

# Barking & Dagenham



## Barking and Dagenham Domestic Abuse Commission Report

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# Councillor Maureen Worby



“Domestic abuse has a huge and profound impact on communities within Barking and Dagenham and is an issue close to my heart. The costs are too high for individuals, families, to our community and to services – and they have been for too long. Our health, social care and wider services see the impact of domestic abuse everyday. The prevalence of domestic abuse in Barking and Dagenham is too high.



Although domestic abuse has been a priority for our political leadership, I knew we needed to go further. We’ve tried many things to tackle domestic abuse, yet our police reported rates are still the highest in London. This is why I was keen to launch the commission – we needed an independent panel of experts to help us look at the attitudes in the community to domestic abuse and our response.”



## Our Commissioners



**Polly Neate CBE – Chair**

Polly Neate is Chief Executive of Shelter, the homelessness and housing charity which defends the right to a safe home, working with individuals, in communities and across society. She is an influential commentator on housing, women's rights, leadership and wider social justice issues, and is a trustee of Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk. She was previously Chief Executive of Women's Aid, where she raised the profile of domestic abuse, including successfully campaigning for coercive and controlling abuse to be made a crime.

Throughout Polly's career she has influenced governments and campaigned for policy change and social justice and has regularly appeared in the media and on platforms as diverse as the Oxford Union and the first Women's March London. Between 2005 and 2013 she was Executive Director of External Relations and Communications at Action for Children, one of the UK's largest charities, where she also led major organisational change programmes. Polly is a journalist by profession and won national awards for both journalism and campaigning. For several years she has been voted one of the Top 30 charity CEOs on social media and can be followed on Twitter at @pollyn1 and on Instagram at @pollyatshelter



**Simon Blake OBE**

Simon Blake has been Chief Executive Officer of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England CIC since October 2018, leading the organisation to achieve its vision of normalising society's attitudes and behaviours around mental health, through training one in ten of the population in Mental Health First Aid skills.

Simon has worked on some of today's most complex social issues; sex and relationships education, sexual and reproductive rights, volatile substance abuse, Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship and LGBT rights.

Simon has over 20 years experience of working with young people through his roles at the Sex Education Forum, National Children's Bureau, sexual health and wellbeing charity Brook and, most recently, as Chief Executive of the National Union of Students (NUS). He has written over 40 publications on all aspects of PSHE and Citizenship.

Simon received an OBE in 2011 for his services to the voluntary sector and young people. He is Deputy Chair at Stonewall, Governor at Bath Spa University, a Companion of the Chartered Management Institute and a Fellow at Windsor Castle Society of Leadership Fellows.



**Becky Rogerson MBE**

Becky Rogerson is CEO of My Sisters Place in Middlesbrough. Currently on secondment to Wearside Women in Need (WWiN), delivering an improvement plan to refuge, outreach and well-being services for women and children.

Becky has held her substantive post at My Sisters Place since 2004, supporting the charity to develop from a small independent Home Office pilot site, to a substantial service with a national best practice profile.

Previous experience includes ten years as a serving magistrate in the adult criminal court; probation service employment in prison and community settings, and the design and delivery of Voluntary Sector Perpetrator Programmes.

Becky is a Winston Churchill Fellow, specialising in 'Criminal Justice and Community Responses to Domestic Abuse in the Americas'; and presented as an 'expert' at the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue in Beijing (2017) on the role of Civil Society in Domestic Violence Law Reforms.



**Amna Abdullatif**

Amna Abdullatif is a community psychologist who has worked with communities, children and women for over 14 years. She is currently the lead for Children and Young People at Women's Aid Federation England, a leading national charity in the UK which focuses its work on domestic violence, supporting women and children.

Amna led the Safer Futures project at Women's Aid in the UK, which aims to promote and support the education of young people about domestic violence and healthy relationships. Amna currently runs training to support specialists working with pregnant women and children impacted by domestic abuse.

Amna is a local councillor, a campaigner and activist for women's rights, with interest in foreign policy and its impact on women, specifically the Middle East and North Africa, and has had her thesis paper published in the Journal of Social Science Education.



**Nicki Norman OBE**

Nicki Norman has over 25 years direct experience of providing, managing and developing local domestic violence services in a range of settings. Nicki has worked for Women's Aid Federation England since 2007, and is Acting Co Chief Executive assisting with all aspects of the national charity's work to end violence against women and children.

Nicki oversees the delivery and development of Women's Aid's direct services which include the National Domestic Violence Helpline, online Survivors' Forum and 'No Woman Turned Away' project. Nicki's remit also includes supporting and representing a national network of around 175 local member organisations providing violence against women services, as well as the National Training Centre and all its work. Currently, Nicki is leading on a national project that is transforming multi-agency responses to domestic abuse in England and Wales – 'Change that Lasts'.



**Jo Todd**

Jo Todd is the founding CEO of Respect, the UK domestic abuse charity providing the national voice on perpetrators, male victims and young people.

Jo has worked in the domestic abuse sector for 26 years, including frontline work supporting survivors, running behaviour change groups for perpetrators, providing clinical supervision and delivering training and consultancy across the UK and abroad, including in Germany, the Republic of Ireland, Mexico and Jordan.

As CEO at Respect for 19 years, Jo has been at the forefront of the development of safe, effective, accountable practice and influencing public policy to ensure better responses to perpetrators that put the survivor at the heart.

Jo has an MA in the Sociology of Gender from Essex University (1992) and qualified as a counsellor in 1999. Jo is co-author of a three-volume practitioner manual, 'Working Towards Safety' (Iwi & Todd, DVIP, 2000) and is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Gender Based Violence which was launched in May 2017.



**Sarah Hughes**

Sarah Hughes has worked in mental health for 28 years and has been the Chief Executive at Centre for Mental Health for over a year now. Having initially trained as a social worker, Sarah has managed a range of innovative community and secure services. She also led the research and evaluation of the pioneering First Night in Custody project in Holloway Prison which saw the roll out of these principles across the prison estate supported by the Cabinet Office.

In recent years, Sarah has led Mind in Cambridgeshire (among other organisations) which is known for values led practice and high impact campaigns including Stop Suicide and Stress LESS.

Sarah is also undertaking a professional doctorate with the Tavistock and Portman Centre studying Women, Resilience and Leadership. She writes a blog and has written many guest pieces for various platforms.

Sarah is passionate about the mental health of the nation and believes it is possible to achieve parity of esteem by drawing on the amazing work already being undertaken across the country.



**Raji Hunjan**

Raji Hunjan is the Program Director for Housing and Homelessness at the Oak Foundation. She was previously the Chief Executive Officer of anti-poverty charity Z2K (Zacchaeus 2000 Trust). She is also the Chair of the Independent London Housing Panel funded by the Trust for London and the GLA. In this capacity she sits on the Mayor's Homes for Londoners Board. In 2018, Raji was a Commissioner on Shelter's Future of Social Housing Commission, and remains committed to campaigning for the building of more social housing as well as tenant voice.

Raji was formerly Operations Director at Inquest and prior to this she was the Director of North Kensington Law Centre. Raji is passionate about empowering people and grassroots action which formed a large part of her work previously as Director of Democracy at the Carnegie UK Trust and at the Hansard Society before that. This includes ensuring that the voices of those who are most excluded from decision making processes are heard.



### Jess Phillips MP

Jess Phillips is a Labour Party MP who has been the MP for Birmingham Yardley since 2015. Jess is a prominent campaigner on issues relating to violence against women and girls. Jess became a councillor in 2012 through the Labour Future Candidates Programme. In this role she worked tirelessly to support residents, with her work being recognised when she became Birmingham's first ever Victims Champion. Jess chairs the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Abuse, which provides a forum for discussion on how policy and legislation relating to domestic violence is affecting survivors and specialist support services.



### Rick Henderson

Rick Henderson is the CEO of Homeless Link and was appointed to that role in July 2012. Prior to this he was the CEO of Action for Advocacy and has a background in advocacy and human rights. He is a member of the government's National Rough Sleeping Advisory Panel and the Mayor of London's Rough Sleeping Task Group. Rick also represents Homeless Link internationally, as a member of FEANTSA - the European homelessness network - and the Housing First Europe Hub. Rick is prolific on Twitter and somehow still manages to find the time to sing and play around with classic cars in his spare time.



### Junior Smart

Ex-offender Junior Smart founded SOS Project, ST Giles Trust, in 2006. The ex-offender led gangs intervention project offers intensive, tailored one-to-one support for young people caught up in the negative vortex of gangs and weapons crime. Initially starting as a small South London pilot, SOS grew over the years to become London's largest gangs exit project assisting over 500 young people annually to break free to gang, gun and knife crime and lead positive, productive lives in the community. The project won multiple awards including the Charity Awards 2014, The Third Sector Excellence Awards 2011, the Centre for Social Justice Awards 2010 and The South London Press Awards 2008. Junior was listed in the Evening Standard's list of 1,000 Influential Londoners in 2014 and 2015 in recognition of campaigning work around the issue of London's gang and serious youth violence problem.

Going back to education, Junior achieved a First Class BA Hons in Youth Work and a First Class Distinction MA in Youth Crime and Justice. Junior also undertook numerous other qualifications in areas including Conflict Resolution, Youth Work, Gangs Work, Substance Misuse and is an accredited PTTLS trainer. Junior is now the Director of Smart Training and Consultancy.



# Introduction



Domestic abuse is a national crisis. The crime survey of England and Wales estimates that one in three women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and on average a woman is killed by her male partner or former partner every four days in the England and Wales. However, domestic abuse prosecutions fell 24% in the last three months of 2019. Domestic abuse affects both men and women, but is a gendered crime, with women more likely to experience domestic abuse and more likely to experience more severe incidents and prolonged patterns of abuse. Despite this, or perhaps because of its gendered dynamics, domestic abuse is not a national political priority. It is deeply rooted in our cultures and its effects are seen not only by specialist domestic abuse services, but in our healthcare, homelessness, substance misuse and child safeguarding services. Everywhere, in fact,

where the trauma survivors experience over many years is seen. Any strategy to defeat domestic abuse must tackle both its effects and its roots.

This Commission set out to discover what a local authority can do, despite the lack of political focus. We set our agenda by the experiences of women who have survived, and tested our findings with them every step of the way.

A few months into our work, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

During the first three weeks of the lockdown in March 2020, 16 women and girls were killed in domestic homicides in the UK, more than three times the number from the same period in 2019. As one of our survivors told us, “you’re at lower risk dying of COVID-19 than you are dying from

your partner killing you.” The national charity Refuge notes that calls to the National Domestic Violence Helpline were up 80% in June. The work of the Commission became even more urgent. For survivors, lockdowns “make me feel that the government is now my abuser”. With the Domestic Abuse Bill now before Parliament, the time is right to show how fundamental change at a local level can happen.

The Commission was set three tasks: to address the cultural normalisation of domestic abuse in the borough; to improve the council’s own services and the services of partners in the borough; and to provide a toolkit for others to use. We wanted to know why survivors weren’t able to get help, despite the usual avenues being available: police, a local commissioned support service, some local charities exist, yet survivors still feel they have nowhere to turn. Real change on abuse will only happen when communities come together to take action against domestic abuse and survivors know they will be believed and will find help.

We brought together national experts, who could draw on local experience and expertise but scrutinise with fresh eyes, with the aim of setting Barking and Dagenham on a radical new path, while also starting a conversation that empowers more local areas to tackle domestic abuse at its root, by sharing how we reached our conclusions. Our commissioners are not only domestic abuse specialists – though several of them are. They are also experts in many of the policy areas and services touched by domestic abuse, such as homelessness, mental health and poverty. The Commission marks a step change in giving survivors the response they deserve within their communities.

Our recommendations are both radical and unsurprising. Radical in that no local area exists with the level of response and focus on culture

change that we recommend. Unsurprising in that the truth is out there. It isn’t surprising because the women’s sector in particular has been arguing for this approach for decades, often without being heard, always without being given the resources to make it happen.

The leadership and transparency Barking and Dagenham Council has shown is impressive. With London’s highest police reported domestic abuse rates, and school surveys in 2017 and again in 2019 showing that 26% of young people thought it was sometimes acceptable to hit your partner, the council wanted to ask some hard questions, and is an ideal case study. But domestic abuse is a national issue and the attitudes and experiences detailed within this report are found across the country – the findings of the Commission should be read with this in mind. Barking and Dagenham is the first area in the country to seek to understand what residents think and have experienced, and to commit to change as a result. Let’s hope it isn’t the last.



## Executive Summary

Through over 55 focus groups with residents and professionals across the borough, the commission has found that domestic abuse is normalised in the community, and that one consequence of this is that domestic abuse survivors often aren't believed by their friends, families and professionals alike.

There is a richness in the qualitative insight that has come out of focus groups and the stories of those we've spoken to through-out our work is woven into this report. There are some headline theme figures that we can draw together to highlight what we've learnt:

- **52 out of 55** groups, including interviews, felt abusive behaviours in relationships were normalised
- **44 out of 55** groups, including interviews, identified they were not explicitly taught about relationships and learned more from what they saw
- **32 out of 55** groups said they learned from family, parents and friends about relationships
- **11 out of 12** of the young people's groups said they learned about relationships from social media
- **All the young persons focus groups** said social media is a way to reach young people
- **34 out of 55**, over 60%, groups had little to no knowledge of coercive control or financial abuse
- **13 out of the 55** groups including interviews identified language barriers as an issue when trying to seek help

Victim blaming with domestic abuse happens in a way that does with very few other crimes - "why don't they just leave?" "what did you do to provoke it?", "I would never get myself into a relationship like that". We all owe it to survivors of domestic abuse to do more about this terrible crime, and amplify survivor voices.

For this reason, the Commission has structured its recommendations as seven outcomes which have been co-produced by our survivors panel. They outline what the experience has been like for survivors of domestic abuse in Barking and Dagenham now, as they've told us. The future outcomes are what survivors in Barking and Dagenham have told us their lives should be like - the vision is for this to be the universal experience in the borough. Telling the stories and experiences of survivors of domestic abuse is a powerful way of no longer "sweeping [domestic abuse]... under the carpet" as Jo Richardson MP noted back in 1983 in the Barking and Dagenham Post. It helps to raise awareness and understanding of the whole experience of survivors, as well as giving survivors the voice they deserve. Below each of these outcomes are recommendations drawn from best practice evidence, wider consultation with survivors, professionals and residents, and data which details specifically what steps the commission recommends should be taken in each of these areas.

The commission has come up with six key principles which should guide any change around domestic abuse. In addition to this, the outcomes shouldn't be taken in isolation but as key areas that should be addressed in relation to domestic abuse moving forward:

- **We believe survivors** - Survivors should be believed as a starting point of any approach.
- **We are led by survivors** - Survivors are at the heart of any approach to domestic abuse. They are consulted and their needs are put at the centre.
- **We focus first on changing behaviour in order to change attitude** - The commission views the best way to change attitudes towards domestic abuse, first to change someone's behaviour. You can make it clear that domestic abuse will not be tolerated



and that tackling domestic abuse is a priority, which can help to change someone's attitude and belief system around domestic abuse.

- **We do not create harm** - We don't create harm by implementing something which tries to help but can have a negative impact because it's not fully developed and co-ordinated with a wider offer.
- **We are feminist and anti-racist** - As the most diverse area in London, a one-size fits all approach won't work. Campaigns, services, and professionals alike need to consider the accessibility for different cultural groups within the borough and need to prioritise anti-racist and feminist approaches.

- **We are trauma informed** - Trauma is inseparably bound up with systems of power and oppression. For people who have experienced trauma in their lives, public services can unwittingly make things worse if they create situations that bring back the trauma or make them feel unsafe. We will make sure Barking and Dagenham Council will strive to change the culture and structure of help and support.



		What is life like for survivors now? Current outcomes	What should your life be like? Future outcomes
Outcome 1	Professionals and services	I didn't know where to get help for domestic abuse. When I have approached services, staff don't believe me or I am blamed for the domestic abuse. I am not referred into domestic abuse specific service, and the police don't believe me. My perpetrator manipulates professionals in the same way as he manipulates me.	I know where to get help from for domestic abuse, and when I do seek help, I feel supported, believed by different services and they don't make me feel as if it is my fault. Services are aware perpetrators may manipulate professionals as well as victims. Tackling domestic abuse is the duty of every professional in Barking and Dagenham.
Outcome 2	Healthy relationships and young people	I never understood what a healthy relationship was – I didn't know the signs or how to respond to it. I was never taught about healthy relationships and domestic abuse in schools or with my friends, and my children aren't taught about healthy relationships and domestic abuse now either.	All young people in Barking and Dagenham understand gender, domestic abuse and relationships through teaching about domestic abuse, gender and relationships in schools and the wider community so they're aware of the signs of domestic abuse and how to respond to it.
Outcome 3	Trauma-informed	I have to repeat my abuse and relive the trauma when re-explaining my story.	I only have to tell my story once to different services and services recognise that it is triggering to retell my story.
Outcome 4	Community awareness	I've found that the community is mixed, with those who understand domestic abuse because they've been through it and those who don't.	Those within the community understand domestic abuse, including those going through it, and the borough has a clear and unified message about its response to domestic abuse.
Outcome 5	Perpetrators and those using abusive behaviours	Survivors are the ones who face the consequences, whilst perpetrators get away with their behaviour. Survivors don't get justice around their perpetrators' behaviours, and perpetrators manipulate those in the criminal justice system.	Perpetrators are both held to account for their actions and have the opportunity for honest conversations to challenge their behaviour through interventions. Survivors have a sense that their abuse has been taken seriously.
Outcome 6	Community Groups and community spaces	I haven't had the opportunity to process and recover from my abuse. I need psychological support and in the meantime I have no support at all.	I feel supported in Barking and Dagenham and can recover from and process my experience, with the support of access to supportive groups/professionals quickly where I need them.
Outcome 7	Child survivors of domestic abuse	I worry about my children not being safe and their needs not being met. I'm concerned about the impact of domestic abuse on my children.	I know my children are safe, and their psychological and emotional needs are met. They are able to thrive.

