded crime statistics on domestic abuse are misleading

From our research with Avon & Somerset Police we uncovered several factors affecting the integrity of police-recorded statistics on domestic abuse, most of which we believe are national issues.

Firstly, we noted a tendency to flag/record domestic abuse 'just in case', both because of the overly broad statutory definition and the wider climate of formal scrutiny of recording practices and of promoting recording in the wake of HMICFRS inspections. As noted earlier, cases are being flagged as domestic abuse that have a perpetrator who is a stranger or acquaintance, which does not match the definition. Meanwhile some FV cases involved a single argument or incident of criminal behaviour, and it was unclear how this constituted domestic abuse other than being committed by a family member. This raises urgent questions about domestic abuse data integrity and interpretation. Is all crime committed against someone the perpetrator is personally connected to domestic abuse? Is this what the broader public understands to be domestic abuse when they see published crime statistics or are they reading the statistics as meaning something more connected to common understandings of domestic abuse as an ongoing pattern of abuse by a current or ex intimate partner?

Similarly, given the inspection regime and efforts to redress a historic tendency to under-record both domestic abuse and RASSO crimes, many forces now conduct what we have termed 'crime scraping' or looking for additional crimes within crimes to ensure they have all been recorded. The role of Avon & Somerset's Crime Integrity Team's role is to find unrecorded crimes in existing crime reports, including all criminal behaviours recorded in the DASH and at MARAC. This has led to significant volumes of additional crimes being recorded. However, victims have not chosen or intended to report these and are unlikely to support prosecution, again affecting performance metrics and data interpretation. This is made even more problematic by the fact that when victims have chosen to report domestic abuse crimes, they have often not received an effective response.

The final key factor contributing to the misleading nature of police-recorded domestic abuse is the role of counter-allegations. Allegations made by the primary perpetrator in intimate partner domestic abuse (where they are recorded as the victim and the primary victim is listed as a suspect) are not a minor occurrence in the data. In 15% (n=23 of 153) of the case file sample, the person recorded as the victim in this incident was the primary perpetrator in a wider pattern of domestic abuse. This dramatically increases to 73% (n=16 of 22) of cases where female perpetrators are recorded against male victims in an IPV context. This means that of our case file sample almost three-quarters of the crimes recorded as being committed by a female intimate partner in a heterosexual relationship were, in fact, counter-allegations being made by a male primary perpetrator.

Allegations made by primary perpetrators appear to contribute substantially to the overall statistics on male victims of domestic abuse. Of all cases in the case file dataset logged as having a male victim (including both FV and IPV victims), almost half (48%, n=20 of 42) were primary domestic abuse perpetrators. By contrast, just 3% (n=3 of 109) of cases where the victim was recorded as female were, in fact, primary perpetrators.

We found that officers tended to be very good at identifying counter-allegations, meaning that operationally these cases did not take up too much resource. The problem is that these are nevertheless being recorded and counted in the recorded crime data with the primary perpetrator as the victim. These issues increase the volume of domestic abuse and contribute to misrepresenting the profile of perpetration by sex.

Implications

Pillar Five found that the breadth of the statutory definition of domestic abuse is creating problems for policing not just operationally, but also for the quality of policing data and metrics for assessing performance. While both FV and IPV currently form part of the statutory definition, it would be helpful to be able to distinguish between these different contexts clearly in published crime statistics and report on them separately.

Specific context-led guidance should be developed to aid better designed investigations and responses to each. Data quality, and particularly the recording of data on suspect-victim relationship, needs urgently to be tightened to ensure that these different contexts (which are defined by relationship) are clearly and accurately recorded. This would be the basis of any automated flagging or other delineation. There is also a need, stemming from the definition, for much greater clarity about what counts as abuse when the crime is being documented and the domestic abuse flag is being applied, as this will determine the appropriate response. It is essential to move beyond incidentalism when investigating domestic abuse, as individual offences are likely to be part of a wider pattern of behaviour by the suspect.

Finally, we found that current recorded crime figures for domestic abuse are influenced by several complicating factors beyond this conflation of FV and IPV in the statutory definition. These include the flagging of counter-allegations made by primary perpetrators and the drive to record all disclosed crimes, whether or not they have been reported or supported by victims. The impact of these complexities on recorded crime statistics must be recognised and further explored, and current data gaps and quality issues addressed.

