



Implementing a perpetrator-focused partnership approach to tackling domestic abuse: The opportunities and challenges of criminal justice localism

Pamela Ann Davies

Northumbria University, UK

Paul Biddle

Northumbria University, UK

Abstract

This article reports on a perpetrator-focused partnership approach to tackling domestic abuse. The package of interventions includes an identification tool and a unique multi-agency partnership approach to violence prevention and tackling abuse through perpetrator-focused early interventions. An overview of the key outcomes and issues emerging from this innovative package and partnership approach in one policing area in England is offered. Our discussion focuses on issues relating to the development of the co-ordination of the multi-agency tasking and co-ordination (MATAC) approach to addressing domestic abuse, particularly within the context of the opportunities and challenges of the localism agenda in criminal justice. Perceived concerns within the MATAC partnership, about victim safety alongside a heightened 'focus on perpetrators', caused us to critically reflect on the convergence of the politics of multi-agency working at very local levels. Our conclusion is that partnership working remains important in the shifting economic and political context in which local agenda setting and commissioning is occurring. The local still matters, and is as challenging as it ever was, in ensuring victim safety.

Keywords

Domestic violence, localism, multi-agency, partnership, perpetrator, safety, victim

Corresponding author:

Pamela Ann Davies, Professor of Criminology, Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University, Lipman Building, Newcastle, NE18ST, UK.

Email: pamela.davies@northumbria.ac.uk

Introduction

Responses to domestic abuse cannot be divorced from the social context within which it occurs and traditional criminal justice responses have increasingly been combined with other preventive measures often involving multi-agency approaches to tackling the problem (Brookman and Robinson, 2012). The increasingly sophisticated response has seen investment in specialist services for women victims of domestic abuse in order to provide better support through the criminal justice process and through to recovery. The commitment to the multi-agency approach has become well established. Though we argue that the local still matters as much as it ever did in ensuring victim safety and tackling domestic abuse and that partnership working remains essential, we also suggest this is increasingly challenging because of how localism is conceptualized and implemented and in part due to a postcode lottery. Thus, what we discuss has wider relevance. This article reports on a package of domestic violence perpetrator interventions used in one locality. It provides an overview of the key outcomes of a partnership approach to tackling domestic abuse and reduce risk for victims. The discussion, and our reflection, focuses on perceived concerns about victim safety in the context of a heightened 'focus on perpetrators' and the politics of the local multi-agency tasking and co-ordination (MATAC) partnership.

We commence by outlining the historical commitment to partnership working in the context of community safety over the last three decades. We draw out how this approach is well established in the context of violence reduction and how multi-agency working is integral to strategies to tackle it. We evidence the historical importance of 'localism' and how collaboration and localism have been championed by politicians across the political spectrum who have argued that it enables more responsive service provision that better meets the needs of service users. We then illustrate the benefits and challenges of contemporary localism in tackling domestic abuse with particular emphasis on the politicization of community safety, mixed sector provisions of services and co-ordinated developments to tackle domestic abuse outside formal criminal justice responses. We then describe the various components of the local project and the methodology for evaluating it. Key findings are reported leading into a discussion that dwells on perceived concerns about victim safety in the context of a heightened 'focus on perpetrators'. This we found, can produce tensions where local partnerships are predisposed to focus on risk, the targeting and control of serial perpetrators, detection and prosecution at the same time as they recognize that changing perpetrators' behaviour is the longer-term solution to violence reduction and increasing women's safety. We also dwell on how the MATAC partnership has attuned itself to victim safety alongside the heightened 'focus on perpetrators'. Tackling domestic abuse in such a synchronized way demands highly effective communication and information sharing and these issues feature in the final part of our discussion of the MATAC partnership. Here we fully embrace the views espoused over 10 years ago by Follett (2006: 107) who argues that analysing community safety must always recognize the importance of local contexts including 'understanding local politics, local government and other local contextual elements'. From a critical and feminist informed criminological perspective we ultimately argue, that politics is everywhere in community safety.