## A history of Barking and Dagenham



### Why is history relevant to the Commission?

It was important for the Commission's independence that the commissioners should be from outside Barking and Dagenham, able to bring a national perspective, but be advised by the expert group of borough organisations, and of course led by the experiences and views of survivors of domestic abuse from the borough. But because they did not know the borough well, the commissioners were keen to explore and understand more about the history of Barking and Dagenham, particularly in relation to culture, gender and any references to domestic abuse. The Commission aims to understand attitudes in the community, and understanding the sense of place in Barking and Dagenham, both past and present, is a vital piece of context.

### A history

Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneer of women's rights, grew up in Barking and Dagenham and lived here from 1759 until 1868. Her influential book published in 1792 'A vindication of the

rights of woman' is seen as the first to argue for equal rights of men and women: she argues for equal education for both sexes, and speaks vehemently of how women are held back without education. The key to her argument is summed up by the quote: "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" – still relevant today. Partly in recognition of this historic link, since 2015, the council has held a Women's Empowerment Month in March to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of local women.

Annie Huggett, the influential suffragette moved to Barking when she was 10 years old, and played a key role in campaigning for votes for women. She often had members of the Pankhurst family around for tea, including Emmeline Pankhurst, also organising meetings for the cause in the former George Inn in Barking Broadway – known then as the Three Lamps – when she was 18. The Huggett Centre, run by Nia, in Dagenham Heathway was named after her.



More recently, the Commission has focused on Barking and Dagenham's defining history since the First World War. The London County Council built the Becontree housing estate, the first council house estate built under the Addison Act. It was completed in 1935 and was the largest council estate in the world offering "homes for heroes". Today it is still considered the largest council estate in Europe.

Around the same time, in 1931, the Ford Factory opened its doors in Dagenham, employing 58,000 people at its height. After World War One created an imperative for women to work, the inclusion of women in factories played a key role in changing perceptions of women's roles. In 1911, just over 1,000 women in Barking and Dagenham worked in manufacturing. By 1931, almost a third of the factory workforce in the district were women. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, women were conscripted into war work – though still paid less than men, for the same work.

Day nurseries, funded by the government, were opened to care for children while their mothers were at work. At least five nurseries opened in Dagenham during the Second World War, including Eastbury Manor House, which was a nursery from 1942 to the 1960s, and hosted the launch of the Domestic Abuse Commission on 25 September 2019.

The East End Women's Museum carried out a series of interviews on the historic 1968 machine strike. Over 150 women sewing machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant walked out on strike. Sewing was seen as work for women and wasn't recognised as skilled, so they went on strike until their pay was increased to the level of semi-skilled male workers. Their strike inspired the government to pass the Equal Pay Act in 1970, making it illegal for employers to pay women and men different wages for the same work.



Jo Richardson

Through exploring the archives at Valence House, the commission was also reminded of the work of Jo Richardson, a leading feminist and the former Labour MP for Barking from 1974 to 1995. Jo was a tireless activist for women's rights, and in 1986 persuaded the Labour Party to adopt the creation of a ministry for women as policy. The first appearance of violence against women in Parliamentary politics was in 1976 when Jo introduced a bill to give women, who suffered from domestic violence, the right to apply for an injunction. She was also a fierce campaigner for better support for survivors of domestic violence.

“**May & Bakers had sent some of their management to argue against us two so they put their case forward first for May & Bakers saying that the men done more than the women and they shouldn't have equal pay. So and then.. he questioned me on what I'd done. And I told him a few facts about what we used to do, what the men never used to do.. a little while after we both got a letter to say we'd won.**”

– Winifred Griffiths

“

**Women's lives are being made a misery and Barking is no better or worse than elsewhere in London. But people in Barking tend to sweep it under the carpet and pretend it isn't happening here. I see many women in my surgery who are desperate to be rehoused because of their husband's violence.”**

– Jo Richardson, 1986, Barking and Dagenham Post

Although Barking and Dagenham's population has changed dramatically since Jo Richardson said this, yet her words ring absolutely true to the commissioners following their investigations of present day attitudes and the challenges faced by survivors.

However, migration and an increasingly diverse and changing population now play a key part in Barking and Dagenham's sense of place. Since 2001, Barking and Dagenham's population has changed dramatically: between 2001 and 2016, the population has increased by 25%. The proportion of White British residents has also fallen from 90% of residents to less than 50%. In the space of a few years, a very significant British ethnic minority population moved into the borough from inner parts of London.

Another significant part of the borough's recent history is the notorious election of British National Party (BNP) councillors in May 2006. The BNP secured 12 councillors in Barking and Dagenham, and narrowly missed securing a 13th – if they had put forward a candidate in every ward, they would have been the first BNP-controlled council in the country. They lost all their seats in the 2010 local elections, and party leader Nick Griffin lost the battle to win a parliamentary seat. But it would be foolhardy to say the far right influence

has disappeared altogether, and this relatively recent history cannot be ignored as context for the marginalisation many survivors from Black and other ethnic minorities spoke of to the commission. Community cohesion has been a council priority for the last few years, with huge amounts of work taking place in this area, led in particular by the council's Deputy Leader, Councillor Ashraf.

It is noteworthy that in the 2016 European referendum, 62.4% of Barking and Dagenham residents voted to leave the European Union, an outlier in the wider London context. This cannot but have an impact on the experience of Eastern European women in the borough in particular. Moving forward, the East End Women's Museum has found a permanent site in Barking town centre and is set to open in 2022. Given the borough's history it seems fitting that Barking will be so central to ensuring the history of women in east London past and present can be recorded, researched, shared and celebrated. The commission is working with the East End Women's Museum to ensure domestic abuse is not “swept under the carpet”, in the words of Jo Richardson, but is represented as part of the story told by what will be the only dedicated women's museum in the country.



## Cultures and communities

Given Barking and Dagenham’s diversity, it was important for the Commission to explore the cultural differences in attitudes between communities in relation to domestic abuse, as well as common themes. We needed to hold this at the forefront of our minds, while also never forgetting that domestic abuse happens in all cultures and backgrounds, and cannot be linked exclusively to any particular cultural group or community. It’s important not to let the need to differentiate between cultures provide an excuse to “other” violence against women and not recognise that both domestic abuse, and the sexist and oppressive attitudes that let it thrive, are present in all communities in the UK and in Barking and Dagenham. Within all communities, there is a need to make domestic abuse more visible and tackle it at its root.

From a range of qualitative insight, the Commission sought to understand some of the challenges which different communities face around domestic abuse. Perpetrators are highly manipulative and will use whatever tools they have available to them to control their victim – this often includes warped views of faith, outdated cultural attitudes and the fear that individuals, already marginalised and stigmatised, may feel towards public services or others in the community. The Commission does not want to dictate to different communities exactly how they should respond to domestic abuse. For everyone to play a role in making domestic abuse more visible, it is vital for communities to be encouraged to speak with their own voice. Specific messages should ideally be community-led and authentic, as well as survivor-led. The Commission has sought to bring out the positive examples of women’s empowerment within different communities in Barking and Dagenham, which should be built on moving forward to tackle domestic abuse.

We also heard from survivors about the need for survivors from different cultures to come together to discuss their shared experiences. Survivors told us that “when domestic abuse is so engrained”, mixed groups provide the opportunity to come together to break down cultural myths around abuse, free survivors from the fear of judgement and help them recover.

Importantly, we need to get away from the myth that domestic abuse is intrinsically linked to specific cultures. We found that professionals tend to assume domestic abuse is specific to some cultures because of their perception of attitudes towards traditional gender roles. But we found that the reality is starkly different. We heard from some groups “are we talking about domestic abuse or c.... [racist term] domestic abuse?”. We found that othering of domestic abuse was a symptom of the widespread normalisation and minimisation which enables both professionals and others to ignore how widespread it is, and how it happens to our neighbours, friends and family members regardless of their background. As Women’s Aid highlight, domestic abuse affects women from all ethnic groups, and there is no evidence to suggest that women from particular ethnic or cultural communities are any more at risk than others.

At national level, the work on the Faith and VAWG Coalition by Standing Together has been ground-breaking work, reframing the conversation by bringing different faiths together and highlighting the positive role that faith can play in tackling domestic abuse. We also heard strong views in Barking and Dagenham itself, from across communities, from both survivors and the wider community, about the key role that faith provides. Faith should be seen as a comfort and an offer of support, rather than weaponised by perpetrators into a supposed



justification for domestic abuse. We heard from victims, perpetrators and the wider community in particular about how discussions about relationships and marriage through faith groups act as their reference point about what is right and wrong in a relationship throughout their lives. At the Barking and Dagenham Faith Forum in July 2020, there was a discussion on domestic abuse, in response to the Commission. These discussions should be happening regularly, and the borough must include faith partners as key associates in responding to domestic abuse, without making assumptions about its prevalence or justification within their communities.

The Commission also heard about the intersection of mixed cultures. One survivor told us how racism formed a part of the domestic abuse he experienced as a black man from his white female partner. “She was physically abusive and racially

abusive towards me. She used to love my food but suddenly she started spitting in my food, spitting on me, telling me to go back to my country.” This couple’s mixed race children witnessed the emotional abuse, which the perpetrator linked to race as a way of undermining and controlling the victim - “She was never racially abusive about our mixed race son but if you are being racist to the father, it affects the son.”

We heard of some specific issues in relation to some of the key communities in the borough:





### LGBTQ+ communities

The Commission has found it hard to engage with LGBTQ+ community to the extent that we would have wished. National research from Galop has highlighted that LGBTQ+ victims are disproportionately affected despite the heteronormative narrative around domestic abuse, and despite this there is very limited data available about the prevalence of domestic abuse in the LGBTQ+ community. National research also highlights that the LGBTQ+ community often face barriers in approaching public services. Specifically in Barking and Dagenham, in 2016 the Stephen Port murders and the response to them profoundly damaged the confidence in public services of the LGBTQ+ community in Barking and Dagenham. Specifically in relation to domestic abuse, we heard that LGBTQ+ survivors “don’t think the police take abuse in a same sex relationship as seriously as they do in a straight relationship. I almost feel like they think it’s just two girls arguing and fighting and they don’t see the abuse element of it”.

The Commission recommends the borough continue its attempts to engage with the LGBTQ+ community on this issue, building on the successful partnership between Studio 3 Arts and the council which has built community visibility through the Be + Do project. LGBTQ+ people also told us that more funding for LGBTQ+ spaces and services would fill a gap in provision and importantly “having police provide some of that funding would be a good way for them to recognise the failings in the Port case and be part of a solution to help protect LGBT people from violence”.

Again, the need for informal spaces, which would be of huge benefit to survivors as part of the community as a whole, and provide a pathway to further support, were seen as the vital first step, rather than the establishment of a specific and labelled domestic abuse service.

### Disability and domestic abuse

National evidence from the British Crime Survey highlights that disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse that non-disabled women. Disability can both be used by a perpetrator to further isolate the victim, and also create additional barriers in seeking help from services. Within Barking and Dagenham, the winner of the women of the year in the first 2015 B&D Women’s Empowerment Awards was a deaf survivor of domestic abuse, Karla Felicianne – listening to the stories of, and celebrating the achievements of disabled survivors is key to raising awareness.

In terms of local evidence, service level data from the borough’s independent gender-based violence advocate run by Refuge highlights that 43% of those supported by Refuge with long-term support identify as having either a physical disability, or mental health problem. We also heard from survivors about the wide-ranging impacts of both mental and physical conditions. One survivor told us about self esteem and her disability - “I told my nan I wanted to be a police officer and she told me I can’t do that because I’m half deaf. I was always told I wasn’t good enough”. Mental health was also commonly mentioned - PTSD, ADHD, anxiety, and depression were all referenced by survivors as making it harder for them to seek help.

The commission acknowledges that this is a need to further consult with, listen to and support disabled survivors of domestic abuse.

### White British

Engagement with white British residents showed that domestic abuse was seen as a normal part of relationships, yet nobody talked about it. In groups of older women, we heard a large number of disclosures, and they all accepted that domestic abuse was highly prevalent in their communities, yet our focus groups were the first time that these women had ever discussed

the domestic abuse they had experienced. One survivor told us “you didn’t have much help then or anywhere to go.... Nothing was taught in schools and nothing was spoken about from parents”. They discussed how coercive control, financial abuse and often physical violence were just seen as a normal part of marriage. Financial abuse in particular was seen as the norm – they were controlled with money: “he would give me £20 to cover the household costs but it was never enough” one resident told us, while another said “you put up with it because you had a roof over your head”. Domestic abuse was also intergenerational and linked strongly to traditional gender roles: their mothers had seen it as normal, and therefore so did they. One older survivor told us “I grew up in a violent relationship with [my] parents. I just had to put up with it”. White British residents linked a lack of education about relationships more generally, to the fact that domestic abuse was never openly discussed.

### Eastern European

We heard from those running Eastern European support services that the community’s isolation, in part due to language barriers, is used as a tool by perpetrators. We heard stories of perpetrators who will not let their victims learn English, forcing them to stay at home. We also heard about the wider stigma around mental health and getting emotional support, and how this played a role in preventing survivors from getting help. Support services talked about the lack of safe spaces for the Eastern European communities, and how when they discovered domestic abuse cases, it was when they were seeking help for other problems such as financial difficulty or homelessness rather than domestic abuse itself. Overall, the key gap was felt to be the lack of support following the first disclosure, to help support Eastern European women to follow through with support services and the police in order to stop the abuse.

There are several examples of good practice to empower women within the local Eastern European community which should be built on. Shpresa is an organisation working in east London with the Albanian-speaking community including with people in Barking and Dagenham. Their work focuses on development, education and health and wellbeing rather than domestic abuse specifically, but they have had many women coming forward to them with domestic abuse disclosures. They worked with Solace Women's Aid to develop a domestic abuse offer to those women. The borough's current contracted service provider, Refuge, have also recently set up an Eastern European specialist service across Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge, recognising the barriers that Eastern European women face to accessing specialist services. The Eastern European Resource Centre has also recently set up a new project for women affected by domestic abuse, offering them support with welfare, immigration and basic advocacy and legal advice, as well as Polish and Romanian therapists. These services not only provide the valuable support that Eastern European women need, but also importantly help to make domestic abuse more visible in the community and break down the stigma of talking about domestic abuse and seeking help.

They demonstrate that there are pockets of work in the community, that can be used as starting points for a wider campaign to reach the Eastern European community, and huge potential for wider work with the Eastern European community. But the council must adequately resource its ability to work with and build on them.

### Muslim communities

We heard from some Muslim women that Islamic teachings, as with other religious scriptures, can be used to justify domestic abuse by perpetrators. Muslim women wanted to promote the fact the Quran contains a number of passages which clearly highlight that any violence and coercion against women is unacceptable. One young person told us: "I'm Muslim and what they teach in the Quran is that a man can have four wives, which is meant as something else but people take it in the wrong context. The Quran says to discipline your wife but shouldn't cause damage but that it is taken out of context".

We also heard from Muslim survivors that cultural shame and taboos around divorce and sex before marriage for instance, can be used by abusers to further isolate victims of domestic abuse. We also heard that there was a culture of comparison between women, where victims did not want to report their domestic abuse because they knew their neighbours, friends and family might be experiencing it too, but worse than them. This was strongly agreed by women as a major obstacle to disclosure.

We heard of best practice where the Hive women's group at Al Madina Mosque held events highlighting these teachings and raising awareness of domestic abuse, something the Commission sees as best practice which should be built upon. We heard from Muslim survivors that there were many examples of positive female scholars and other influencers who challenge what is sometimes taught to justify the oppression of women. Importantly, Muslim survivors saw an urgent need to amplify the voices of empowered Muslim women.

### Black communities

The treatment of both the Black African and Caribbean communities by the police, was frequently cited as a reason why domestic abuse victims will not consider reporting their abuse. Recent events worldwide, Black Lives Matter was bringing urgently to our attention during the period when the Commission was working, racism as an additional barrier that prevents black communities from accessing all public services. In the case of domestic abuse, this is extremely dangerous. National work has highlighted that victims are often concerned about how their black male perpetrator would be mistreated by the police given racist attitudes and police brutality.

We heard that experiences of racism from past interactions with the police, or from friends and family members' experiences, prevents victims from reporting their abuse. We were told from those we spoke to that in some families, young people were taught never to call the police because it was seen as too risky. We also heard that stereotypes around 'strong black women' mean that black women who experience domestic abuse do not want to be seen as victims, or will not be treated as such, leading to a need to communicate the strength and courage of domestic abuse survivors. Within black African churches, we heard of instances where the church directly provides mediation to families, without full domestic abuse training, rather than referring onto specialist support. This was a cause of great concern to the Commission.