Pillar 6 Digital Evidence

Summary

- At a senior command level there was no ownership or oversight of digital capacity, capability or investigations.
- There were both structural and institutional barriers preventing officers from undertaking digitally competent domestic abuse investigations.
- Digital learning and development were described as ‘lacking’, ‘non-existent’ and ‘inadequate’ across all ranks and posts (detectives, civilian investigators and response officers).
- Internal recording systems are not capturing digital data, leaving Avon & Somerset Police with no digital memory or ability to capture digital intelligence.
- Significant Digital Forensic Unit (DFU) backlogs and a lack of digitally competent officers left victims and suspects in some domestic abuse cases waiting over ten months before a case was able to start/progress.

Methods

Pillar 6 used a mixed method approach to undertake a domestic abuse focussed digital ‘deep dive’ to answer the following key questions:

- What formal digital learning and development (L&D) are officers provided with?
- How do officers approach the digital element of a domestic abuse investigation?
- What are the institutional and structural digital enablers and inhibitors?

Data collection included the following:

- In-depth interviews with 17 officers and supervisors
- Three focus groups with domestic abuse investigators, police staff and digital experts (n=12)
- Case file analysis on 159 domestic abuse case files covering the first week of February 2024 and the first week of February 2025
- Analysis on 64 victim (a) Digital Processing Notices and 13 suspect (c) Digital processing Notices
- A review and analysis of all Avon & Somerset Police digital policy and procedure documents
- A rapid evidence review was undertaken using the search terms: “digital evidence” and “domestic abuse” using date parameters from 2015 to 2025

Participants had a range of experience from new in post officers/police staff to long-serving detectives/staff and covered the ranks of police constable, detective constable, sergeant, inspector and equivalent police staff positions. Their range of experience provided us with a unique insight into a diverse range of views, opinions and experiences across the force, and the differing exposure to digital practices, policies, procedures and (digital) learning and development.

Findings

What formal digital learning and development were investigators and response officers provided with?

Digital competence is a key requirement for most police investigations and is a rapidly evolving area of police practice which needs - like many areas of policing - an ongoing investment, both in the technology and upskilling of officers. In the context of a domestic abuse investigation, the absence of a digitally proficient investigator/response officer, can be the difference between a charge or no further action outcome. Findings from interviews with response officers, detectives, and supervisors indicated a fundamental gap in any formal provision for digital learning and development. While programmes such as the Specialist Sexual Assault Investigation Development Programme (SSAIDP) and the Professionalising Investigations Programme Level 1 (PIP1) cover digital material, the inability of participants to recall its content suggests either limited coverage or insufficient impact.

‘The digital stuff (L&D) was like bare bones.’

‘I don’t even consider the digital evidence [in a DA investigation] because we’re just, we’re not trained to do that.’

‘In our role [DA investigator], we kind of just like learn on the job. For example, you know if we’ve got to review a phone download, we don’t get training on how to do that, we just kind of wing our way through it.’

None of the response officer interviewees had received any digital learning or development, with most stating that they had learned “on the job” mainly from colleagues. There was also no formal learning and development available to investigating officers or response officers on how to complete a Digital Processing Notice, how to develop a digital strategy, how to assist victims to know if they are being tracked/monitored by others, or how to investigate the digital element of a domestic abuse investigation involving coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB). This lack of formal digital Learning & Development meant that officers relied heavily on peer-to-peer learning, which whilst valued, was informal, and neither monitored nor able to ensure a consistent approach to digital from all officers.

‘There’s a lot of mixed messages about what you should or shouldn’t do [with time critical digital evidence]. I think everybody does different things. Personally, I wouldn’t be 100% sure if what I’ve done is the correct thing.’

‘We can’t manage those [Coercive and Controlling Behaviour] investigations because we don’t have the resources, nor the training, nor the technology to investigate it properly.’

‘Sometimes I’ve received the phone download, and I don’t know what I’m looking for.’

What did the case files and Digital Processing Notices (DPNs) tell us about how officers approach the digital element of a domestic abuse investigation?

As part of all domestic abuse investigations, officers are expected to create an investigative strategy, in which they highlight their reasonable lines of inquiry, which they document on the investigation case file. Creating a digital strategy allows officers to highlight what devices need to be examined/extracted, the reasoning behind the acquisition of devices, the extraction parameters and the analysis undertaken. These processes should be undertaken in consultation with both the victim and suspect and recorded on the case file. Officers acknowledged that across the force, the development of digital strategies and approaches to analysis, varied considerably, highlighting that no one approach was taught, used or recommended.