Domestic Violence Context

Domestic abuse: Definitions and extent

In March 2013 an extended definition of domestic violence was introduced, with young people aged 16 and 17 included for the first time and coercive control was a new component. This most comprehensive definition to date defined such violent abuse¹ as: ‘any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality’. Forms of abuse include physical, emotional, financial and sexual and the current definition refers to intimate partners and family members. The gendered nature of domestic abuse has driven the framework for much policy and practice since the 1970s. An increased gender sensitive understanding of the complex dynamics of domestic abuse has resulted in an acknowledgement that some victims can be male and that individuals may be both perpetrators and victims of abuse (Dixon et al., 2012; Donovan and Hester, 2014; Harwin, 2006). It is estimated to have affected 1.9m (overwhelmingly female) individuals in 2014, at a cost of £16 billion per year and to be responsible for 80 deaths each year in Britain (CSEW, 2015; HMIC, 2014; Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). Explanations for the stubborn problem of domestic abuse include social structural as well as individualistic and cognitive features with different emphasis being placed on the combinations of these influences (Dixon et al., 2012; Donovan and Hester, 2014, Hunnicutt, 2009).

Domestic violence: Policy and practice

The rise of the women’s refuge movement (as part of a wider feminist movement) in the 1970s brought the issue of domestic violence to the attention of policymakers. Recent criminal justice developments include the Domestic Violence, Crime & Victims Act 2004 with provisions to improve investigation and prosecution of cases of domestic abuse and legally enforceable Protection Notices and Orders (Burton, 2015), via the Crime & Security Act 2010. Additionally, the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (also known as ‘Clare’s Law’) gives members of the public the ‘right to ask’ the police about a person’s history of domestic abuse or intimate partner violence. This law thus supplements the ‘right to know’ route already available to those working in the statutory sector which allows them to initiate a disclosure on a safeguarding or public protection basis. Electronic tagging of perpetrators and sanctuary schemes have also been important developments. The National Domestic Violence Strategy has promoted a co-ordinated community response approach recognizing the value of working together to prevent and tackle violence. The most recent strategy 2016–2020 (HM Government, 2016) cements an approach that prevents, provides services, promotes partnership working and which brings perpetrators to justice. Regional and local-level risk management and safety initiatives have proliferated and now include Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH), Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour-Based Violence (DASH), risk identification, assessment and management, and the establishment of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) (Davies and Francis, 2015; Donovan and Hester, 2014).

While there has been a considerable range of initiatives to provide a more sophisticated and effective response to victims of domestic abuse, the challenge to prevent such abuse remains. Criticisms persist of the slow cultural shift in policing. In some areas, police officers remain ill-equipped and ill-informed to identify dangerous patterns of behaviour, rely on outdated information technology and poor information systems and inadequate training is a feature highlighted in inspection reports (HMIC, 2014, 2015).

For over half a century feminist research and activism has ensured that the hidden nature and complex social structural context and dynamics of domestic abuse are more widely understood. In the last three decades this has impacted on the response to domestic violence. More recently still it has insisted that targeting perpetrators, holding them to account and efforts to reduce their re-offending are all part of a comprehensive strategy for tackling such abuse (see Devaney, 2014; Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Donovan and Hester, 2014; Featherstone and Fraser, 2012; Pence and Paymar, 1993). This orthodoxy suggests that a co-ordinated, community response that is comprehensive and holistic is most likely to be effective (Dobash et al., 2000; Gondolf, 2002; Kelly and Westmarland, 2015; Price et al., 2009; Rivett, 2010). However, debates continue regarding how domestic abuse should be tackled with some tensions and fierce critiques of the dominant feminist framework within which policy and practice has developed (Dixon et al., 2012).

Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes

Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes (DVPPs) fall within the current strategy for tackling domestic violence that holds perpetrators to account for their behaviour in two ways: by improving investigation and prosecution and by changing behaviour and reducing offending. However, identifying the 'success' of perpetrator programmes is challenging given the complex dynamics of domestic abuse and the inter-relationships between victims, perpetrators, their families and the wider community (Clarke and Wydall, 2013; Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). The most recent evidence suggests that their impacts can be modest but more effective when tailored to the individual needs of the perpetrator (Babcock et al., 2004) and that victims find breathing space when partners engage in programmes (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). Criticisms suggest programmes fail to tackle under-reporting, are insufficiently funded to deliver effectively, excuse and fail to criminalize abusive behaviours and have high drop-out rates (Devaney, 2014; Featherstone and Fraser, 2012; Hester and Lilley, 2014; Phillips et al., 2013). For some there is scope for programmes to encompass wider issues that impact upon perpetrator behaviour and to facilitate responses that address perpetrator needs related to substance misuse, mental health problems, parenting support and emotional issues (Juodis et al., 2014; Rivett, 2010).