The Black Lives Matter protest in Barking in July 2020 shows the importance of coming together to talk openly about racism, and the barriers faced by the black community. The Commission has heard that within some black families, traumatic experiences were not spoken about and therefore things were often swept under the carpet. There has been a generational shift where young generations are opening up dialogues about trauma.

### South Asian

South Asian victims of domestic abuse told us about how the interconnected nature of their communities made disclosing domestic abuse difficult. It meant that disclosing domestic abuse could leave you separated from your whole community – "my sister was married to his brother" one survivor told us. Again, shame is used by perpetrators to further isolate their victims. We also heard that the intergenerational nature of abuse led to greater tolerance and the idea that abusive behaviour was seen in some families as a normal part of marriage. We heard from survivors about the need to promote positive ambassadors from South Asian communities who are able to talk about their domestic abuse openly to show that it is not acceptable.

### Common themes

There are some clear messages common to the conversations held with all the above groups of women. Domestic abuse was extremely common, and was considered normal by many of the people women interact with daily. There was a lack of willingness to seek help, but this was to a large extent driven by lack of opportunity, and the view that there would be no point contacting formal services because it would cause more harm than good. There was also a striking lack of awareness of local specialist services, as well as a perception that the police would not believe women, would be racist, and would be confrontational – for example asking if they planned to withdraw their statements later, telling them "this isn't a game".

The overwhelming message is summed up by one survivor who told us "there need to be more spaces where us women can come together and have these conversations about relationships and abuse" and that community groups should have a unified message when it comes to domestic abuse, while not necessarily being specifically labelled as a domestic abuse service.



### Excel Women's Centre

One of the very few examples of this in the borough is the Excel Women's Centre. We ran a series of focus group at the centre, which included women who were Black African, South Asian and Middle Eastern, mostly of Muslim faith. The Commission was struck by this thriving example of women coming together in a community space, and having the opportunity to talk about their experiences. It was obvious that everything the centre does is driven by a deep understanding of the local community and experiences of local women, and that while helping women to develop new skills like language, employment and creative crafts, it also provided a safe space where domestic abuse could be discussed. Spaces such as this are key to developing the borough's response to domestic abuse, and are in extremely short supply.



Overall, when taking the above experiences of the different communities which make Barking and Dagenham the vibrant place it is, the Commission was struck by the need to address the culture in the community around domestic abuse. There is a need to ensure that survivors are believed, that community members are aware of domestic abuse and importantly that the community have opportunities to come together.

### Overall commission recommendations

There are many positive examples in the borough which should be built on moving forward. The Commission is aware of the huge amount of work done by the council on an ambitious participation and cohesion programme, reconnecting the community closer to the council led by Deputy Leader Cllr Saima Ashraf. This has created the engagement tools and mechanisms which can be applied to bring the community together around domestic abuse. The key is to make domestic abuse more visible within different communities, building on what is already there, and ensuring that survivors are able to own the way in which support is offered within their own community, understanding the specific barriers that need to be overcome, but as part of a wider effort across the borough to raise awareness, challenge attitudes and ensure survivors can make the first step towards finding support.

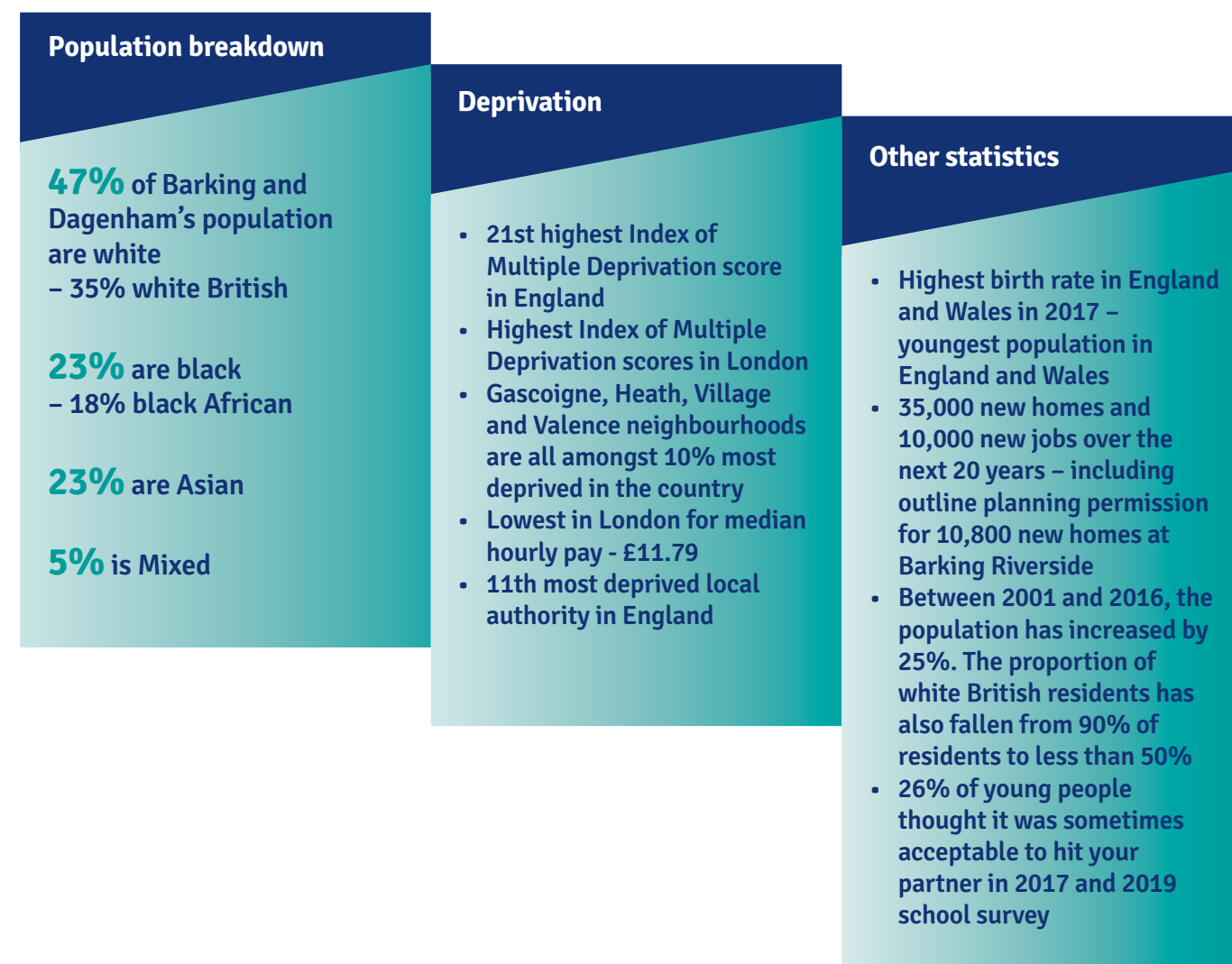
## Domestic abuse in Barking and Dagenham now

The Commission has drawn on extensive data on domestic abuse in order to develop its analysis and recommendations.

We have looked at the data from two perspectives. First, as independent commissioners without significant prior knowledge of Barking and Dagenham, it was important to understand the borough's sense of place and identity.

Secondly, the commissioners were keen to ensure that the recommendations and findings were grounded in as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the complex landscape of services which impact on the lives of survivors and perpetrators. An overview of data is found within this chapter, but further relevant data is also included within each outcome as evidence to support the recommendations.

### Statistical overview



### Domestic abuse data

Barking and Dagenham has had the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse for the last 10 years. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) data highlights that in 2018/2019, 78% of victims were female and 22% were male, while 93% of perpetrators are male and 7% are female. Data from the North East London Foundation Trust, which provides integrated community and mental health services including talking therapies and health visiting, showed that within mental health services, 82.7% of victims were female and 17.27% were male. The number of people disclosing domestic abuse within sexual health services was less than five. The raw numbers of domestic abuse disclosures from other services is also far lower than would be expected from the high police reported rates of domestic abuse, and qualitative reports from professionals, indicating that in many health care and other settings, survivors do not feel able to disclose.

- The proportion of social care assessments where domestic abuse is listed as a factor is the third lowest in London at 26.6%. This compares to an England average of 51.1% and London average of 42.6%, surely again indicating a lack of awareness on the part of professionals and an unwillingness to disclose on the part of survivors.
- Anecdotally, many social workers reported to the Commission that domestic abuse is often recorded as neglect because of the impact on the child from a child protection perspective and this is reflected in the data. Neglect is listed as a factor in 21% of social care assessments, compared to London average of 14.9% the third highest in London. Taken together with the figure in the point above, this was cause for concern to the commissioners.

- Homelessness data shows that in 2018/2019, the Barking and Dagenham average across the year of households who owed a duty because of domestic abuse is 4%, compared to the London average of 6.1%. In terms of the support need of the household, in 2019 the total number of households with support needs who owed a duty and at risk of or have experienced domestic abuse is 10.81%, compared to the London average of 15.81%.
- Barking and Dagenham is in the middle of London boroughs in 2019/2020 for calls received by the National Domestic Violence Helpline.
- Hospital admissions data for domestic abuse is notoriously hard to measure nationally, but limited data shows Barking and Dagenham in the middle of London boroughs for a range of clinical codes relating to domestic abuse.
- Domestic abuse service level data from Refuge reflects the cultural diversity of the borough – there are men approaching the service too, albeit in far smaller numbers than women.



### One Borough Voice survey

We asked residents a series of questions on the council's One Borough Voice platform to understand their views on abusive behaviours, asking nationally benchmarkable questions.

We were keen to ask survey respondents questions which we could compare to other data.

For this reason, we replicated the question asked by the LBB's school survey commissioned by Public Health, and undertaken by the School Health Education Unit. The survey was undertaken by over 2000 students in the borough.

The first question came from the school survey, and when asked to the wider population shows that there is a stark difference between survey respondents and young people.

### One Borough Voice survey results

The data from the wider One Borough Voice resident survey of adult residents suggests that the following percentages think some of these behaviours are sometimes acceptable:

- 23%** - Checking where you are all the time
- 22%** - Telling you what to wear
- 18%** - Forcing you to do something you don't want to do
- 18%** - Telling you who you can and can't see
- 18%** - Them checking your phone

### Barking and Dagenham school survey results

- **61%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to check where your partner is all the time
- **60%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to check your partner's phone
- **32%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to demand undressed/sexual photos from a partner
- **32%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to use hurtful or threatening language to a partner
- **26%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to hit your partner



For the other questions, the commission replicated some questions from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, and from the British social attitudes survey. The comparison results can be seen below – these suggest that more people who answered the survey in Barking and Dagenham had experienced domestic abuse than the national benchmarks. A British social attitudes survey question on gender was in line with national data.

One in five of those who answered the survey did not know how to report domestic abuse, with one in three of those answered the survey not sure how to support a friend or family member. One in three of those who answered the survey thought that some domestic abuse in a relationship was normal.

	Barking and Dagenham One Borough Voice survey	Crime Survey for England and Wales 2018	British social attitudes survey: an annual survey testing how social attitudes
Agree with the statement “I have experienced domestic abuse since age of 16”	69%	21%	n/a
Agree with the statement “I have experienced domestic abuse in the last year”	16%	6%	n/a
Agree with the statement “A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family”	75%	n/a	72%
Agree with the statement “I don’t know how to support a friend or family member experiencing domestic abuse”	27%	n/a	n/a
Agree with the statement “I don’t know how to report domestic abuse”	20%	n/a	n/a
Agree with the statement “people I know think some level of abuse is normal”	33%	n/a	n/a



**The council’s response to domestic abuse so far**

The council has made several changes around domestic abuse in the last few years, particularly in the last 18 months. Domestic abuse is a stated corporate priority and as a result a range of projects are already underway. The commissioners have been regularly briefed about the council’s changing approach to domestic abuse and commend the council for making considerable progress during the time the Commission has been working in the borough. However, there is no room for complacency and the Commission does not consider the approach is sufficiently resourced, coordinated or broad. There are many excellent ideas and ambitions but some of the basics are not in place to enable these to be followed through safely or to best effect.

Each chapter in the recommendations outlines the work already done in the borough as a starting point.

The Commission has noted that Barking and Dagenham Council has a tendency to focus on specific projects in relation to domestic abuse, rather than addressing the overall culture. This is a common pattern in local government, and in part is driven by short-term funding streams from central government and regional mayors.

This is not to say that individual projects are not valuable. However, it does mean that the need for the local authority to focus on the issues of culture change and the basic level of support available to survivors in the community. An outline of the initiatives that the council has begun is below, and is given in some detail, mainly for the benefit of other local areas wishing to follow the same approach, so they can understand the starting point on which the Commission’s recommendations will build.

In relation to services, the council commissioned Refuge charity on a three-year contract in September 2020 to provide specialist support to victims in the borough. This included a perpetrator programme available to those within Tier 3, the highest level of social care intervention. The contract provides refuge accommodation, and specialist support for those experiencing domestic abuse including two children and young people’s intervention workers. A peer mentor programme is also in the process of being developed through Refuge. In the first year of its Barking and Dagenham contract, Refuge supported 955 residents through its Independent Gender-Violence service. This is compared to 3,302 police reported domestic abuse related incidents in the borough in the same period.

The council also commissions counselling for survivors of gender-based violence through the Ashiana Network, on a three-year contract from 2019 to 2021.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the council became aware of the need for a universal programme for perpetrators and commissioned Cranstoun to deliver a 24-week Men and Masculinity programme. Work is also taking place on an innovation pilot to house perpetrators, which puts an onus on the perpetrator of domestic abuse to move to ensure survivor safety. There are currently three flats which have been found to be used for this purpose. In addition, DV Flag East provides free legal advice to victims of domestic abuse, in partnership with the council's legal services and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

IRIS training, who aim to improve the healthcare response to gender-based violence through training those in General Practice about domestic abuse, is currently being implemented in the borough as a one-year pilot funded by the Violence Reduction Unit through the Mayor of London. The council has also provided domestic abuse training for managers, and created a staff policy on domestic abuse which offers 10 days' paid leave for those who are experiencing domestic abuse. The council has also trained up domestic abuse ambassadors in the workplace.

The council has commissioned the school survey run by the Health Education Partnership to ask questions on young people's acceptance of abusive behaviours, and also commissioned the Health Education Partnership to run training for schools on how to build awareness of domestic abuse, and how to develop staff policies.

Barking and Dagenham has recognised the important link between housing and domestic abuse and is embarking on the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance accreditation. DAHA accreditation is the UK benchmark for how housing providers should respond to domestic abuse in the UK and includes eight priority areas: policies and procedures, case management, risk management, inclusivity and accessibility, perpetrator management, partnership working, training, and publicity and awareness. The borough is due to be assessed on this in February 2021.

The borough has also adopted the Safe and Together model which aims to create a domestic violence-informed child welfare system.

The council is to be commended on its journey so far. Guided by the experiences of survivors, however, in the context of the high prevalence of domestic abuse and the relatively low base from which the council is building, the Commission believes that its recommendations are urgent and in some cases should carry a higher priority than some of the projects already in their early stages. Unless survivors are believed across the system, can access support, and live in a community which does not minimise, normalise and tolerate domestic abuse, the Commission believes the important work already undertaken by the council will be limited in its impact.

## Outcome 1: Professionals and services

“

Health and safety is everyone's concern. Domestic abuse should be everyone's concern too. You might be the one person that victim may come and speak to – they might never speak to anybody else.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

Survivors of domestic abuse have told us how important the response of professionals is. Just one individual a woman chooses to speak to when she's experiencing abuse can be the start of a journey of survival – or not. Every interaction with a survivor is precious. It is the behaviour of professionals across the system that determine whether or not the council and other local agencies are effective.

People working in public services are subject to the same influences and pressures as anyone else. Around 40% of the council's employees live in the borough. There is no hard boundary between “the council” and “the residents”. This is a significant opportunity, because those residents who work for the council are those who the council has most opportunity and authority to.

### What survivors told us

For survivors who choose to disclose to professionals, the response is vital to their recovery, either reaffirming, and sometimes even showing them, that the abuse was not their fault, or at the other end of the spectrum revictimising them and minimising the abuse. As one survivor put it “health and safety is everyone's concern. Domestic abuse should be everyone's concern. They may speak to one person which may be you. You might be that one person that victim may come to speak to and they might never speak to anybody else”. Put simply, it must be everyone's job to make sure that survivors feel believed and are offered the right support is crucial.

Positively, the commission heard of how much of a difference a supportive professional can make. One survivor told us: “I had no vocabulary for what actually happened to me for... three years. I realise now I am lucky to have a support worker who genuinely loves her job, she fought for me. I literally put my life in her hands. If it was not for her, I wouldn't have got this far”. We heard from another survivor how “one [police officer] in particular took it slowly with me. He picked me up and took me to the station.. if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have pressed charges and probably gone back to him [the perpetrator]”. The same survivor told us how her social worker “really helped [me], within two days of being in [my] own place she had kitted out my home. She also worked really well with the police and made things much easier for me”.