Our analysis of the domestic abuse case files found a worrying absence of digital paper trails. In cases where it was evident that a device had been submitted for extraction, there was no record of the associated forms being completed, no indication of where these forms were stored, what had been extracted or analysed and what bearing the analysis had on the investigation. In addition, some of the case files we reviewed appeared to have obvious digital lines of enquiry, but these lines were not pursued, with no explanation noted.

From the case files we found many examples of victims withdrawing their support for the investigation. In these cases, often digital had been mentioned by the victim but officers had not requested (victim) or seized (suspect) any digital devices. This perhaps suggests a link between victim withdrawal and the lack of digital evidence collected, which may have supported the victim’s case.

Another pattern found in the case files, highlighted that digital evidence was often collected for cases considered to be more serious (e.g., threats to kill, grievous bodily harm or other assaults with injury), compared with less serious/non-notifiable offences, which often lacked any digital data collection. In the cases where no digital data was

collected, there was an increase in victim withdrawal from the investigation. Whilst we cannot state with certainty that the two are linked, the finding highlights the need for a closer examination of the case files.

In cases involving CCB, analysis of the case files highlighted a number of missed digital opportunities. In these investigations, officers often overlooked the evidential potential of digital devices beyond mobile phones, potentially highlighting a lack of understanding of CCB and how digital devices are often used to perpetrate this type of offending, equally, they can also be invaluable to the investigation.

What are the institutional and structural digital enablers and inhibitors?

Understanding the institutional and structural digital enablers and inhibitors provides Senior Command Teams (SCT) with an evidence base to reshape and strengthen their force digital portfolio. In an area where technical and digital advances develop at an unprecedented speed, these factors shape how investigators identify, collect, analyse, and prepare digital material for disclosure within domestic abuse investigations.

1. Digital Enabler: Digital Media Investigators and Advisors

A key institutional enabler at Avon & Somerset Police was the introduction of Digital Media Investigators (DMIs) and Digital Media Advisors (DMAs). Officers consistently described these officers/staff as *“invaluable”* and *“a really useful learning resource”*. Their expertise was especially valued in complex domestic abuse cases involving large volumes or multiple types of digital material. However, limited staffing meant their input was generally reserved for the most challenging investigations, as officers were reluctant to *“overwhelm”* them.

2. Digital Inhibitor: A Lack of Strategic Digital Leadership

The digital portfolio cuts across IT infrastructures, investigative capability, information management, and data protection. Without a senior force lead who can break down silos, align digital practices with national strategies, and ensure that the needs of frontline officers and detectives are properly understood and resourced, digital is likely to be left *‘wanting’*. A SCT digital leader will be able to ensure there is an organisational commitment to digital confidence and continuous learning and development, whilst also overseeing disclosure commitments are properly understood when dealing with digital data, and that digital data is handled with integrity. In addition, a digital SCT officer will be able to ensure there is a robust digital governance and risk management structure embedded within the force ethical framework.

3. Digital Inhibitor: Digital Competence in the Investigation of Domestic Abuse

There was a clear consensus among response officers, detectives, and digital specialists that the current force structure for investigating domestic abuse cases was not functioning effectively. Participants reported that the current model placed considerable and often unsustainable pressure on officers and police staff, which was exacerbated by ongoing specialist digital staff retention issues. All participants stated that they were carrying too many cases with no specialist training in the digital element of their domestic abuse investigation, which they believed inhibited them from undertaking an evidentially sound, digitally competent investigation. This was particularly evident among patrol officers, who expressed difficulty in dividing their duties between response and progressing domestic abuse cases; some of which they felt were complex to the point of being beyond their role remit. Many participants expressed frustration at their limited digital skills and articulated a strong desire to undertake this aspect of their investigative work with greater confidence and proficiency.

4. Digital Inhibitor: The Force Niche system

Another significant inhibitor was the Niche system, which was described as “*outdated*” “*difficult*” and “*clumsy*” to navigate. Officers highlighted that the absence of a digital “home” within Niche or even a dedicated space to deposit digital data meant there was an absence of a coherent digital case file within the current case file management system, leading to an absence of digital force intelligence. In addition, officers were unable to complete DPN forms online, as they were not digitised, and the paper copies remained paper copies with no digital access to them. which again resulted in incomplete records of digital enquiries and missing DPNs, leading to a constraint on the force’s ability to maintain any oversight of digital evidence.

