

September 2021

Dear Home Secretary,

**Re. HMICFRS report: Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic**

Can I thank the inspectors at HMICFRS for this report – one of several recently released examining the police’s response to crimes which are predominantly experienced by women and girls. The safety of women and girls in West Yorkshire is of great concern to the Mayor and myself, forming a key pledge at the heart of the mayoral manifesto.

In West Yorkshire we have been able to instigate a number of important initiatives to safeguard and support victims of domestic abuse, and challenge the perpetrators of these offences. This has included the establishment of a network of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), and a Domestic Abuse Protection Order Team at West Yorkshire Police. Some of our work has been assisted by members of the MCA’s West Yorkshire Safeguarding Communications Group and Independent Domestic Abuse Scrutiny Panel.

In 2019, we delivered a key project from our Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy by commissioning the first West Yorkshire-wide domestic abuse perpetrators programme. This service provides a rehabilitation pathway targeted at first time or standard risk offenders, and is designed to break the cycle of domestic abuse at an early stage.

Investment in new services has continued on into 2021, with the announcement of further funding to extend perpetrator programmes in West Yorkshire, and an increase in IDVA support to both male and female victims in need.

This report reflects last year’s concerns that the unprecedented conditions of the pandemic could have led to an increase in offending which takes place away from public view, such as domestic abuse, and child exploitation or abuse. As a consequence, the PCC for West Yorkshire made supporting the delivery of our commissioned services to victims a priority during the early stages of the pandemic. This approach was applied throughout 2020 to ensure that crucial services to vulnerable people stayed in place throughout the Covid emergency.

In the following pages, I will address the specific recommendations for improvements to police practice made by HMICFRS in this report, and outline West Yorkshire Police’s current response:

## **Recommendation 1**

*We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should immediately introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework.*

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WYP have been recognised leaders in use of online contact methods. Victims of domestic abuse can access reporting templates from the force's homepage, and view detailed information of when it is appropriate to use online forms to report a domestic abuse incident. This information is available in a number of formats to make it as accessible as possible, and the reporting forms contain the option to ask for an interpreter.

The information provided at this point acts as an initial filter to reduce risk and increase effective management of those reports that arrive with WYP's Contact Team. Additionally there are signposts to partner agencies and services that can assist victims of domestic abuse, as well as offering advice on protection.

An effective reporting and monitoring framework is already in place at WYP. Once a report is submitted, it generates an email to the WYP Customer Contact Centre mailbox, where staff grade the report based on THRIVE (Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability, Engagement) criteria. At the starting point, all domestic abuse incidents will result in an in-person visit, and careful consideration of risk factors are taken into account, which are reviewed by a supervisor. If further information comes to light, a THRIVE assessment can be made again to ensure the risks to the victim are mitigated.

## **Recommendation 2**

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

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West Yorkshire Police's Witness Care Unit (WCU) monitors trial caseloads and witness lists, in conjunction with our criminal justice partners. The Covid 19 pandemic had a significant impact on the Criminal Justice System as whole. Court capacity, social distancing measures and Covid restrictions resulted in delays in getting cases to trial. By November 2020, the number of victims and witnesses for pending trials had doubled in size from pre-pandemic levels, despite 'surge' funding to provide further staffing.

Pre-COVID victim attrition rates were indicating a positive downward trend as a result of our commitment to provide a service above and beyond the minimum requirement. However, the backlog in the Criminal Justice System due to the pandemic has meant the WCU team has not been able to provide the same level of service. For example, the frequency of victim contact has had to be reduced; and the time available for staff to build a rapport with victims has lessened.

However, it is important to note that despite the increased volumes and the lengthy delays in trials, we have continued to maintain the minimum requirement, even over significantly extended periods. IDVA services have remained in place during the pandemic (and in some districts provision has increased), and the MCA have secured funding for additional IDVA support, including exploring their use in non-traditional settings such as hospital A&E departments.

WYP have ensured that IDVA provision and the signposting, engagement and use of IDVAs is promoted, and this is included in more detail in the new Domestic Abuse Tactical Delivery Plan sitting under the Protecting Vulnerable People Strategic Plan.

### **Recommendation 3**

*We recommend that all forces immediately review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions.*

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West Yorkshire Police has undertaken audit work to understand its use of Outcome 16 (victim does not support a prosecution) in domestic abuse cases. 250 cases were audited in May 2021, and 249 were found to have the outcome correctly applied. Initial investigation and engagement with victims was deemed to be effective in most cases, and supervisory oversight and direction was evident in 90% of cases, however the force has identified that in 20% of cases, the victim's reasons for *withdrawal* of support were not effectively recorded. During PEEL continuous assessment and fieldwork, the force could provide examples of where evidence-led prosecution had been pursued or considered with some successful outcomes.

WYP has also been asked by HMICFRS to provide evidence of scrutiny of the use of Outcome 15 (insufficient evidence for a prosecution), and work on this is ongoing.

The Mayor and I are keen to hear from local voices on issues such as stalking, domestic abuse, sexual offences, honour-based abuse, and safety in public spaces, and we want to know how we can bring about the behavioural change, which will influence attitudes towards women and girls in wider society. The conversations we are having with victims, communities, practitioners, and partners in the police and criminal justice services are crucial as we work to develop the new Police and Crime Plan 2021-2024, which features the safety of women and girls as a cross-cutting theme across all four proposed priorities for policing and safety in West Yorkshire.

We will continue to monitor and evaluate the police's response to domestic abuse - informed by this report – through our normal bilateral and public scrutiny channels in the months ahead.

Yours,



Alison Lowe

Deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire for Policing and Crime