Another survivor told us “once I started the [therapy] sessions, I realised how it felt to receive the right help, it felt so different the lady was so supportive and very welcoming, she made me feel heard, she provided me with the right questions”. Professionals have the power to really change a survivor's experiences for the better.

However, we also have heard many examples from survivors which suggest an engrained culture of not believing survivors of domestic abuse across different public services. Survivors told us about negative experiences with the police which “make it hard to report these things... they didn't do anything”. Survivors felt they were treated by the police as if they were



causing trouble – “not you again” police told one survivor who had called the police for different incidents of abuse. Survivors told us that police told them “this is not a game” when threats of further abuse from their perpetrator meant that they were unsure about continuing with prosecution. Overall, survivors were mistrusting of the police and their ability to help – “you call the police, they don’t get them or even look for them”, “I recently called the police. They didn’t do anything. I suffered an anxiety attack that day”. Currently, too often the police response to domestic abuse leaves survivors not feeling heard, and justice not being served.

One of the points survivors have been most unanimous about, and most anxious to see reflected in this report is the lack of understanding on the part of professionals that perpetrators are highly manipulative, and that professionals are just as easily manipulated as survivors themselves – and arguably less likely to understand the risk. One survivor told us how “My mum called the police after a physical injury, they came and they believed his story. They let him go upstairs before he left my property – he didn’t live there but he told them he did so needed to get his stuff. He stole the last of my child benefit, my cigarettes and my bank card before he left”. Another survivor told us “my ex was so charming that he charmed my social worker... she took sides” and yet another explained how when undergoing legal proceedings, “he manipulated the mediator”. Another told us about her GP being manipulated by her perpetrator – “he manipulated the GP – she told me ‘you need to appreciate what you have... he loves you so much’ when I told her about the abuse, because he manipulated her”.

Survivors also told the commission about missed opportunities when questions were not asked. For example: “When I went to hospital with a broken hand, I didn’t tell the nurse, I lied and said I was playing with my kids and got carried away. But if someone asked me, I would have

told them”. The survivors we spoke to strongly recommended routine questioning at dentists, GPs and all health services. Survivors told us that “if you ask more questions, you can realise that there’s an issue and investigate it further”.

Our interviews with professionals themselves substantiated the criticisms made by survivors. We heard from a frontline homelessness prevention officer that “a lot of people come in here, say domestic abuse and expect to get a council home”, and from another, when asked about domestic abuse survivors, “do you mean genuine domestic abuse or the ones who make it up?”. Survivors also talked of their own struggles to find a safe and secure home – “my ex was going to petrol bomb my house, I told the council and asked if they can change my door and they said no, and didn’t offer me support. So I had to do it myself, and they then said I shouldn’t have done that”. Another survivor told us that “I told my friend about my experience with housing and she said if it is this difficult to find somewhere else to live, she will just stay with her abusive partner”. Survivors do not feel listened to, supported or believed by professionals and services – “[it] feels like a survivor isn’t being believed if there’s no conviction - the person who’s holding that info, is saying we don’t believe a survivor. A survivor has done enough fighting” and another said “even when I go for help, I feel helpless. All the professionals that are meant to be there for you, I feel helpless”.

We also heard many examples from survivors that professionals had more of an understanding of certain types of abuse, mainly physical, with coercive control and financial abuse being much less understood - “when I speak to professionals about domestic abuse, they think of physical abuse straight away”. Survivors also told us of instances of social workers not acknowledging the impact of domestic abuse on them – “if you experienced domestic abuse five years ago, why is that relevant now?”.



#### What other evidence shows us

The importance of the professional response is corroborated by the data analysis undertaken by the Commission. Despite having the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse in London, a high acceptance of abusive behaviours among young people at school, as demonstrated by the school survey, and reports from professionals across the system about the high rates of domestic abuse, this high level of need is not reflected in wider service level data. Looking at data for social care assessments, Barking and Dagenham has the third lowest rate in London for domestic abuse listed as a factor, yet the third highest for neglect. Social workers themselves told the Commission that there is a tendency in the council for domestic abuse to be recorded as neglect, meaning the official response is to a mother’s failure to protect her children, rather than to both mother and children as victims of abuse. Social workers reflected in our conversations with them that case notes featured

the language of “failure to support their child” in relation to victims of domestic abuse, without acknowledging the impact of the abuse on the mother. They felt there was far more to be done at an operational level to ensure survivors of domestic abuse are believed and supported.

All public sector partners have work to do to improve the understanding of and response to domestic abuse. A culture change is needed across the system to ensure that survivors feel believed and supported when they disclose domestic abuse. The Commission believes strongly that public sector professionals should lead the way in creating a community which understands and responds to domestic abuse, particularly because any increase in understanding in the wider community will lead to demand on services. This was highlighted in particular in a focus group with young people about healthy relationships, where a youth worker’s sexist attitudes and negative attitudes

to domestic abuse influenced the young people in the group. Professionals, especially those working directly with residents can have a huge impact. The professional response should be the first part of the wider system to be addressed, and only when it is adequate should work in the community take place to raise awareness.

It is important to state frankly here that the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) at local level has been particularly concerning in its response to the Commission's work. The Commission first started the process of requesting local GP level data on domestic abuse in July 2019. By November 2020, despite the request being approved, this data has still not been sent despite much chasing. There has been welcome progress locally from health partners, particularly the establishment of an IRISi pilot, training GPs on responding to domestic abuse disclosures. However, this work is awarded and funded directly by the Violence Reduction Unit run by the Mayor of London on a single year basis, it does not reflect the commitment of local health partners. Given the scale of domestic abuse in Barking and Dagenham and the national evidence about both the key role of GPs and the frequency of domestic abuse disclosures in the wider health system, as well as the savings which can be made for health services through early intervention, the CCG and wider health partners need to do more, including providing funding.

The Commission also has specific observations about data collection. As most domestic abuse is never reported to the police, we must look at a combination of other service level data in order to get a true sense of prevalence. Understanding prevalence of domestic abuse provides evidence for both internal and external funding applications, which groups might face barriers accessing specific services, and it makes domestic abuse visible to all agencies, creating a shared agenda. Despite this, there is a culture in several agencies of reluctance to

share data which is not corroborated by police data. Discussions of "alleged domestic abuse" or of only "allowing" police-reported data to influence the accepted views on prevalence, actively contribute to the culture of disbelieving survivors.

In reality there is no evidence that false claims are common. The Crown Prosecution Service did the first study of false allegations in 2013, which found that in a 17-month period, there were 111,891 prosecutions for domestic abuse with just six prosecutions for making false allegations.

Another aspect of data collection which is key to draw attention to is the data collection of domestic abuse within the LGBTQ+ community. National evidence from Galop suggests rates of underreporting of domestic abuse in the LGBTQ+ community are between 60-80% and importantly, there is a lack of robust data about DA prevalence as a result of this, despite some evidence that LGBTQ+ communities are at a higher risk of domestic abuse. Research from Galop also concludes that underreporting means that that "violence and abuse in the LGBT+ community remains absent from domestic abuse datasets and is therefore invisible to service providers and policy makers". The Commission recommends that improving data collection at a local level in relation to LGBTQ+ domestic abuse, matched with increased community awareness, could play a role in starting to ensure the needs of the LGBTQ+ community are addressed.

The level of funding for specialist domestic abuse services was also of concern to the Commission. In the first year of its Barking and Dagenham contract, Refuge, the borough's commissioned specialist domestic abuse service provider, supported 955 residents through its Independent Gender-based violence (IGVA) service. This is compared to 3,302 police reported domestic abuse related incidents in the borough in the same year period, not to mention the far higher

level of domestic abuse unreported to the police. As the borough looks to challenge the culture of disbelief in the local community, and encourage disclosures, the specialist service must have enough capacity to deal with increased demand.

The Commission recommends following the Home Office Violence Against Women and Girls National Statement of Expectations. Echoing some of the commission's principles and outcomes, these recommend that survivors themselves are the key focus of any approach, alongside a clear response to perpetrators. They suggest a strategic system-wide approach to commissioning, a locally-led approach which safeguards individuals and raises local awareness of the issues and involves, engages and empowers communities to seek, design and deliver solutions. We recommend the Statement of Expectations should be used in line with the Women's Aid VAWG sector shared core standards which enable joint commissioning across specialist services.

Key to all our recommendations is training for professionals. Those working in social care and early help services, for example, told us that they wanted more training to support interactions with both survivors and perpetrators.

Other residents shared the distrust felt by survivors of the public service response to domestic abuse – one resident told us: "I might know how to support a friend in terms of police or services, but I don't believe they actually help. We tell people to call the police and the police are inconsistent at best and dangerous at worst".

### **What Barking and Dagenham have already done**

Barking and Dagenham Council has shown leadership and a commitment to tackle domestic abuse. In particular, senior councillors talk from the heart about the need to tackle domestic abuse, sometimes citing their own personal stories and importantly letting the community know that they are not alone. Domestic abuse is also one of the council's five strategic priorities.

The council have undertaken managers' training for all managers and created a domestic abuse staff policy which gives 10 days' paid leave for staff experiencing domestic abuse. This also includes DA staff advocates who are trained to support staff.

Some training has been delivered to wider staff on domestic abuse, but it is not yet widespread. The council is currently preparing for accreditation by the DAHA standards for housing providers on domestic abuse. And the council's Children's Care and Support teams are adopting the Safe and Together Model which focuses on creating a domestic violence-informed child welfare system. However, at the moment these are pockets of good practice. They do not represent a serious attempt to shift the organisational culture – never mind that of the wider community of which the council is a key part. All public sector staff in Barking and Dagenham must understand domestic abuse and know how to respond to it within their own role, with domestic abuse a factor – where appropriate – in all decisions that affect people's lives.



**Therefore the Commission recommends:**

The council leads the way and sets an example for other partners to follow

- **Step 1 – Create a culture change around domestic abuse so that a shared language of “we believe you” is the starting point for all professionals**

The first step in tackling domestic abuse is a widespread culture change across public services. There is no excuse for the council not starting in its own backyard, and leading the way, by starting to create a system which does not tolerate domestic abuse.

Training is fundamental to this culture change and should highlight the risk of manipulation by perpetrators, and lesser known types of abuse such as financial abuse and coercive control. There also should be the opportunity for tailored training for those in key areas, or aimed at specific roles – for instance, those who work with residents around money and debt should have the opportunity to gain a detailed understanding of financial abuse.

Training should importantly include how domestic abuse manifests in LGBTQ+ relationships, as well as heterosexual relationships.

Celebrating good practice around DA is also important. The Commission recommends a domestic abuse champion scheme which recognises and celebrates staff who have done important work on tackling domestic abuse and supporting survivors.

- **Step 2 – Council lobbies partners to invest in domestic abuse training**

The work of the Commission has shown how important the response from other public sector partners is. The Commission recommends the council should play a key role in ensuring that partners also prioritise domestic abuse training. In particular, engagement with survivors and professionals across the system has shown that Domestic Abuse Matters training for police is key to creating a response that believes survivors. Given the considerable number of police forces who have undertaken this training, its clear recommendation by the College of Policing, and the presence of local advocates within the police, it is of grave concern that it has not yet been taken up in the borough.



- **Step 3 – Create a three-point domestic abuse assessment for all council services and decision-making boards**

The Commission recommends that to embed the principles of the Commission into ways of working, and make domestic abuse a key part of the council’s business, a three-point assessment in relation to domestic abuse is required alongside the Equalities Impact Assessment by every decision-making meeting of officers or elected members of the council. The assessment would contain:

- 1) ‘We believe you’: services, professionals and decisions required to demonstrate how they encourage believing domestic abuse victims;
- 2) Trauma-informed: demonstrating how the impact of trauma has been considered; and
- 3) Not believing excuses: demonstrating how opportunities for manipulation by perpetrators or “opt-outs” by professionals have been sought out and challenged. An example copy of what this assessment could look like can be found in the appendix of the report.

- **Step 4 – The council shows leadership on tackling domestic abuse, incorporating domestic abuse into all decision making**

Domestic abuse should be a key part of the council’s core values and linked into the staff code of conduct, appraisal and performance management system, holding staff members accountable for their views of healthy relationships and domestic abuse. Tackling domestic abuse should be the duty of every council staff member, as detailed in a ‘BD Against Domestic Abuse’ staff code of conduct. The council should then lobby partners to adopt the same principles, ensuring that tackling domestic abuse is the duty of every professional in Barking and Dagenham. Leadership around domestic abuse means it is business as usual and sits at the heart of all decisions. For illustration, as the council develops its work from home policy as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements, domestic abuse should be embedded in the policy as it applies to everyone, rather than creating an exception for survivors which would require disclosure or evidence.

## Outcome 2: Healthy relationships and young people

“

It all comes down to healthy relationships – if I'd learnt about this when I was younger, I would have been more aware when I got into a relationship.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

The Barking and Dagenham school survey in 2017 and 2019 of over 2,000 secondary school students found that 26% of young people thought it was sometimes acceptable to hit your partner.

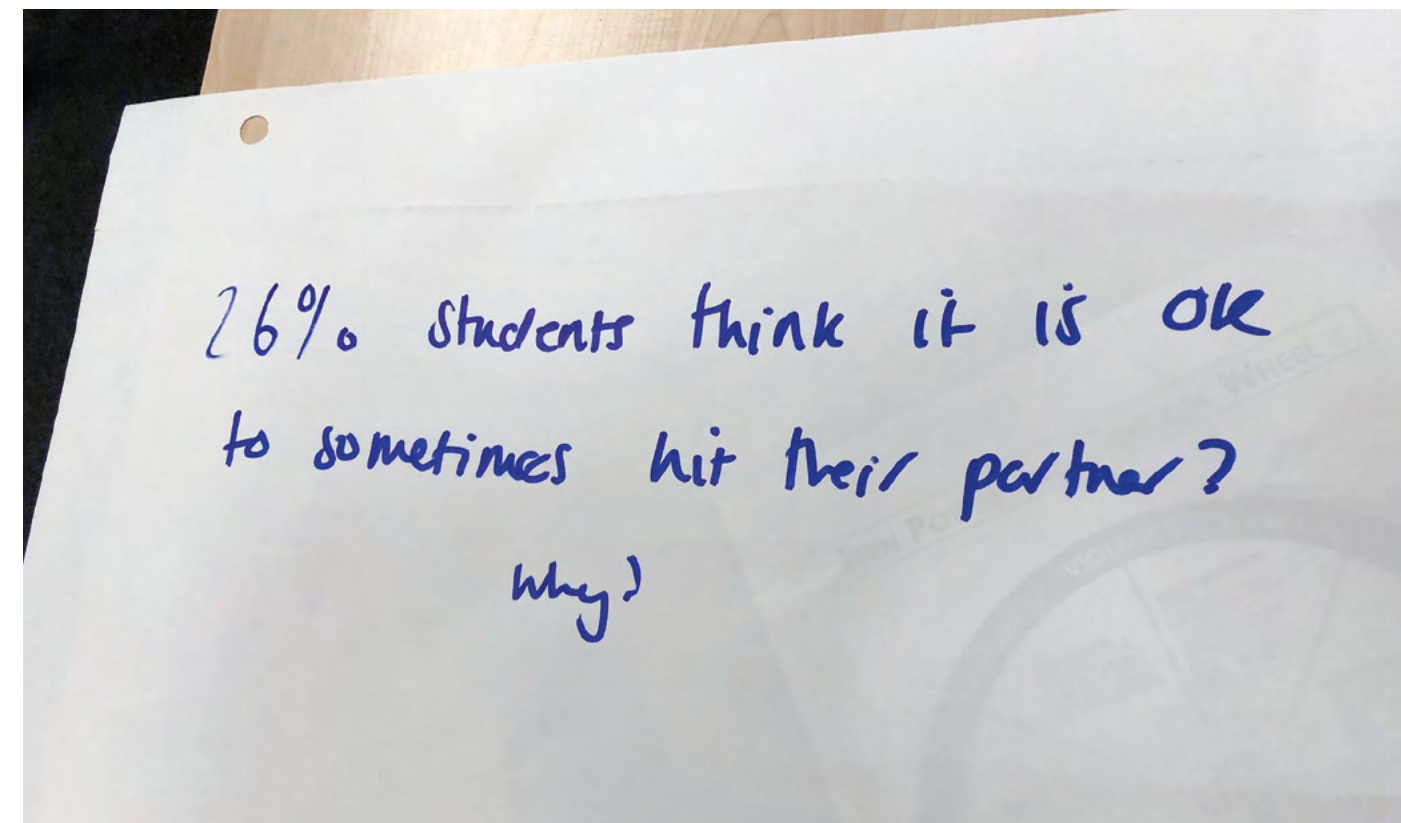
The Commission wanted to dig deeper into the lives behind this snapshot and understand the views of young people and the wider community towards relationships.