5. Possible Digital Enabler: The Development of a Digital Case File Management System

Encouragingly, the Police Digital Service (PDS) is currently developing a Digital Case File system, which they state will streamline the creation and sharing of case materials, including DPNs, which they state will be “compatible with Niche and will replace physical forms with digital case files integrated with force and CPS systems and with legislative requirements built in”.

6. Digital Inhibitor: Placing a Digital Burden on Victims

In some cases, victims were asked to provide their own digital material (e.g., already selected Ring doorbell footage, screenshots of relevant texts, and photos). Whilst many victims may find this empowering, it needs to be approached on a case-by-case basis. For some victims, such a request might feel overwhelming, they may not, however, feel they can voice their apprehension to an already overburdened officer. In other cases,

victims may miss digital data, which might have an evidential importance, in other cases the evidence may be sensitive, which they then decide not to send. Officers were cautious about asking victims to send in digital data as they too recognised that it could be viewed as shifting the investigative responsibility inappropriately to the victim, whilst also creating practical barriers where victims lacked the technical skills or willingness to share material

7. Digital Inhibitor: Forensic Capacity Constraints

Delays within the regional DFU, combined with a device backlog at the force DFU, coupled with the inability to access some phone models, created a strain on many domestic abuse investigations. Backlogs could be reduced if more officers/police staff are trained to undertake Level 1 phone downloads and provided with the learning and development to be digitally competent enough to assist colleagues around simple digital queries such as time critical digital evidence. Triaging digital devices to determine which may/may not assist the investigative strategy may also reduce the backlogs at both regional and force level. Undertaking triaging will, however, need officers to feel confident in their digital competence.

Implications

Fifteen years ago, digital data was viewed as the periphery element of a criminal investigation. Now, the volume of personal data and digital material held on digital devices, cloud storage, and the Internet of Things has amplified at such an unprecedented rate that over 90% of recorded crime now has a digital element.²¹

The digital challenges facing the police today are a web of interconnected issues relating not only to equipping the police with the necessary technology to access and extract relevant data, but also to provide police officers and staff with the necessary skills and training to be able to tackle the investigative challenges digital data poses.

The structural and institutional inhibitors identified by Pillar 6, included limited digital capability, the absence of clear strategic leadership, and outdated digital systems, which, unfortunately, are not unique to Avon & Somerset Police, but reflect a wider, system-level issue within and across the 43 forces. Progress in embedding digital competence and creating digital force systems able to capture digital intelligence, to inform future policing, must be central to realising strategic objectives²² and the need for a holistic digital approach to investigative effectiveness, consistency, and public confidence in policing.

Supporting this view, a recent government publication²³ found, across the public sector, the same digital inhibitors at a national level, that we found in Avon & Somerset Police. These included:

- Public sector services are under-digitised
- Across the public sector technology is fragmented and duplicative
- Digital data is fragmented and underused
- Critical services depend on decades-old legacy technology
- Funding models do not reflect modern digital practice
- Cloud adoption is concentrated in central government; and interestingly,
- The public sector spends less on technology than House of Lord Peers.

Like our work in Avon & Somerset Police, which found many dedicated officers and police staff working to improve the current digital situation, the Government review highlighted that:

‘(Digital) successes are too often achieved despite the system rather than because of it. They rely on the dedication of experts doing their best with limited resources, navigating processes which were not designed for a digital age and implementing policies which were not designed to be digital first.’

The Government report concluded by stating:

‘As we move into a new era of opportunities created by artificial intelligence (AI) and other technology innovations, we must take a realistic and unflinching view of how much more we have to do to create a modern digital government and reform public services.’

Considering the similarities in the identified barriers from this Government review as well as Project Bright Light, policing must now, not only prioritise improving its current digital capability, but also adopt a horizon scanning/future-proofing approach to avoid falling irreversibly behind in an ever-increasing digitalised world.

Conclusion

The Bright Light research involved close police-academic collaboration during an intensive period of fieldwork with the aim of generating new insights into how the police response to domestic abuse can be dramatically improved. To that end, our [national policy recommendations](#) were disseminated in July 2025. Together, these are intended to promote the delivery of *victim-centred*, *suspect-focused*, and *context-led* policing of domestic abuse, which are key principles that were derived from Operation Soteria and embedded within the National Operating Model for rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) cases. This section provides a concluding discussion of the key Pillar-specific findings arising from Bright Light.