Partnership working and localism

Collaborative approaches have characterized many areas of social policy including criminal justice-focused partnerships (Edwards, 2013; Goodman et al., 2006; Perkins et al., 2010; Walton, 2006). From the late 1980s onwards developments were spurred by Home Office Circular 8/84, which stipulated that crime prevention was the responsibility of the

whole community (Berry et al., 2011). In 1988, the Conservative government set up the Safer Cities crime prevention programme under which several domestic violence projects were funded and in 1998 Crime & Disorder Partnerships were established to develop multi-agency working within the criminal justice system (McCarthy, 2014). In the early 1990s, the *Safer communities* report (Home Office, 1991) recognized the value of partnership working to address the causes of crime, and it was during this same period, that community safety strands of organizing intertwined with feminist initiatives against domestic violence. Between 1999 and 2002 under the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme, Violence Against Women Initiative, 33 projects were funded. Since the late 1980s therefore, partnership approaches were identified as an appropriate way to tackle domestic violence (Barton and Valero-Silva, 2012; Whetstone, 2001).

Localism has found its way into a variety of policy areas including local economic development neighbourhood planning, housing and welfare assistance and criminal justice (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013; Grover, 2012; MacLennan and O'Sullivan, 2013; Westwood, 2011). The creation of elected Police and Crime Commissioners is an example of this localism within the criminal justice sector. A defining characteristic of localism is the rebalancing of power and relationships via decentralization. With devolved power comes devolved responsibility and decision making to lower tiers of government that is shared – in partnership – with communities, neighbourhoods, local agencies and frontline managers (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013; Grover, 2012).

Localism and partnership working have found support across the political spectrum. The devolutionary approach of the Labour government of 1997–2010 had an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities (Buser, 2013; Grover, 2012). The subsequent Coalition government's desire to deliver the 'Big Society' resulted in the Localism Act 2011. This legislation was designed to empower local communities to do things 'their way' and sought to reconceptualize citizen engagement, civic space, social action and provision of public services. It was argued this decentralization, alongside a rebalancing of the economy, would solve perceived deficits in the efficiency, fairness and democracy of the British state (Hopkin and Atkinson, 2011; Westwood, 2011).

Critique of localism and partnership working

Current approaches to localism in general have been criticized for having aims that are too diffuse, too weakly conceptualized and lacking clarity about the relationship between local authorities and other local actors. Neither has there been commensurate resources to deliver this 'vision' (Padley, 2013). Concerns that this brand of localism may result in greater rather than less inequality and inconsistent treatment (the 'postcode lottery') remain unresolved (Buser, 2013; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013; Evans et al., 2013; Grover, 2012; Howard and Moore, 2011; MacLennan and O'Sullivan, 2013).

In relation to criminal justice, locally based solutions to local problems may have a persuasive appeal, holding the promise of a 'freedom to' approach, leading to grounded and co-operative initiatives to resolve community problems (Padley, 2013). However, as Tilley's (1993) discussion of the crime prevention and safer cities story has shown us, there are complex inter-relationships between politics and policy formulation.

In terms of using local partnerships to tackle domestic abuse, there has been a mixed reception to the way in which these have been operationalized. At the same time as some were championing initiatives within and through the state two other relevant concerns were gathering momentum: one focusing on victims and the other focusing on enhancing safety at the community level (Wilcox, 2006). Certainly, these concurrent developments gave traction to the partnership approaches for tackling domestic violence. Consequently, throughout the 1970s–1980s in the UK, local-level, grassroot activism played an important role in setting local agendas on domestic violence. A consolidated feminist movement that had a strong radical dimension was also pivotal in securing locally tailored provisions to support women victims (Mawby and Walklate, 1994). Walklate and Evans (1999: 4) have noted ‘the many dynamics of community relationships which are in existence’. They argued for a greater emphasis on families and sets of personal relationships, on local social dynamics, formal and informal networks in communities in order to restore the local equilibrium. In their view, close ties and the ‘local’ matters to the extent that they suggest ‘the meaning of locally formulated policy responses may need to be reinterpreted and re-defined in terms of quite small units’ (1999: 138). Building on these sentiments, Davies (2008) has argued that the ‘quite small units’ include family living arrangements, intimate and personal, formal and informal relationships and ties, working and professional as well as enforced and coercive relationships. In addition to these relationships being important and integral to an effective crime prevention strategy, they are equally important to considerations of safety. In other words, very, very local areas and small units possess harm reducing skills which are capable of producing successful and effective outcomes to conflict and for restoring equilibrium at the same time as they are also capable of producing conflict.