### School survey – 2019 headline results

- **61%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to check where your partner is all the time
- **60%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to check your partner's phone
- **32%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to demand undressed/sexual photos from a partner
- **32%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to use hurtful or threatening language to a partner
- **26%** of students think it's sometimes acceptable to hit your partner

### Headline: differences between groups

- **46% of young people from single parent family** think it's sometimes acceptable to hit your partner, **compared to 26% of young people as a whole**
- **31% of LGBT students** thought it was sometimes acceptable to hit your partner, compared to **26% of the young people as a whole**
- **19% of female students** think it's sometimes acceptable to hit your partner, compared to **33% of male students**



Now is the time for decisive action, both by schools and by communities, to support young people to learn safely about healthy relationships and domestic abuse. As a result of Covid-19, schools have a lot to catch up on. The Commissioners were concerned that this could distract from implementation of the new requirement to provide relationships and sex education. Our view is that in fact the pandemic makes high quality education on healthy relationships, backed by a whole-school approach, more important than ever, given the impact on young people who may be witnessing increased levels of domestic abuse in the home. With police reported cases nationally at a 10-year high during lockdown, exacerbated by school closures, the number of child survivors of domestic abuse is likely to be higher than ever. Prioritising healthy relationships both within education settings and the wider community is how Barking and Dagenham can change attitudes for the next generation.

### What survivors have told us

None of the survivors of domestic abuse we spoke to had a good understanding of it before it happened to them – “I didn't know the signs to look out for, I only found out what domestic abuse was after I'd left my abusive relationship and was speaking to a social worker”. Survivors linked their self-confidence to their vulnerability to domestic abuse – “I was always told I wasn't good enough. I took up school subjects just because my friends did... I had low self esteem”. One survivor told us that he “used to attend all the classes at the church... many were about relationships and marriage so I knew what was wrong and what was right”, but he still ended up in an abusive relationship further down the line. Nevertheless, he realised it was domestic abuse and sought help because of the classes he had attended.



Survivors talked passionately about how young people held the opportunity to change the culture for the future, and how this would make the biggest difference in tackling domestic abuse: “it all comes down to young people... We need to educate the girls from a young age”. Linking to this, survivors were very concerned when they could see their children using some of the same abusive and violent behaviour as their perpetrator – “he hasn’t had much support... [and] now I see my son using the same behaviours as his Dad”.

However, helping young people to learn about healthy relationships is not a panacea. As outlined in this report, healthy relationships education is a key part of a wider system response to domestic abuse and can play an important role in prevention. Schools across the borough have invested in healthy relationships education for their young people, but weaknesses in the approach can still be found. An audit on domestic abuse in the borough completed by the Health Education Partnership, who have provided training to teachers on domestic abuse, found that eight out of 12 schools in the borough felt that although the leadership of their school had expressed strong support for addressing healthy relationships and abuse, staff still identified significant gaps, chiefly related to staff professional development and confidence, including seeking support for themselves if needed. Healthy relationships education is one tool in the box, but without wider awareness and interventions, and support for teachers from specialists, it will not be effective.

### What other evidence shows us

#### Perpetrators told us

Engagement with perpetrators of domestic abuse also highlighted the importance of teaching about relationships outside of the home. One perpetrator of domestic abuse told us that he “grew up not with just my mum and my father not around, [but he] didn’t really have much of an example of what relationships were like...”. Others told us that “schools should have lessons teaching young people how to treat each other – not just about sex... but about respect. It shouldn’t be left up to the parents”.

Perpetrators highlighted that “there need to be more youth spaces for young people to come together and learn... I think about young people that join the church and they may have come from gangs and crime. They will say that they grew up in that environment and went straight into that lifestyle but a friend brought them to church and they changed. Young people can influence young people”. As this highlights, we traditionally view healthy relationships education as the business of schools, but there is a need for a wider conversation which young people and the wider community help to lead.

#### Young people told us

The commission engaged with a total of 220 young people about domestic abuse and healthy relationships through 15 focus groups and workshops, with a range of young people – including mainstream schools, pupil referral units and LGBTQ+ young people. The key themes that emerged from these groups are below:

- **Social media and TV are key in learning about relationships both now and to raise awareness moving forward** – 14 out of the 15 groups of young people noted that they learned about relationships from social media.

Young people said social media was the best way to get messages to young people, but equally that “young people have been educating ourselves a lot more on social media, like Tik Tok”. In a focus group with the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum over half of the group said they would look online for advice around their relationships and domestic abuse more generally in the first instance. When asked how the borough could raise awareness amongst young people, social media came up in every focus group – young people told us that to start conversations and raise awareness, “We need ads on social media promoting awareness on domestic abuse”.

- **Some young people reflected on experiences in the home that they had seen and brought these into their understanding.** When talking about financial abuse “my dad... would just dip into savings account to pay for alcohol”. Another student detailed that “financial abuse is when somebody set up bills in another person’s names and builds up debt in their name”. Detailed understanding from some members of the group, made us aware that it was likely some young people in the room were talking directly from experience. Equally, when asked about where they learned about relationships some young people said “not my parents” or “my parents are bad examples”.
- **Young people linked wider violence to normalisation of domestic abuse** – Knife crime was an issue that young people brought into discussions, referencing both wider thoughts around safety concerns in the borough and discussions around domestic abuse, linking the two together. One young person noted that “knife crime violence is so normalised in the borough, so young people normalise other violence too”.

- **Need for anonymous reporting** – “I would rather talk to someone I didn’t know so they don’t go back to my mum and tell her”
- **Enthusiasm among young people for discussion on domestic abuse** – There was no reluctance at all from any of the young people we spoke to. Once trust was established in the group, they were enthusiastic about discussing healthy relationships and sharing their experiences, and spontaneously acknowledged the importance of these conversations. The idea that young people might be embarrassed or reluctant to have these conversations was not borne out at all by our research.

### What Barking and Dagenham have already done

Barking and Dagenham council has already commissioned a school survey of over 2,000 young people through the School Health Education Unit, at Exeter University, every two years to understand the attitudes of young people towards abusive behaviour. This marks an important step in understanding the views of young people towards domestic abuse – and should be used to work through gaps and areas of focus for the work of young people.

The council have also commissioned the Health Education Partnership who have worked on a whole schools approach to domestic abuse – providing training for teachers on domestic abuse, and also working on staff policies. The Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum is made up of 13 to 19 year olds elected by their peers, who come together to have their say in issues affecting their lives and communities – the BAD Youth Forum has done some fundraising for Refuge charity – this should be built on, with the Youth Forum playing a key role in conversations relating to domestic abuse and young people.

**Therefore the Commission recommends:**

Young ambassadors should play a key role in promoting messages around healthy relationships and domestic abuse

- **Step 1 – Schools in Barking and Dagenham prioritise healthy relationships and domestic abuse education, despite or even because of the challenges of COVID-19**

Teaching on domestic abuse and healthy relationships is now more important than ever. Young people need this education to start now. They need this education to represent the world in which they live – covering key topics like the influence of porn with all young people, but young men in particular. And, where possible they also need this education to cover gender and be applied through a gendered lens, particularly in early education.

The Department for Education has reiterated that relationship education will still be statutory for schools, but have delayed the requirement for full delivery to the summer term 2021. Barking and Dagenham schools must play a leading role in prioritising these subjects and deliver a full programme of health relationships education immediately.

- **Step 2 – The council has oversight on the healthy relationships work that is taking place in schools**

Currently, the council does not have oversight about what happens in schools around healthy relationships. It should play a role in monitoring and auditing the work which is taking place within schools on healthy relationships and domestic abuse – this will allow the council to share best practice among schools, and ensure that schools are prioritising healthy relationships. For schools, this will mean that they are able to learn from best practice approaches and importantly

request support and resources from the council and DA specialists where they need it. It is suggested that a central monitoring report becomes a standing item at the Healthy and Wellbeing Board, and that the Survivors Panel provide some narrative for the report about the work taking place in each school.

- **Step 3 – Recruit a group of culturally diverse young ambassadors of domestic abuse and healthy relationships**

This group should receive funding to develop conversations with their peers. Their role will be to lead conversations in key locations identified by them and relevant to young people in the locality, helping to create messages that will resonate with diverse groups of young people on healthy relationships and domestic abuse, and ensure Barking and Dagenham becomes a place where young people feel they do not need to tolerate and can call out abusive behaviours. The diversity of the group needs to reflect the diversity of Barking and Dagenham's population.

- **Step 4 – Young ambassadors of domestic abuse use social media to create organic conversations to tackle domestic abuse**

In every focus group, young people strongly expressed the view that social media should be used to engage young people in conversations about relationships and domestic abuse. The commission believes that using young people themselves to seed these conversations will be most effective, and that once they have received training the young ambassadors should be free to do this in their own way and in their own words. This will require a level of “letting go” by the local authority but we believe without this freedom, the effectiveness of messaging will be compromised and the opportunity to make real change might be lost.

## Outcome 3: Trauma informed

“

What people don't remember is when I've told my story again, I'm left by myself in the night, reliving it all over again. That one conversation can set my depression off for a year.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

Within the Commission's principles, we have defined trauma-informed as:

**“Trauma is inseparably bound up with systems of power and oppression. For people who have experienced trauma in their lives, public services can unwittingly make things worse by creating situations that feel unsafe or trigger traumatic memories. We will make sure Barking and Dagenham considers the impact of trauma in implementing all our recommendations”.**

The process of the commission has been trauma-informed throughout: survivors have co-produced the commission recommendations and shaped each stage of our work. In order to implement the recommendations, this must continue. Barking and Dagenham has the opportunity to lead the way nationally with a trauma-informed response.

### What survivors told us

Survivors described the wide ranging impact that the trauma of their domestic abuse has had. Some of this is a direct result of being asked to retell traumatic experiences to professionals. “What people don't remember is that when I've told my story again, I'm left by myself in the night, reliving it all over again. That conversation can set my depression off for a year”. Another survivor told us: “I was being triaged for therapy and told my whole story to them, at the end of the call they told me they couldn't help me and I had to heal from that phone call”.

We also heard from survivors about how their trauma can follow them in all aspects of their lives, often in ways non-survivors would never consider. For example, we heard from survivors that they don't answer private numbers, because their perpetrator calls them on a private number. This means that when council or other services call them, they don't answer. One survivor explained about a friend who is also experiencing domestic abuse – “she won't block his number because he'll just call her on private number and Refuge, the council, the police all call her on private numbers”.

We heard how the trauma survivors have experienced prevents them from working. Often it makes it hard to stay in their own home – we heard from one survivor “I've had to redecorate my whole entire house due to trauma”, and another told us “I couldn't cook in the kitchen because he strangled me there, so I relived the trauma every time I went to cook for my child”. This survivor told us about having to arrange her own transfer to a smaller property. Survivors felt that the impact of trauma was not considered by services. One survivor told us that, when she was in contact with social services over her children, “in my early days, I didn't want to be in the same room as my ex. I refused to be in that room and they said I was non-engaging”.

Importantly, survivors have told us about their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the different ways it is triggering for them, reminding them of their abuse. We heard from





The COVID-19 restrictions also resulted in some post-separation abuse from some of our survivors – “a lot of women have found their abusive exes have got back in touch [during lockdown], three of my abusive exes have tried to get back in touch with me.” In one case, a survivor experienced post separation abuse which she had to call the police about, after her perpetrator came to her home after not getting in contact for years.

Another aspect of the pandemic which survivors told us about was the impact of face masks. This was twofold: firstly, face masks make them scared of their perpetrator – “I knew my ex would’ve been one of those guys wearing a hoody and face mask. I know that he would be using a mask as a big excuse to hide his identity in my area. It does make it hard and it makes me panic”. Secondly, within the government’s face mask exemptions list, you are not required to wear a face mask if “you cannot put on, wear, or remove a face covering without severe distress”. For some survivors, wearing face masks can cause severe distress – it can bring back triggering memories from sexual trauma, strangulation or smothering which are common parts of domestic abuse. But it is also traumatic to have to say so.

Survivors were also aware of the impact of the pandemic on incidence of domestic abuse and felt that the government were not doing enough – “domestic abuse didn’t come into the news till April – well I’m not being funny, there was a need for refuge space... what about women in refuges?”. We heard from survivors their concerns that during the pandemic “someone could die in a domestic situation and it could be blamed as coronavirus – I don’t think the homicide rate has doubled, I think it’s gone way beyond that”. Survivors talked about friends who were currently experiencing domestic abuse and how their perpetrators were using the restrictions

survivors during lockdown that “it feels like the government is now my perpetrator”, with government restrictions on going out and socialising reminding them of the restrictions their perpetrator placed on them. Survivors told us about how shopping during the pandemic also reminded them of their abuse. During their abuse, their perpetrator limiting their money and time allowed to go to shopping - “shopping was the thing that affected me the most as a single parent with five kids – I wouldn’t go shopping because I didn’t want to be judged. It was like I was living with him again, and it still feels that way. I don’t know when I will feel safe again going shopping”. National research from Women’s Aid in their ‘Perfect Storm’ report found that 53% of survivors who had experienced abuse in the past, found the pandemic triggering and that it negatively affected their mental health.

and how it was harder for them to get space – again Women’s Aid research shows that 66.7% of survivors still experiencing domestic abuse noted that their abuser was using lockdown or the COVID-19 virus as part of the abuse.

It is of course to be hoped that the relevance of this report will well outlive the pandemic. However, survivors’ responses to the pandemic are cited in detail here because they serve to highlight how unpredictable and constantly evolving trauma can be. This is one of the main reasons why the Commission recommends survivors must not only be at the centre of its own work and recommendations, but of all aspects of the borough’s response, including monitoring and governance. Without this, there is a risk that key issues will not be spotted. Survivors have told us they are keen to be involved in shaping this work in the future. They would relish opportunities to speak to professionals, schools and other survivors about their experiences. They see sharing their experiences with others as hugely important to raise awareness and create change.

#### What other evidence shows us

There is a growing body of evidence for trauma-informed services. When people have a say in their care and treatment, they are more likely to engage with a service. This means that they are less likely to miss an appointment, and less time is spent on staff time for ineffective interventions. Staff also report less burnout, improved relationships with service users and greater collaboration.

We also heard from social workers that they would like the opportunity to engage with survivors of domestic abuse as part of their training and reflective practice, highlighting the appetite among professionals too for trauma-informed services.

#### What Barking and Dagenham has already done

Barking and Dagenham council is not completely new to the concept of trauma-informed services. Its substance misuse services have been commissioned in a trauma-informed way. Trauma-informed approaches have been discussed through the Community Safety Partnership. Through the Community Safety Partnership RockPool Trained a total of 195 professionals, of which 20 are now able to deliver half-day ABC Trauma Informed Training sessions and have delivered to a further 223 staff through sessions arranged by the Community Safety team. Further sessions which have been arranged mean that eventually close to 350 staff will be trained.

Participation and engagement is one of the council’s three strategic priorities as outlined in its 2018-2022 Corporate Plan. The council is doing a large amount to reshape its relationships with residents – empowering residents by enabling greater participation in the community and in public services. However, the Commission believes this needs to go further to ensure that those with lived experience play a key role in service design and policy: a shift from participation to co-production.

**Therefore the Commission recommends:**

Embed trauma-informed approaches into council ways of working

- **Step 1 – Commit to being a trauma-informed council**

The Commission recommends that the council commits to being a trauma-informed council, including becoming one of the first local authorities to join the soon to be established UK National Trauma Council. As detailed earlier the Commission recommends a three point domestic abuse assessment for every decision-making board, with one of the three being a trauma-informed assessment. This will help to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse, and other trauma, are considered in each decision taken by the council. The Commission recommends the council keeps up to date with national policy work on this, through One Small Thing and their work in this area. There are also specific things which survivors have raised which the council could act upon quickly and simply: for instance, for council telephony system should stop calling residents through withheld numbers to ensure survivors feel comfortable to engage with services, without concern that their perpetrator is at the other end of the phone. Alongside this, it will be key to keep trauma-informed approaches in mind when continuing to respond to COVID-19 social distancing requirements within council buildings.



- **Step 2 – Establish a permanent domestic abuse survivors panel for co-production**

Engaging with those with lived experience has huge benefits. Co-production will help to change perspectives and attitudes, while helping to come up with new solutions. It is also important to explore different mechanisms to engage with survivors to allow male survivors and LGBTQ+ survivors to play a key role in the process, as well as heterosexual women who form the vast majority of domestic abuse survivors.

- **Step 3 – Transform the MARAC model to include experts by lived experience**

Ensure there is a survivor of domestic abuse at MARAC, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference, meetings who is reimbursed for their time, and provides the voice of lived experience. This individual would be drawn from a trained panel of survivors, with all other MARAC attendees trained on how to amplify survivor voices and ensure survivors feel supported and are heard in meetings. This would work to change the culture of MARAC meetings.

- **Step 4 – The council must look to include lived experience of key policy priorities as a desired criteria within recruitment**

The council should explore opportunities for guaranteed interviews, or the opportunity to respond with lived experience rather than qualifications within job descriptions. It is proposed that domestic abuse is one of these areas. This would help to create a culture change within the organisation about lived experience, and the impact of trauma.



- **Step 5 – Health partners should develop a specific perinatal domestic abuse locally**

Local and national data highlight the need to ensure that there is a specific local perinatal domestic abuse approach. Barking and Dagenham has the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse in London, and the highest birth rate in England and Wales. This, matched with national evidence that domestic abuse is more likely to increase in pregnancy, leads us to conclude that it will be key for the council and partners to work together specifically on this issue. There is considerable national focus on perinatal mental health, and partners across the borough should play a key role developing a bespoke approach around domestic abuse.