First, it is worth briefly revisiting the broader landscape which led to this project being instigated by Avon & Somerset Police. Against a backdrop of a diminished policing workforce has been a significant rise in the number of domestic abuse offences coming to police attention. In the past decade, the volume of domestic abuse has more than doubled and is now more voluminous, complex, and digitally-enabled than ever before. Alongside terrorism and serious and organised crime, it was recently designated as a national strategic policing priority by the Home Office.²⁴ However, the capacity and capability of police ‘on the ground’ to rise to this challenge is markedly compromised. The overall policing workforce has only recently returned to pre-austerity levels, when domestic abuse was much smaller fraction of police business. Now, a third of officers have less than 5 years of service and the shortage of detectives has been deemed a “national crisis”.²⁵ These problems have disproportionately impacted upon the public protection portfolio, which includes domestic abuse, and which was recently described as “the most beleaguered of all frontline policing”.²⁶ The overwhelming majority (95%) of domestic abuse offences are finalised without a perpetrator held to account for their behaviour,²⁷ and trust and confidence in the police’s ability to keep domestic abuse victims safe is at an all-time low.

Far from being *victim-centred*, Bright Light showed how the current approach is process-driven, risk-focused and reactive. Echoing decades of research, we found that victims still feel that they are not listened to, not taken seriously, and put at risk by police action or inaction. National efforts must continue to address organisational challenges in policing that underpin poor victim service, championing an ethos of it being ‘everyone’s business’ to engage positively with victims. More work is urgently required to develop new tools, guidance, and products to enable officers to deliver a ‘victim-centred’ and ‘victim-led’ approach to DA. This includes developing a contextual understanding of ‘positive action’ which better addresses victims’ goals, safety and interests.

Far from being *suspect-focused*, we observed a mismatched patchwork of outcomes, provision and approaches which mainly resulted in nothing significant happening with domestic abuse suspects. This helps explain how, in 21st century Britain, only a tiny fraction of perpetrators is ever held to account for their abusive behaviour. Furthermore, the lack of a strong strategic grip on responses to domestic abuse suspects results in many policing decisions directly or indirectly compounding the harm experienced by victims. More work is required to understand how everyday policing interactions can be reframed as deterrence-focused interventions. An urgent policing discussion, in partnership with multi-agency partners and academics, is needed to develop best practice for effective deterrent and diversion of suspects at all risk levels not only those deemed to be at highest risk.

Far from being *context-led*, operational policing was instead revealed to conflate different victim-suspect relationship contexts in its delivery. Consequently, meaningful distinctions between types of cases (e.g., intimate partner violence, family violence, honour-based violence) and their corresponding safeguarding concerns and justice goals do not routinely inform the investigative process. The current policing model needs to be urgently reoriented to enable better recognition of and responses to these different domestic abuse contexts. Part of this shift would require the tools, training and interventions available to officers to be adapted so that officers are explicitly supported to undertake context-led investigations. More work is also needed to develop methods of improving the identification and recording of victim-suspect relationships.

Building on Operation Soteria, Bright Light has reinforced the importance of key ‘enablers’ necessary for moving policing substantially closer to the three principles described above. Driving forward meaningful, sustained and positive change to the policing of domestic abuse will require: a learning environment that sufficiently prepares current and future generations of officers to deal with the complex and different contexts of domestic abuse and a recognition of how this impacts positively on wellbeing; data of sufficient quality and accessibility for accurate and timely strategic analysis of what is a deepening epidemic; and the ability to deliver digitally competent, forensically compliant investigations at scale. Without national leadership, new investment, and a coherent approach to addressing the systemic issues described in this report, the contemporary British policing response to domestic abuse will continue to result in inconsistent and inappropriate responses to victims, missed opportunities for disruption and deterrence of perpetrators, and negative impacts from ill-equipped patrol officers.

Directions for future research

Broader research and consultation with multiple forces is essential to ensure that any changes made to respond to these challenges are effective, consistent and widely applicable. This should include expanding the collaborative action research approach of Project Bright Light to a wider range of forces to explore the nature and extent of the national challenges identified, as well as force-specific issues, contexts and opportunities.

Endnotes

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¹³ See also Johnson, K. and Hohl, K. (2023). Police responses to domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic: Positive action and police legitimacy. *Policing*, 17(1): <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paac108>

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