At the operational and very practical level, it can take an inordinate time to develop trusting partnerships, some organizations have discreet responsibilities that hinder partnership working, others are fearful of losing autonomy. There can be uncertainty around information sharing and different organizational agendas can lead to conflict. Furthermore, organizations have conceptualized domestic violence/abuse differently, often in a way that has made the problem the responsibility of another agency, with a greater focus on processes rather than outcome resulting in victims remaining vulnerable (Berry et al., 2011). The factors that compromise partnership work to tackle domestic violence can be summarized under the umbrella of ‘the politics of community safety’. In the current climate, the broad-based public sympathy for victims across the political spectrum continues, however, desires to promote active citizenship and reduce expenditure may sit rather too comfortably with the caring face of the ‘law and order’ lobby (Morgan and Zedner, 1992). In the context of local partnership working this has the potential to create tensions in areas where there are different party political affiliations involved in such partnerships.

Furthermore, the specific form of localism practised since 2010, which is closely associated with austerity, is particularly problematic in relation to tackling domestic violence (Vacchelli, 2015). It ignores the complexity and challenges that localism can bring where it interfaces with women’s safety. Collaboration and localism have been championed by politicians across the political spectrum and such working practices are often presented by politicians and policymakers as technocratic, non-ideological, evidence-based approaches.

Any weaknesses that might be identified tend to be associated with implementation deficits, rather than due to more fundamental issues such as wider socio-economic power relationships that are replicated within and by collaborative and localist approaches. Feminist approaches to effecting change challenge this technocratic narrative, highlighting that collaboration and localism can be problematic approaches when used to address domestic abuse. The implications of the ‘payment by results’ agenda, alongside the decentralizing of power, can produce competition for scarce resources and increase inequalities. Local feminist inspired women’s groups have often lost out resulting in the further marginalization of domestic violence victims, rather than active citizenship (Vacchelli, 2015; Westwood, 2011). Indeed, reduced funding to many local-level initiatives has destabilized the sector, weakened local grassroots organizations that have traditionally delivered services and jeopardized the ability of a number of organizations to provide services while privileging large corporations (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Hirst and Rinne, 2012; Vacchelli, 2015). As a measure of these successes, many services have been professionalized, institutionalized and mainstreamed. However, this is concomitant with a detachment from local traditions and heritage. The sort of localism that helped to expose and address domestic abuse is perhaps being eroded with the very local having been overshadowed in the 25 years or so since the story of community safety policy first emerged (Squires, 2017).

In spite of the difficulties associated with locally based, collaborative approaches to tackling domestic abuse, innovative approaches to local partnership working persist in several police areas. We now describe an example of one such local project. Under this initiative the ‘focus on perpetrator’ was pioneered.

The Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Interventions (DAPI) Project

This project was developed in a northern police region. It is managed and administrated by a police team including a Detective Chief Inspector, Detective Inspector, three co-ordinators and an analyst. The project has five objectives that are to:

- (1) prevent further domestic abuse-related offending;
- (2) improve victims’ safety;
- (3) improve criminal justice system outcomes;
- (4) improve partnership engagement; and
- (5) improve offender behaviour.

The project comprises the following components:

- *The Recency, Frequency & Gravity Model (RFG)* analysis tool, based on a risk model established in 2013, in Scotland, to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. It identifies and targets repeat domestic violence perpetrators using a scoring mechanism that identifies the recency, frequency and gravity of offending. Based on a range of specific and weighted criteria (e.g. previous offences, number of victims, interpersonal relationships, health issues and substance misuse) the RFG scores each perpetrator from 0–100 (100 being the most harmful). The top-four

highest scoring perpetrators identified are selected for discussion at each MATAAC area meeting (see later). The score, plus other intelligence drawn from members of a multi-agency team, is brought to the MATAAC area meeting (Burman, 2013; Owen, 2015). Intelligence is drawn from police domestic abuse records and crime recording systems. All partner agencies are also able to refer perpetrators for consideration/into the RFG analysis tool.