## Outcome 4: Community awareness

“  
In my experience, I’ve found that the community is split between those who have experienced domestic abuse and those who haven’t.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

The Commission was specifically asked to explore attitudes towards domestic abuse in the local community. As the council suspected, what we found was a culture of disbelief and an overwhelming ignorance of the nature and impact of domestic abuse. The Commission agrees with the council that domestic abuse is the result of harmful sexist beliefs that are deeply ingrained in all communities in the UK – and in all the communities in Barking and Dagenham, and that therefore culture change is one of the key objectives the council should adopt.

In terms of the order of implementation of our recommendations, however, the commission is clear that the first step in system-wide change is to improve the response survivors receive from professionals and services. Only when the professional response is of a good quality, is it safe to run wide-ranging work on community awareness. It is also vital to have community ambassadors in place before an awareness campaign begins, to help signpost survivors to the support they need.

### What survivors told us

Survivors have told us that “the community is mixed – between those who understand domestic abuse because they have been through it, and those who do not”. They feel that the Barking and Dagenham community is not aware of what constitutes domestic abuse, nor how to respond to it. Survivors felt that community awareness was key to help survivors who had previously been through abuse to feel believed and

supported by their community, but also importantly to raise awareness amongst those that are currently experiencing domestic abuse. Creating a community that is aware and has conversations about domestic abuse was at the heart of the response survivors wanted to see.

One survivor told us – “I did not know I was living my abuse until after. I never saw no posters, no awareness, no nothing”. Survivors told us they “didn’t know what any of this meant until afterwards – I could’ve been saved once or twice before”. With specific types of abuse, we heard from survivors that “I didn’t even know sexual abuse could happen in a relationship” highlighting that the lack of awareness around the dynamics of an abusive relationship. One survivor told us the community needs to understand “the red flags of perpetrators”. Survivors talked about the need for domestic abuse to be more visible in the borough, to help get the message across.

Survivors also talked of their friends and family not being aware of abuse, or of its impact. “[When he hit me], I remember no one did anything, I was so shocked. I knew it was wrong, I was brought up to hit anyone back if they hit me, but he had just wiped me clean off my feet... so I just ran away” one survivor told us. Another said – “I spoke to one of my friends about it, she said it was normal and asked why I was worried about it, but I knew it wasn’t normal. My dad never hit my mum and my previous boyfriend did not treat me like that. But I don’t know, maybe it was normal”. Survivors

felt from their experience that domestic abuse was normalised in the community, so that their own friends and family failed to understand or to respond.

We also heard about judgement in the community about domestic abuse, with the school playground a common example given. Survivors told us how they had opened up to the mother of their child’s friend about how they had experienced domestic abuse, and that this had resulted in their child no longer being allowed to see their friend. Another survivor told us: “When I told my friend about something that happened to me, she said ewww but when I told [a survivor], she totally got it”. We also heard of the impact that a positive friend can have: “I had really good neighbours. Whenever she heard me crying or scream, she came and checked on me. I didn’t know what was right and what was wrong and I checked with her.”

Survivors also told us about the need for more awareness of how abuse manifests in different relationships. We heard about how residents and services alike did not recognise abuse within same sex relationships as domestic abuse, meaning LGBTQ+ survivors did not get the support that they needed.

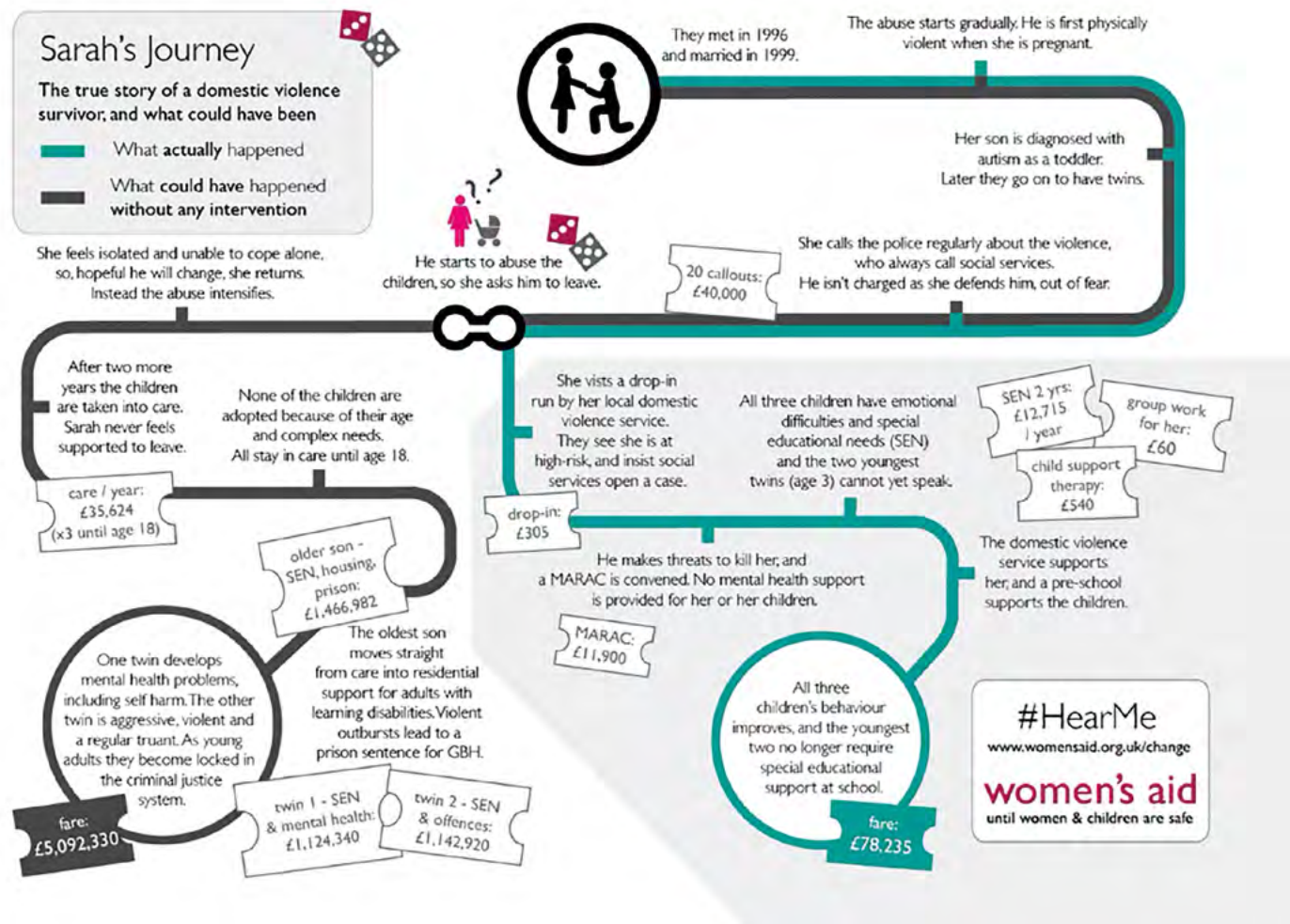
Survivors told us about how their perpetrator isolated them from their friends and family, using this culture of normalisation and judgement to their advantage. They explained how their families and friends would talk about not liking their perpetrator, rather than understanding and acknowledging their abusive behaviour. “My mum didn’t like him, but that just pushed me away from her. If someone had given me the details of domestic abuse hotline or Refuge, that would have made a difference.”

### What other evidence shows us

The community acts as the first line of defence for domestic abuse. A survey of survivors run by Wearside Women in Need in 2020 asked survivors who they told about their domestic abuse. It found that 62% of survivors told a friend or family member about the abuse before they told anybody else. Only 11% of survivors first told the police about abuse, and only 4% of survivors told a specialist domestic abuse service first. This highlights the key role that the community plays in domestic abuse, borne out by our own research, as the first point of call for most survivors, with many never wanting to talk to a professional at all.

Importantly, community awareness plays a key prevention role. A community which is aware, and knows how to respond to domestic abuse is a key pillar of a system which promotes early intervention. When the response to abuse can take place in the community, it can prevent escalation and the high-risk and crisis cases which end up with statutory services. We also heard from non-survivor residents about the need for the community to play a key role in the response to domestic abuse: “Why does it have to be the council doing this? I feel like it should be parents and people in the community. If the council keeps talking about the same thing you find that people will just become desensitised to it.”





**Women's Aid Change that Lasts**

Women's Aid Change that Lasts is best practice in the domestic abuse sector when it comes to increased community awareness. It aims to increase the number of women and children living free from abuse by improving the response survivors receive from people in the community, from the first time they speak about their abuse, to their contact with professionals, to achieving freedom and long term safety. The system is made up of three parts:

**- Ask Me** – This is the community-based response including raising awareness, safe enquiry, signposting and importantly a community that believes survivors and doesn't accept abuse.

**- Trusted Professionals** – This provides support, advice and safety planning in a range of service settings including health visitors, drug and alcohol services, housing and others.

**- Expert Voices** – This provides training for specialist domestic violence services, including IDVAs, refuges, outreach and community workers.

After having the training, 94% of community ambassadors discussed their training, 82% challenged victim blaming myths and stereotypes, 44% used social media to talk about domestic abuse, 28% put up a poster about domestic abuse. The majority of disclosures the ambassadors received came from friends

or family, followed by clients or customers and then colleagues. Women's Aid Change that Lasts provides help earlier and saves money to statutory services, the early intervention that the community ambassador scheme offers, the cost could have been over £5million to the public purse.

**What Barking and Dagenham has already done**

During the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, every year, partners across the borough hold awareness-raising events.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the borough has worked with colleagues in the Cultural Partnership to create a Community Safeguarding campaign which was co-produced with survivors

of domestic abuse. The #BDProtect campaign also worked with local artists to design artwork to be used online and offline. Stickers were produced to go on pharmacy bags across the borough, and on food boxes given out during the pandemic.

The Commission applauds these efforts, but is mindful that awareness-raising without community ambassadors or an adequate response from professionals could create risk. The visibility of domestic abuse must be a priority all year round. It is also important that the diverse communities in the borough – led by survivors – have the opportunity to influence and own campaigns and messages.



**Therefore the commission recommends:**

Make domestic abuse visible

- **Step 1 – A community ambassador scheme to increase domestic abuse awareness and train up community champions**

The Commission recommends a community ambassador scheme to increase domestic abuse awareness. It is suggested that BD Collective would be key to provide links with members of the community to create ‘safe spaces’ and recruit community ambassadors. It is also suggested that businesses should play a key role in the community ambassador scheme, so they are able to spot the signs of domestic abuse and deal with disclosures. The community ambassador scheme should also importantly raise awareness in the community about LGBTQ+ domestic abuse. The Commission views Women’s Aid Change that Lasts as best practice in the sector.

- **Step 2 – Use the Citizens’ Alliance Network to start resident conversations/ownership of campaigns**

Use Barking and Dagenham’s existing online platform to start resident conversations about domestic abuse, and allow residents to feed their views into campaigns around domestic abuse and volunteer for specific roles.

- **Step 3 – Compel local businesses to play a key role in tackling domestic abuse**

Local businesses in Barking and Dagenham should play a key role in community ambassador schemes, undertaking training for domestic abuse. Businesses and employers in the borough should also look to create a staff policy on domestic abuse to ensure that staff who are experiencing domestic abuse get the support that they need. Employers in the borough should learn from the council’s staff policy which won a PPMA silver award and offers 10 days’ leave. In addition to this, the council’s approach to social value – compelling businesses it has procurement contracts with to demonstrate their value to the community – should include tackling domestic abuse as a matter of priority.

- **Step 4 – Launch a borough-wide “We Believe You” campaign**

A top down, high-profile awareness campaign from the local authority can play a key role in making the issue visible, and sending a clear message that survivors of domestic abuse are believed until proven otherwise. Local businesses should also look to use this messaging. The campaign needs significant profile on billboards and all council materials. Messaging must be simple and unified.



- **Step 5 – Launch bottom up campaign about domestic abuse**

Offer seed funding to encourage organisations (VCSE groups, faith groups, residents etc) to launch tailored campaign messages to raise awareness of domestic abuse which, while adhering to the Commission’s principles and the central “We Believe You” message, are given freedom to flex to meet the priorities of particular groups. One example of this would be funding Shpresa, the Eastern European Resource Centre and Refuge’s Eastern European service, to work together on a campaign focusing around “We Believe You”, ensuring that this was translated into different languages, and also importantly ensuring that the wider campaign messages resonated with the Eastern European community’s experiences of domestic abuse. Another would be to ensure that specific campaigns could be run by and



for LGBTQ+ people, centred on the core “We Believe You” message but flexed for different genders and experiences of abuse. This will require considerable courage from the council to fund messaging it does not control, but the Commission believes this is necessary in order for survivors in all parts of the borough to benefit from culture change on this issue.

## Outcome 5: Perpetrators and challenging abusive behaviours

“Perpetrators go from victim to victim. My perpetrator has a record after me – he’s been charged with DA for someone else after me.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

If perpetrators effectively commit abuse with impunity, without experiencing any pressure to change their behaviour or being subject to the criminal justice system, then domestic abuse is accepted as normal behaviour. Unfortunately this is the case in Barking and Dagenham. The borough is by no means unusual in this. In fact the same could be said for the vast majority of the country. Responding to perpetrators in a robust manner requires considerable investment, not least because such a response is wholly dependent on support being available for survivors. Despite the cost, there is no alternative for any locality aiming to be a place where domestic abuse is not tolerated.

Survivor safety and interventions for survivors should always come before perpetrator interventions. This means that the Commission recommends that perpetrator interventions should not be the first priority. This does not mean they are not important, and we urge the council to ensure this part of our report is not overlooked.

### What survivors told us

Survivors told us that there was a real sense that as victims of domestic abuse, they faced the consequences whilst their perpetrator got away with their behaviour. “Nothing is being done to the perpetrators in my situation, he’s completely fine enjoying his life”, whereas she had to move home. Another survivor noted, “why do we have

to move when he’s fine?”. We also heard from a survivor that “I feel like everyone is laughing at me. I know he’s laughing at me when he pleaded guilty then going out and partying”. Overall, there was a sense that perpetrators “do so much damage in one family’s life but they don’t pay for it”.

We heard from survivors that perpetrators “go from victim to victim”, heard of perceived imbalance in terms of support – “he got a six month perpetrator programme and I didn’t get anything. I didn’t get any therapy or support group”. We also heard from survivors scepticism and an awareness of the difficulty of getting perpetrators to change their behaviour: one survivor told us “there are people out there who won’t get help, he thinks there’s nothing wrong with him.”

Survivors were hugely critical of the criminal justice system and the lack of justice. Overall, there was a strong sense that “perpetrators are not held to account” – “it’s law that needs to change. We can’t make the perpetrators do more, can we?”. Survivors told us how despite Domestic Violence Protection Orders being in place, their perpetrator had visited their property and breached their orders. Survivors felt that current legal protections were not enough to ensure their safety and were not taken seriously by perpetrators.

The need for enforcement was strongly referenced by survivors - “they need to be named and shamed just like murderers”. Survivors talked about the injustice of the difference between the way domestic abuse was treated compared to other crimes – one told us “If it was a gang attack, he would get a much more severe sentence rather than DV” and another “Normal GBH is taken more seriously than DV – GBH gets prison, DV gets community service”.

Survivors also told us how perpetrators who have undergone behaviour change programmes, should be role models within the community and setting an example of how it is possible to change.

### What other evidence shows us

As well as the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse in London, Barking and Dagenham also has high-harm domestic abuse. Professionals frequently told us that they did not know how to deal with perpetrators and would like more training on understanding how best to respond to the perpetrators they encountered in their day to day practice.

Nationally, Women’s Aid research shows that less than one in ten of incidents of domestic abuse reported to the police ended with the perpetrator receiving a custodial sentence. The new Domestic Abuse Bill will improve the legal response – the Bill provides for the breach of an order to be a criminal offence, punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment, or a fine, or both.

We also spoke with perpetrators themselves, to understand their perspectives. Perpetrators told us how they felt in general there was not enough support out there for men – “from what I have heard, there is not enough support for men... whether you are the abuser or abusee, the embarrassment of coming out about it stops you from getting support”. One perpetrator also told us about the benefits of his intervention – “I’m so

grateful for what the council have done for me, they have been so supportive and quick in helping me find a place.” And how the programme is “independent and impartial. You realise there are a lot of people that have been in your situation”. Talking about the programme, we heard “when I was first referred to Cranstoun, I was nervous. I thought people would judge me and assume I was a wife beater and also the other men would be massive guys, you assume people would judge you straight away”. This highlights the need to encourage open conversations about abusive behaviour and challenging it.

In terms of their motivation to change and undertake a behaviour change programme, one perpetrator told us “most men on the course are there because they have to be, but also they want to change”. We heard about their desire to better themselves. Another perpetrator talked about “The will to better myself, I don’t think a lot of myself, I don’t have a lot of confidence. I decided to start doing a bit of exercise, and I felt a bit more confident. I just decided that I wanted to make myself better. I don’t want to be that person I once was, I’m a really nice guy when I’m not getting drunk but recently I haven’t thought much of myself.”