- *Monthly Partnership Area Meetings* (one in each of the three areas): representatives from a range of agencies meet to share information, professional opinions and determine actions to manage identified perpetrators. Those invited to attend include representatives from the police, various local authority functions (e.g. safeguarding teams and children's services), the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, health service providers, the National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Companies and providers of specialist services for victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- *The Domestic Abuse Proximity System (DAPS)*: this is a non-statutory two-piece GPS system designed to improve victim safety and confidence. The perpetrator is provided with an ankle tag with a GPS tracking unit, which they wear whenever they leave their home. The victim also carries a device, a handset that uses the same GPS location technologies. Fixed exclusion zones are set up around appropriate locations, which the perpetrator is banned from entering and the victim and monitoring centre is alerted if the perpetrator is within 500 m of them.
- *The Domestic Violence Perpetrators Toolkit*: this includes a range of criminal justice and non-criminal justice intervention options to manage perpetrators depending on their circumstances, needs and level of engagement as determined at partnership meetings. The toolkit comprises two pathways – see Figure 1. The left-hand pathway is designed to support perpetrators who recognize their behaviour is problematic and want to change. This pathway provides access to supportive interventions including referral to a DVPP and access to substance misuse, mental health and housing services as appropriate. The right-hand pathway is used for those perpetrators who are unwilling to recognize their behaviour is coercively abusive and comprises a lengthy, diverse and comprehensive list of preventative, diversionary, disruptive and enforcement activities including a Perpetrator Warning Letter. The serving of a Perpetrator Warning Letter is the first action to occur for those perpetrators who are to be subjected to interventions agreed at the MATAAC. The letter informs the recipient that they have been identified as a serial perpetrator of domestic abuse. The letter explains what this means and outlines support services that are available. It also explains that failure to change their abusive behaviour will result in the police using a range of means to prevent and disrupt their offending.

Methodology

The research was approved by a University Ethics Committee. All participants were provided with full written information and a verbal explanation about the project. Participants' consent was obtained based on full knowledge and understanding of the research and of how the information would be used. Interviewees were assured that they

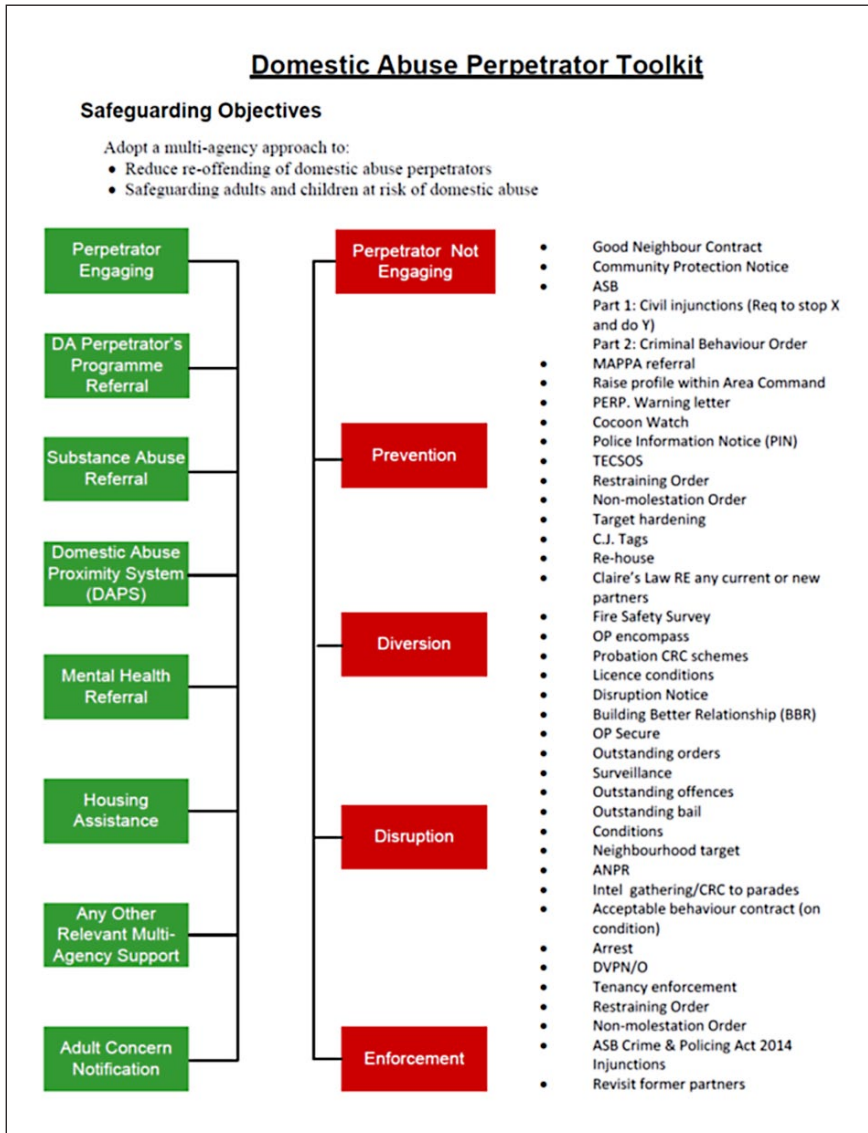


Figure 1. Domestic Violence Perpetrators Toolkit (left = the 'engagement pathway', right = the 'non-engagement pathway').

would remain anonymous. Details were also provided to all participants about who to contact should they have any follow up queries or if they wished to withdraw or make a complaint.