We are conscious of the minimisation of abuse contained in almost all of these quotes from the perpetrator interviews. This in itself is instructive. The one thing survivors were anxious to warn us about was the ability of perpetrators to manipulate professionals and gain sympathy. This is why we strongly recommend that Barking and Dagenham create an environment in which survivors are believed and supported, professionals in all agencies understand the dynamics of abuse and the manipulative tactics of perpetrators, and the police in particular have a robust response to all of the crimes that occur in a domestic abuse situation. Only then is it safe and appropriate to offer support and enforcement to change perpetrator behaviour.



**What Barking and Dagenham has already done**

The perpetrator response in Barking and Dagenham is underdeveloped. It takes time to build up a well-established and an effective response. There was no work with perpetrators at all before 1 October 2019, when Refuge took over the contract to deliver the borough's specialist service. The response now in place is for those in touch with tier 3 social care. In addition, during the coronavirus pandemic, Cranstoun has been delivering their men and masculinities 24-week programme in the borough, which is aimed at behaviour change.

The Housing Perpetrator reMOVE abuse innovation programme has also been launched by the council, in partnership with police colleagues and Cranstoun. This pilot looks to remove the perpetrator from the home providing them with intervention and accommodation. It is testing the hypothesis that this will improve outcomes for both the survivor and the perpetrator, as well as reducing the cost of new accommodation by rehousing the perpetrator while allowing the survivor (and usually any children in the family) to stay in their home.

However, the commission has some concerns about this approach. Not all survivors wish to remain in the property where they have experienced severe trauma. This report outlines elsewhere the fact that the survivor response is by no means adequate in the borough, and that survivors frequently receive an unsatisfactory service from the housing service. The approach to rehousing perpetrators outlined above could be the right way forward, but we feel this is difficult to judge in the current context. There is significant and long-term work to be done to build up a tiered approach to managing perpetrators which reflects national best practice. This is not to say that Barking and Dagenham is unusual in being at such an early stage of its response to perpetrators. Quite the opposite is the case, and the borough's openness to new thinking and awareness of the need to improve are to be commended.

**Therefore the Commission recommends:**

Tiered interventions for perpetrators and an embedded perpetrator response

- **Step 1 – Tiered interventions for perpetrators, which are all Respect Accredited**

A well developed local perpetrator response should have tiered interventions, which meet the national Respect standards – reflecting known best practice.

- **Step 2 – Use a MATAC model for high risk perpetrators**

Multi-Agency Tasking and coordination protocol or MATAC, in place in the North East, involves regular meetings led by the police, with key partners, to plan bespoke interventions that target and disrupt serial perpetrators and/or support them to address their behaviour. This is particularly appropriate given the high rates of severe harm in Barking and Dagenham. In Sunderland, this approach has shown a 61% reduction in overall offending of perpetrators after MATAC intervention and a 65% reduction in domestic abuse related offending. Initial analysis of the social return on investment study suggest a return of £14.09 social value per £1 invested, a high percentage of this coming from the positive impact on victims.

- **Step 3 – Perpetrator training for front-line staff**

Professionals have outlined that this is a gap for them, and survivors have also told us about how professionals were often charmed by their perpetrator. Providing perpetrator training for front-line staff once tiered interventions have been established will help to ensure that perpetrators' behaviour is understood, and they are dealt with effectively and with reduced risk.

- **Step 4 – A community training perpetrator scheme**

The commission believes that community ambassadors can play a key role, and that the opportunity for community conversations is a key part of any tiered perpetrator response. This allows for conversations that challenge abusive behaviours to be widespread in the community, enabling those using abusive behaviours to get help. Best practice in this area is in its infancy. The Commission recommends that Barking and Dagenham become a pilot area for the Make a Change programme, a partnership between Women's Aid and Respect.

## Outcome 6: Community groups and community spaces

“

You give each other confidence and then we're like fireworks going off into the world.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

The coronavirus pandemic has shown the power of cooperation and mutual support in communities. There is a national conversation about how to harness this for the future, building on one of the few opportunities created by the pandemic. In Barking and Dagenham there is an opportunity to build on the community groups that have come together in a borough where the number of small, local voluntary organisations was less than in many other parts of London. The Commission urges the council to build on this, because a thriving network of voluntary organisations is vital to creating a community response to domestic abuse. One of the points most frequently made in conversations with survivors was the huge benefit they experienced just from meeting together and, as part of the Commission process, being introduced to community spaces which felt safe, welcoming and empowering.

### What survivors told us

For survivors, the opportunity to come together with other survivors and from there to raise awareness of domestic abuse in the wider community was very highly valued. They clearly told us this should be a priority, and that there are not enough spaces in the borough where survivors can come together. Survivors talked about how “there's a group for people with cocaine addictions, what about domestic abuse?”, while another survivor stated “we've got alcoholics anonymous, why don't we have one for domestic abuse? It's hard; you can't have that story with any Tom, Dick or Harry”.

The process of coming together as a group to engage with the Commission had its own benefits which they want to continue: “you give each other confidence and then we're like fireworks going off into the world” one survivor stated. They spoke about the need for a purpose in life for survivors whose lives have been turned upside down: “friends of mine who were in abusive relationships who don't have kids said they have nothing to wake up for”. Survivors talked about their ambition for these groups to provide moral support. For example some survivors we spoke to had experienced disclosing their abuse to utility providers, with a positive outcome, and were very anxious to support other survivors to do the same. Survivors are passionate about being part of the response to domestic abuse – “the lack of support from services makes me want to set up something on my own. I know the help that they need, and I can help them get it”. The Commission clearly recommends that this lack of support from agencies is rectified, but nevertheless there is a will to act on the part of survivors that presents a significant opportunity.

Survivors also told of the benefits for them of getting involved in community groups, or running their own group. “After you leave domestic abuse, you're leaving that situation with no self worth. To be able to do your career or volunteering, plays a big role with self worth... [you] feel like you're part of your community”, one survivor told us.



We also heard from survivors that it's important to have neutral spaces for people to come together. We heard in particular that this can play a key role in tackling cultural assumptions. Survivors told us that community spaces linked to but independent of faith groups and premises provided an essential forum for open discussions about challenging domestic abuse within a faith context. Survivors also told us it was really important to have different cultural groups talking about their shared experience of domestic abuse to tackle normalisation. If some think domestic abuse is normal because their mother, sisters, aunts have all experienced it, the chance to have a discussion in their own community that tackles cultural myths could be life-changing or even life-saving. Survivors also want spaces and groups for their sons and other boys – one survivor, a single mother, told us that there needs to be more support for black boys who express a need for male role models, having seen how much her son had benefited from such an opportunity.

### What other evidence shows us

Professionals have also told us about the need for more community-based informal work which can help those experiencing domestic abuse, before residents end up at the social work front door. One social worker told us “Culturally, the borough keeps quiet about domestic abuse. The borough should run coffee mornings where people should just talk as a community”. This highlights a key point: the high return on investment from community-based groups. These groups are so low-cost that even if they only prevent one person from entering into statutory services they will earn a positive return on investment.

The groups can also provide information for friends and family who are concerned about domestic abuse, and help to make domestic abuse more visible. The impact of domestic abuse lasts for a number of years, well beyond the capacity of specialist interventions.



These groups can provide support after specialist support ends, as well as reaching those who don't want to seek specialist support at all – either as a gateway or, in some cases, providing all they need.

A significant part of the huge economic cost of domestic abuse is the lost economic output of survivors. The Home office estimates that lost output of survivors accounts for £7,245 of the economic cost of domestic abuse per survivor, and £14,098 million of the overall annual economic and social cost of domestic abuse to England and Wales. A volunteering route that builds on survivors' lived experience and commonly held desire to help others and prevent further abuse is an obvious route to employment. In fact many women employed in the specialist domestic abuse sector, up to managerial and senior management level, are survivors who began as volunteers.

#### **What Barking and Dagenham has already done**

During the coronavirus pandemic, Barking and Dagenham community and social sector mobilised a network of support called BDCAN. BDCAN is a local platform for the co-ordination of social support provided by hundreds of local volunteers and orchestrated by an alliance of voluntary and faith organisations from nine locality hubs across the borough. This highlights the community spirit that should be built on and applied to domestic abuse.

A huge amount of regeneration is also taking place in Barking and Dagenham: over the next 20 years the borough plans to build more than 50,000 new homes and create 20,000 new jobs. Ensuring that the borough in 20 years benefits domestic abuse survivors will be key to creating a lasting legacy. In particular, the Commission strongly recommends that new housing developments must build in the physical spaces required for community activity, including safe spaces for women to meet.

Refuge, providers of the borough's contracted specialist service, are developing a peer mentor service which trains up survivors of domestic abuse to support other survivors within the community. Currently, developing the service has to be balanced with responding to crisis intervention – they started training around 20 individuals in December 2020 and are aiming to grow this from there.

#### **Therefore the commission recommends:**

Use CAN, momentum from the pandemic and the opportunities provided by new development to allow support groups to grow

- **Step 1 – Enable survivors of domestic abuse to set up support groups in the borough**

Survivors need some resource to enable them to set up mutual support and the council should provide this. The council should launch a fund which survivors can apply to, managed by survivors themselves, to set up survivor-led community support and outreach.

- **Step 2 – Resource the specialist domestic abuse service to provide a peer mentor service**

Refuge charity, currently the specialist domestic abuse service provider, are currently developing their peer mentor support service. In order to help grow this, and allow it to take place alongside the service's business as usual crisis intervention work, the commission recommends that a peer mentor service should be a stand alone part of the borough's commissioned service, with ring-fenced additional funding to allow it to take place in addition to crisis-intervention work.

- **Step 3 – The council should ensure that all new housing developments have community spaces within them**

Consultation with commissioners and survivors, as well as wider research, highlights that residents, and women in particular, feel safe when there are community spaces within housing developments. Community spaces offer survivors of domestic abuse physical locations to come together for support groups. A workshop run by the Commission for senior

staff from several local agencies also found there was unanimous agreement that community spaces, and specifically spaces where women-only meetings could be held, are essential. The volume of housing development happening in the borough is a golden opportunity to ensure this resource is in place.

- **Step 4 – Use the Citizens' Alliance Network to help both women's groups, and domestic abuse specific support groups to flourish both online and offline**

The Citizens' Alliance Network is a network developed by the council, currently online only, to enable residents to have a say in things that matter to them. Once lockdown restrictions ease, there will also be face to face and in person meetings. The network is currently still being shaped, but was used during COVID-19 to provide food for vulnerable residents. The decisions about the network's future must be led by the Commission's recommendations.

- **Step 5 – Learn from programmes of positive male role models in the borough to spread awareness of positive masculinity**

Men have told us they do not feel there is enough support for them in the borough and young boys have clearly shown, during interviews for the Commission, that they need and want to talk about relationships and masculinity. There are few opportunities to be exposed to positive masculinity – and a plethora of environments that promote the very opposite. Creating a community of men that lead by positive example and spread awareness of positive masculinity can create a safer culture for all.

## Outcome 7: Child survivors of domestic abuse

“

My eldest child needs support the most – I can see aspects of his Dad’s behaviour in him but there’s no support for him to tackle that.”

– Domestic abuse survivor

### What survivors told us

The survivors we spoke to confirmed the view of commissioners that children must be considered primary victims of domestic abuse, not merely “witnesses”. They were deeply upset and worried about the impact on their children, which influenced all areas of their lives. In particular, survivors told us about that their children had lost their community – “nothing happened to [the perpetrator], but we lost our school and playground. My son wants to go back to the green space, the school, playing with his friends has kept him going – that was his therapy”. The mental health impacts of this change in setting for children is also stark – “when my son was suffering and having panic attacks in school, I kept telling him that it was the last move before settling”. Another survivor told us “he struggles with it now. My eldest son who is 14 – I got calls in Y7 saying he wasn’t engaging and again in Y8, that’s when I realised it was the domestic abuse”.

In terms of support, we heard from survivors that “their minds don’t know how to process it – as a child [survivor of domestic abuse], I didn’t know what to think.” Survivors felt that currently, children’s experiences of domestic abuse are only considered by professionals in terms of child protection – “Why is the impact on children not recognised outside of child protection? Why is there a lack of emotional support for children and young people who are affected?”.

We also heard from survivors about their concerns when they witnessed behaviours in their children that echoed the perpetrator – “My eldest child needs support the most – I can see aspects of his Dad’s behaviour in him but there’s no support for him to tackle that”.

Child survivors themselves told us about the abuse “I saw it, I was scared but I didn’t talk about it” and one male child survivor told us that the perpetrator “[tries] to be your friend and gain your trust”.

Survivors also told us that they had struggled to know how to have conversations with their children about what they are witnessing or have witnessed: an incredibly stressful and upsetting conversation for both parties. “I couldn’t talk about it with my children, because I didn’t want to cry in front of them. I didn’t know what I was experiencing at the time so how could I explain it to them?” Another survivor told us “It would be nice if there was a service that could support the children and me, and help me have the conversation with them”.

Another survivor mentioned the intersectional experiences her son would face, and that she felt her son was being failed by his school as a black young person specifically. “My son was in the top set in primary school and then he was put in a lower set in secondary. When I confronted the school they told me they felt her would be better



suited in a lower set”. She explained that she felt black boys were treated differently in school and that especially given her son’s experiences of domestic abuse, he needed support. “Schools are dumbing down black boys”. She said because her son didn’t have a positive male role model to look up to at home, and she recognised the same gap in the lives of other young black boys, she wanted to start her own group to support them and raise their expectations about what they could achieve and contribute.

### What other evidence shows us

At a national level, the domestic abuse bill, which is awaiting royal assent at the time of writing, will recognise children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right.

Women’s Aid estimates that 14.2% of children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse at some point in their childhood. Every child survivor of domestic abuse

is affected differently, and importantly there is no automatic cause and effect relationship between witnessing domestic abuse as a child, and becoming either a victim or a perpetrator later in life. The key issue is that children and young people must be able to access support for the trauma they have experienced, not because they are seen as future victims or perpetrators, but to address their experiences as victims in the here and now.

Professionals also told us about the need for gender specific resources – they wanted the ability to tailor support to the specific experiences of young people of different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations and so on.

Respect has developed a significant body of work with young people who are showing abusive behaviours, which is best practice in the sector for addressing these concerns. The Respect Young People’s Programme is a



programme for families where children or young people aged between 10 and 16 are abusive and violent towards people close to them, and is targeted to reduce risk factors associated with later offending and aggressive behaviour. The evaluation found that: “Two thirds of parents reported improvements in their child’s overall mental health and conduct” and all indicators for both children and parents showed significant improvement.

#### **What Barking and Dagenham has already done**

Through the specialist service delivered by Refuge, there are two workers providing support to children and young people directly. One worker supports children between the ages of 12 and 17, and the other supports children under 12. The borough’s social work with children is committed to meaningful engagement with children and hearing the voice of the child in all practice. Through the Early Help team the council runs a programme for survivors called AVA (Against Violence and Abuse): this 10 week programme runs 3 times a year, supporting around 10 women and 10 children during each session. The Commission heard that this programme is hugely popular with those have undertaken it – as one survivor wrote: “AVA is a 10 week step-by-step course for women and children on domestic abuse and how we can stay safe... we would attend with our child, they were in a different room to us and they also built friendships”.

Survivors who had gone through the programme told us how “the penny was dropping week by week that domestic abuse wasn’t just physical, it was mental, emotional, financial, sexual and coercive” and that the group marks “huge new beginnings for us and our children”. However, they noted that only one of their children was allowed to take part in the programme at one time, which meant they had to work out who they thought needed support the most.

Despite the above, the Commission’s view is that there is more to be done, both by the council itself and by other partners, to improve the support that child survivors of domestic abuse receive. For a borough with the highest proportion of under 16s in England and Wales, and the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse in London, it is inevitable that there will be a very large number of child survivors of domestic abuse, and it is not satisfactory that the only direct support is the AVA programme which is itself limited to one child per family. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, when rates of domestic abuse increased and children spent more time at home due to school closures, providing child survivors with the support they need is now urgent. Partners across the system, including police and health, need to address this unmet need in the community to allow Barking and Dagenham young people to thrive.

#### **Therefore the Commission recommends:**

Specifically tailored programmes and interventions for children to support their mental health and help them recover from domestic abuse

- **Step 1 – Increase capacity of existing AVA programme within the council**

We have heard from survivors about the big impact that the AVA programme run by Community Solutions. We recommend that all children in a family should be able to benefit from the programme.

- **Step 2 – Commit to language change across the system to “child survivors of domestic abuse” in line with national Domestic Abuse Bill**

The new Domestic Abuse Bill acknowledges that children should be considered by all agencies as survivors in their own right, with specific needs which may be different from those of the non-abusing parent in the home. The council should commit to making this language change immediately across services. In making this change, it is also important to challenge the response of children’s social work which currently sees children too often as victims of neglect by the non-abusing parent rather than of the domestic abuse which that parent is also suffering. The Commission believes that the recommendations under this outcome can only be achieved when the provisions for survivors outlined in the rest of this report are put in place as well.

- **Step 3 – Work with schools across the borough to ensure behaviour policies are trauma-informed**

Survivors told us about how domestic abuse has affected their child’s behaviour at school. Schools across the borough should ensure that

trauma is included in their behavioural policies so that the link between behavioural issues and domestic abuse is acknowledged.

- **Step 4 – Increase capacity of tailored programmes and interventions for young people provided by specialist services to allow for gender specific resources and support groups**

There is a need to increase the capacity of tailored interventions for young people to meet the unmet demand in the community, and also a need to ensure that there are gender specific resources for children and young people to access varied support which acknowledges that child survivors require different support depending on their situation.