The methodology drew on good practice in criminal justice-focused evaluation that highlights the importance of research to identify how a particular component of the

criminal justice system is working (or not working) (White, 2017). The evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach comprising:

- *Analysis of perpetrator statistical data* ($N = 66$ perpetrators) provided by the police which include RFG score information, offending history, additional information provided by MATAc partners, the MATAc and other interventions undertaken and outcome data.
- *Perpetrator case studies* ($N = 5$) to complement the statistical data. These case studies illustrate offending histories, wider issues potentially contributing to their abusive behaviour, MATAc interventions and outcomes achieved and the difficulties that services and partnerships face when dealing with perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- *An online partner agency survey* ($N = 26$ completed) exploring partner agencies' (e.g. third sector, local government, health, criminal justice and housing agencies) awareness and understanding of the project and its aims, the time and resource implications for partners participating in the project, perceptions of actions and decisions made at MATAc meetings and the management of harm/risk/safety. The survey was administered using Bristol Online Survey software and sent out to 182 potential representatives of partner agencies, via an email explaining the purpose of the survey. The survey was administered twice during the evaluation. Once towards the end of the first year and again at the end of the second year. (We report on findings from the first.)
- *Semi-structured interviews* ($N = 18$) with representatives of organizations managing, delivering and participating in the project. These interviews explored understandings of the project, its perceived 'fit' with partner agencies' policy and practice and wider approaches to victim safeguarding, the membership and operation of the project, project impacts and issues to be addressed if the project was to develop effectively. Interviews were also conducted with victims and perpetrators.

Findings were discussed at a workshop event hosted at the end of the evaluation (we refer to this as the Validation Workshop). This half-day workshop, facilitated by the evaluation team, discussed, sense-checked and gathered reflections on evaluation findings from stakeholders to inform the first phase evaluation report and identify any key issues that needed attending to.

Key Findings

We report in the main on partnership engagement and on the operation of the local-level inter-agency partnerships to tackle domestic abuse. However, we begin by presenting four case studies to illustrate some key features and characteristics of perpetrators, interventions undertaken by the partnership and outcomes achieved.

Case Study I

A 40-year-old man, living a chaotic lifestyle with his on/off partner was a suspect in over a dozen domestic incidents over a nine-month period. The majority of these offences

were committed against his partner with others directed towards another family member. He had been repeatedly arrested for domestic assaults and breaching a Domestic Violence Protection Order. His RFG score was 51. Following discussion and agreement at the MATAAC meeting, a police officer served the MATAAC Warning Letter in person, explaining he had been identified as a serial perpetrator and that support was available. The perpetrator was encouraged to resolve his housing and alcohol misuse issues and enrol on a DVPP. One month later a MATAAC review identified that a housing provider had found him an alternative property and he had been allocated a worker and a support package to help him to sustain his new tenancy. He was taking steps to address his alcohol issues. His RFG score had declined to 42 at the point of his discharge from the MATAAC.

Case Study 2

A 23-year-old male, with an RFG score of 45, was, at the time of the MATAAC discussion, remanded in custody for an assault on his ex-partner. He was due to be released within three weeks. He had been a suspect in 17 domestic incidents over the last two years, 14 of which had occurred in the last few months. He had been violent towards five victims including two ex-partners, and family members. While on remand, the perpetrator had contacted his ex-partner via telephone, making threats to kill. Following agreement at the MATAAC meeting, a Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO) was prepared to facilitate robust management of his wider criminal behaviour. The Independent Domestic Violence Advisor worked in tandem with the housing provider who agreed to prioritize a house move at the request of his ex-partner. In the meantime, cocoon watch was instigated whereby police made her neighbours aware that they should contact police on her behalf if they saw specific individuals at her current address or had any concerns. Furthermore, the prison was contacted by the MATAAC Coordinator resulting in telephone calls to his partner being blocked. The male was remanded in custody for a non-domestic abuse-related offence. A CBO is on file. The perpetrator was removed from the MATAAC with a RFG score of 43.

Case Study 3

A 30-year-old male had been the suspect in 10 domestic incidents since April 2014, offending against four victims (both parents, an ex-partner and a cousin). He had been a prolific offender since 2002, with over 60 arrests in total for a range of offences. He scored 39 on the RFG. Information was shared at the MATAAC by Children's Services, identifying concerns that people under the age of 16 had been frequenting his home address. It was agreed at the MATAAC that police gather further intelligence around this information. As a result of this an investigation began and within one month of the first MATAAC meeting, the perpetrator was served a Child Abduction Warning Notice (CAWN). Intelligence suggests that since the CAWN was issued, he had no further involvement with the young people. Neither was he a suspect in any domestic abuse incidents. At a further MATAAC meeting, shared information revealed the perpetrator had been evicted from his tenancy and was now living with a vulnerable adult. It was agreed

that housing services would ensure that the vulnerable adult's housing provider was aware of this situation. This action was completed and safeguarding was put in place for the vulnerable adult. The perpetrator is no longer living at this address. At the next MATAAC meeting he was removed from the MATAAC process and managed locally by the Neighbourhood Policing Team (NPT). At this point his RFG score was 37.

Case Study 4

A MATAAC meeting considered the case of a 28-year-old male who was a suspect in eight domestic incidents since April 2014, offending against five victims. The victims included three of his ex-partners and two other family members, who have all suffered verbal and/or physical abuse. Since 2001, the perpetrator had been arrested on 30 occasions for a range of offences. He scored 45 on the RFG. During the MATAAC discussion, it became apparent that he is alcohol dependent and has financial difficulties, these factors contributing to his agitation and violence. The decision to make a request to health services for information about his mental health and alcohol-related medical history enabled the MATAAC to determine his suitability for a domestic abuse perpetrator programme. The MATAAC Coordinator also liaised with Community Rehabilitation Company in order to get an update on how effectively he engaged with services. Additionally, housing providers were asked to identify and confirm his current address in anticipation of the NPT carrying out a home visit in order to make him aware of his Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)/MATAAC status and discuss making a referral to a DVPP. Since this perpetrator became a MATAAC subject, he has not been involved in any further domestic incidents and has consented to attend a DVPP after being referred by a police officer. He was removed from the MATAAC with a RFG score of 27.

Partnership engagement: Understanding of the partnership

Implementing a partnership, including numerous stakeholders, organizations and interests, can be particularly challenging (Davies and Francis, 2015). However, our evaluation reports (Davies and Biddle, 2016, 2017) and the case studies above, illustrate the value of the MATAAC partnership and its contribution to positive outcomes. Furthermore, we found a good level of understanding about aims and objectives, with approximately 75 per cent of respondents to the partner agency online survey reporting that they were 'fully clear' about the purpose of the project (19 per cent partially clear, with a combined 7.6 per cent not very or not at all clear). Data derived from interviews with respondents from representatives of organizations managing, delivering and participating in the project were able to link participation in the MATAAC to achievement of their own organization's objectives. They understand also how they can contribute to the project and how the MATAAC provided agencies with additional opportunities to work together to deliver a more effective overall response to domestic abuse.

Overall, partners are clear about their roles and potential contribution, which are key pre-requisites to the effective functioning of any partnership. Eighty-five per cent of respondents to the partner agency online survey agreed or strongly agreed that they 'understand their role – and associated requirements – in the MATAAC Trial' (14.3 per

cent neither agreed nor disagreed with 0 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing). The partner agency interviews also clearly indicate that those representing their agency are clear about their individual roles in the MATAAC. These roles are commonly understood to be gathering and sharing information about perpetrators (and victims), actioning decisions made at MATAAC meetings and agreeing plans relating to the management of perpetrators and their removal from the MATAAC process. Most interviewees also understood that they could refer individuals into the MATAAC Trial.

Membership

Membership comprises representatives from a range of agencies. Organizations represented at MATAAC meetings included local authorities, housing providers, health service providers and providers of specialist support services to victims of domestic violence, those misusing substances and individuals who could be considered in some way vulnerable. A minority of members from these organizations, did express concerns about the non-engagement and irregular attendance of some agencies, with approximately one-third (33.4 per cent) of respondents to our first online survey of MATAAC partner agencies, agreeing or strongly agreeing that ‘the relevant agencies are represented at most MATAAC meetings’. One-third disagreed or strongly disagreed, with a further one-third neither agreeing/nor disagreeing. Interview findings indicate that both the MATAAC Police Team and other partner agencies are concerned about the lack of engagement from some healthcare providers, the National Probation Service and some local authority children’s services functions. Non-engagement is linked not only to time and resource issues but also to concerns around information sharing and the non-statutory status of the project. Lack of engagement makes it difficult to gain a full profile of information on perpetrators, which is required to identify which options from the toolkit are appropriate to use and thus move cases through the MATAAC. This also impacts upon caseload volume.