- **Step 5 – Health and police to invest in specialist support for young survivors of domestic abuse**

As the borough with the highest proportion of under 16s in England and Wales and the highest police reported rates of domestic abuse, there is a need for support for child survivors to be in place and coordinated across partners. Mental health services should have bespoke work for child survivors, given the likely high number in Barking and Dagenham. Police colleagues should also ensure that child survivors have the right support that they need during any criminal prosecutions. The Commission recommends a new working group is established on child survivors of domestic abuse across partner agencies, bringing together senior officers from across agencies to develop a bespoke borough-wide response for child survivors.

# The cost benefit of the recommendations

Survivors have told us that these recommendations “give them hope”, and that the process of co-producing them has “made [us] feel that there’s light at the end of the tunnel. We didn’t get our justice, but we got our justice in another way by helping others”. Perhaps above all else, the commissioners strongly urge the council and all its partners to continue the process we have begun of supporting survivors themselves to be the driving force behind the fundamental systemic changes this report recommends.

It should be enough that our recommendations will improve the life chances of survivors, and create a culture where they are believed, and where domestic abuse is no longer normalised or tolerated. However, we recognise that the economic realities in which today’s public and voluntary services operate, particularly in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, mean that all agencies are far more likely to embrace change if there is a cost benefit. Fortunately, the cost benefits of our recommendations are both significant and well evidenced.

There is a considerable body of research demonstrating the cost to public funds of domestic abuse. We have not summarised it all here, however, there are some key highlights which we draw to the council’s attention, while urging further research if it is felt to be needed.

## Cost benefit analysis evidence

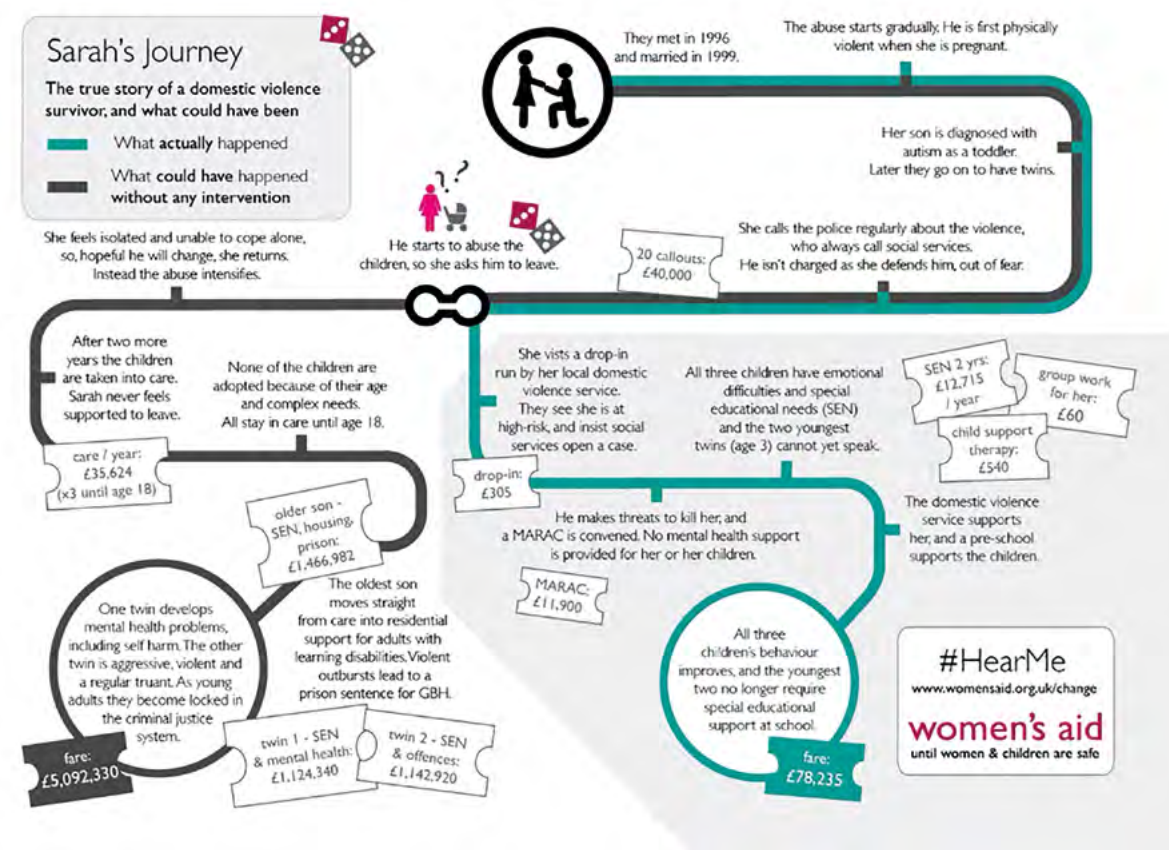
The cost of domestic abuse to local authorities across the country is huge. Research by the Local Government Association and Safer Portsmouth Partnership on the direct cost to council services of domestic abuse found that for a population of 209,100 the cost of domestic abuse is £2,506,288 per year. Barking and Dagenham has a population of 211,998, is broadly comparable in size although there is more deprivation, meaning the cost is likely to be higher. The costs in the Portsmouth research include:

- Fiscal cost to housing - £555,830 p/a
- Fiscal cost to children’s social care - £975,229 p/a
- Fiscal cost to adult social care - £975,229 p/a

**£2,506,288 per year**

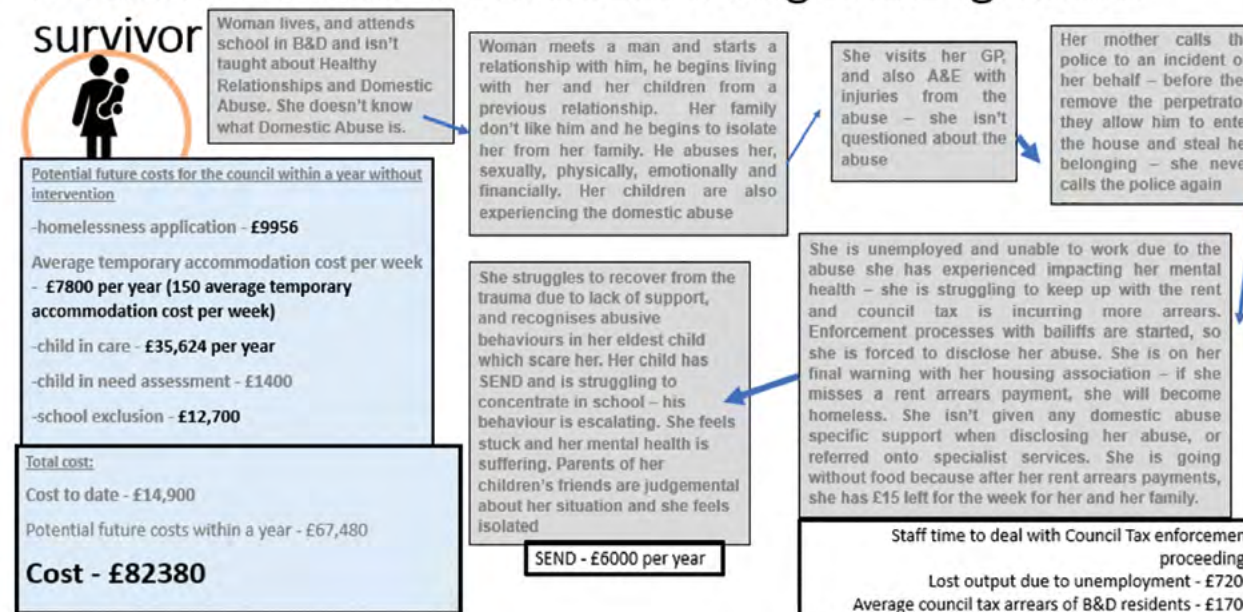
**This means that the total estimated cost of domestic abuse over a five-year period is £12,531,440.**

Research by Women’s Aid, as part of their Change that Lasts approach, has shown that the potential journey of a survivor where intervention takes place at a late stage (as is most often the case in Barking and Dagenham at present) can be as much as £5 million for one family, compared to £78,235 when early intervention happens.



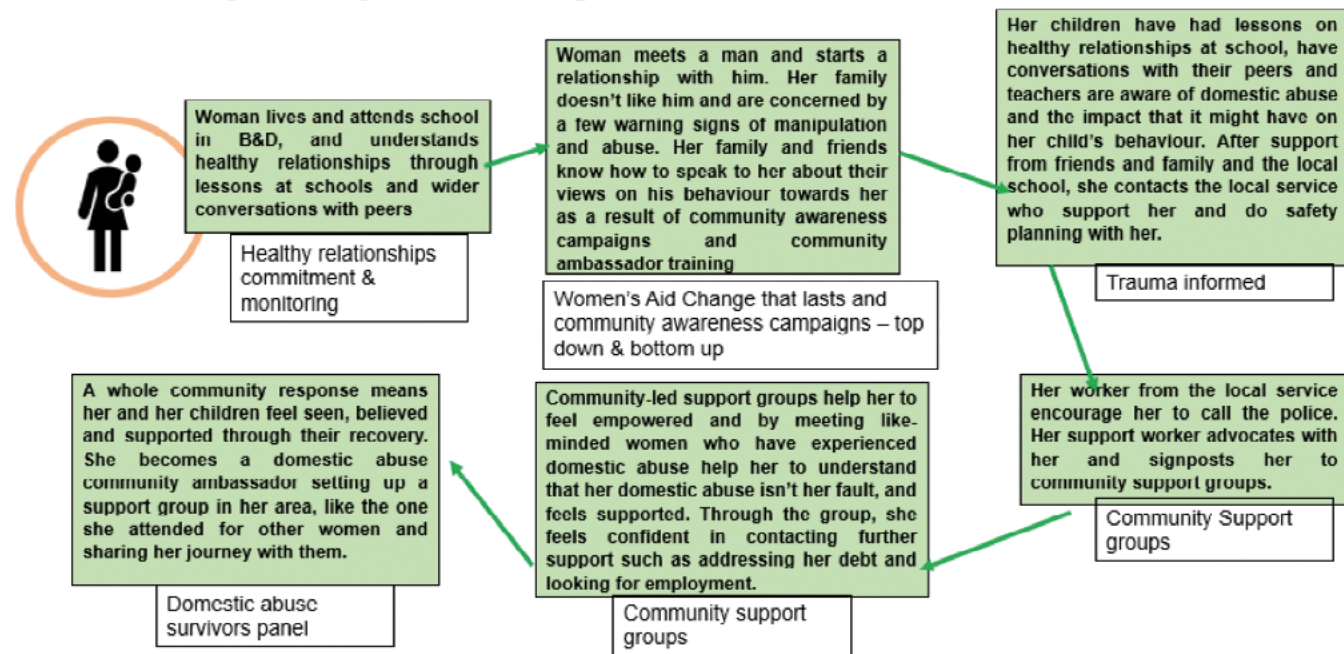
Based on this, we have produced our own survivor journeys, based on the true stories of our Survivor-panel, to highlight the estimated direct cost to the local authority in the current system, and how each of the recommendations could improve the survivor journey in Barking and Dagenham.

## Survivor panel journey: before commission recommendations from local Barking and Dagenham

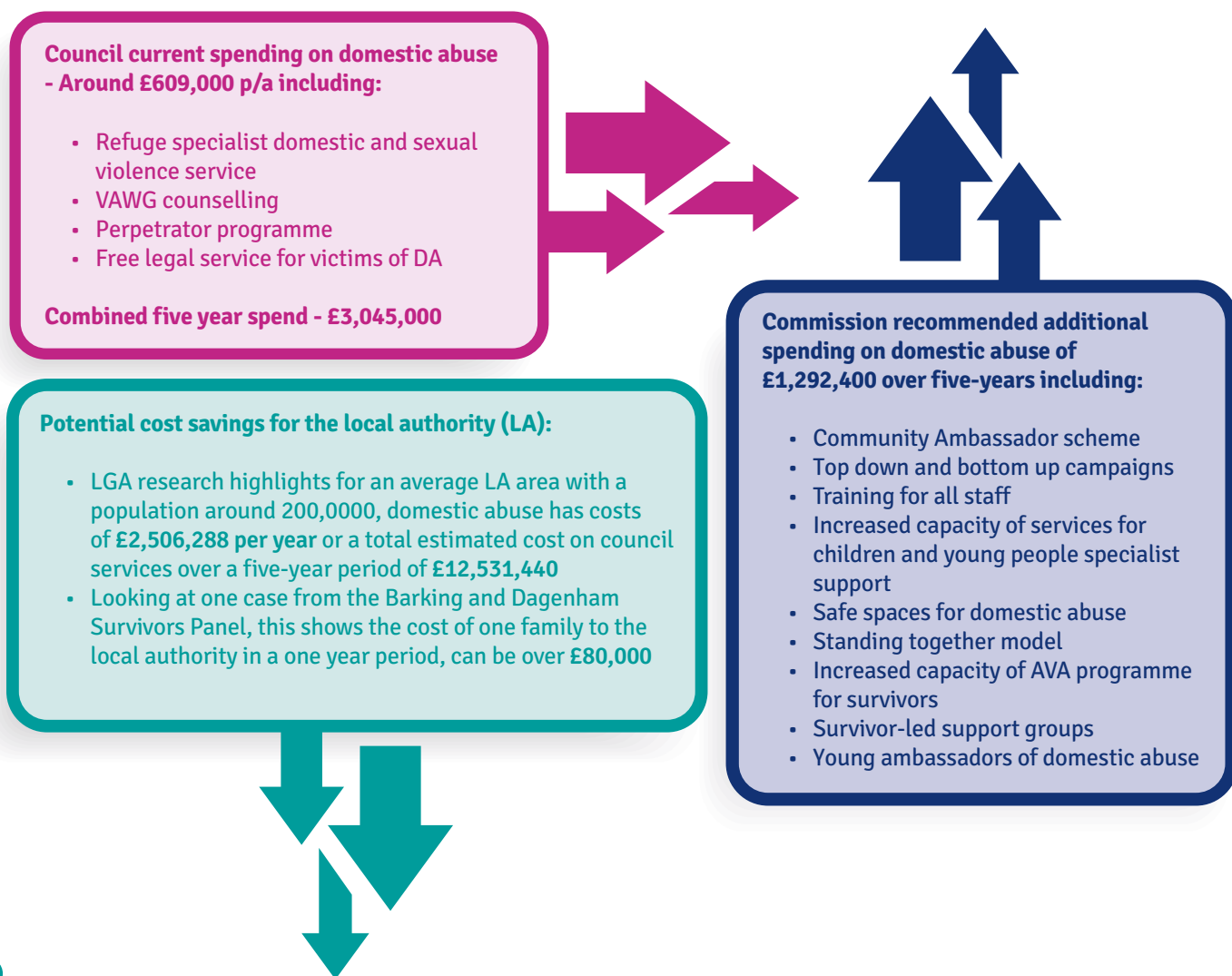




### Survivor journey: following commission recommendations



### Potential cost savings



## Conclusion



This report outlines a radical vision for the next five years of how to create long-term change in the community around domestic abuse. Although there are some key actions and quick wins, which can and should, be taken now. The steps and recommendations outlined in this report requires determined action by the whole community, started over a five year period and continued over a generation to make real and lasting change.

The Commission was set three tasks: to address the cultural normalisation of domestic abuse in the borough; to improve the council's own services and the services of partners in the borough; and to provide a toolkit for others to use. The Commission's conclusion is that the way to address these three asks are interlinked. The commission found attitudes towards domestic abuse are held by professionals and residents alike and recommends the way to change is for the council to lead the way in creating culture change among staff so that "We Believe You" becomes the response to

domestic abuse survivors, every time. And then for the council to lobby partners to do the same. Tackling domestic abuse should also be a core value and part of core business for all council services and importantly, the council should show real leadership in tackling domestic abuse.

Survivors' input into this report has been invaluable – the Commission recommends first and foremost that survivors of domestic abuse play a key role in the council's approach moving forward. In a vibrant and diverse area like Barking and Dagenham, it is also key that those within communities are empowered to be part of the change. A one size fits all approach won't work – bottom up campaigns, and empowering different communities to tailor and deliver their own messages will be key to truly raising awareness and changing attitudes towards domestic abuse.



# Acknowledgements

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- The Technical Skills Academy
- Lifeline School
- Sydney Russell Secondary School
- Jo Richardson Community School
- Mayesbrook Park School
- BAD Youth Forum
- DV Flag East & CAB
- Ageing Well Community Group
- Golden Years Community Group
- The Hive at Al Madina Mosque
- Shpresa
- Eastern European Recourse Centre
- Powerhouse International Ministries Church
- PAUSE group at LBBDD
- AVA and Early Help team within Community Solutions
- Caring Dads
- Positive Parenting
- Community Solutions homelessness prevention team
- Early Help Team
- Care Leavers Team
- Youth Offending Team
- Children's care and support
- Adult's care and support
- East BCU police
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Councillor Darren Rodwell



Councillor Maureen Worby



Chief Executive Chris Naylor



Acting Chief Executive Claire Symonds