Resource implications

Evidence indicates that engagement in the MATAAC poses resources challenges for partner agencies. Eighty-five per cent of respondents to the online partner survey agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the MATAAC Trial creates additional time and resource demands that are difficult for my organization to meet’. This was echoed in interviews, with respondents discussing how budget reductions erode their capacity to engage in new initiatives, particularly non-statutory initiatives like the MATAAC.

Discussion

Overall, evaluation findings echo many of those identified by previous research into partnership working in the criminal justice system (e.g. Edwards, 2013; McCarthy, 2014) with evidence of both positive outcomes and issues to be addressed. The ‘policy of localism’ – partial devolution of service provision and policy – with its resultant attempts to deliver greater local accountability and democracy, has been instrumental to the establishment of the MATAAC, initiated (partly) as it was by a Police and Crime

Commissioner (PCC) whose role is designed to increase the local democratic accountability of police forces, commission local community safety services and victims-services (Lister and Rowe, 2014; Loveday 2013; Wells, 2016). The scope to develop local solutions has smoothed the path for localized collaboration, intelligence gathering and services.

However, the opportunities created by such degrees of localism are accompanied by challenges. The MATAAC makes these challenges visible and mirrors some of the concerns identified in previous research.

Multi-agency and multi-paradigm responses to domestic abuse

Most responses to perpetrators have been located in a criminal justice paradigm (detection, prosecution and mandating of perpetrators to attend treatment programmes). Under this paradigm, referral of victims towards support became routine and there has been a marked determination to hold perpetrators to account to reduce their offending. However, not all victims receive the type of support they want and need and, due to under-reporting, much domestic abuse never comes to the attention of any formal agency. Many victims remain out-with protection and perpetrators remain hidden and out-with the criminal justice system.

The refinement, use and effectiveness of the RFG relies not only upon information already available to the police, but also, crucially, on information from MATAAC partners about perpetrators and victims. The model targets individuals whose profile resembles that of a domestic violence perpetrator. It facilitates a focus on the coercive and harmful activities of serial perpetrators who are not yet monitored for their violent inter-personal behaviour (Donovan and Hester, 2014). An important outcome of the MATAAC therefore has been the shift towards prevention and early intervention via a multi-agency focus on perpetrators not previously known to police as presenting a significant risk to women. The use of the RFG, the MATAAC process, additional DVPP capacity and the opportunity for voluntary participation in them, has enabled more serial perpetrators to be identified, referred into the MATAAC and dealt with appropriately.

The approach we evaluated seeks to tackle domestic violence by fusing the *prevent* and early intervention part of the National Strategy, with the safety first part of the strategy (see later) and illustrates the tensions experienced by local multi-agency partnerships. The current embodiment of localism has also created difficulties due to its association with austerity. Significant budget cuts have been experienced by virtually all partner agencies, resulting in organizational and personnel change. Budget reductions are reducing partners' organizational capacity to participate in non-statutory initiatives such as the MATAAC.

Yet, even so, positive outcomes are seen in the opportunities for non-criminal justice agency partners to identify cases for referral, thus reducing an over-reliance on criminal justice agencies to identify and prosecute which may or may not be in the best interest of the victim (Hester and Lilley, 2017). The collaborative approach used by the project opens avenues to circumvent the problem of under-reporting while creating safer spaces and climates for women and children. The provision of voluntary programmes with their non-mandatory yet high level of criteria for access and lower dropout rate, alongside the

mandatory counterparts where offenders are required to attend yet may not be ready to participate and engage, lessens the onus on the criminal justice route to effecting changed behaviour. The ‘holistic’ approach also underscores the importance of tackling abuse at the societal level.

Strategies to combat domestic violence that are overly wedded to the traditional criminal justice paradigm (these are disposals that are subsumed within the right-hand pathway of the toolkit of interventions – see Figure 1) have traditionally failed to tackle such potentially lethal behaviour. The MATAC shows how partnership approaches, comprising input from a multitude of local agencies, can be effective in tackling domestic abuse in spite of the various tensions around the heightened focus on perpetrators and despite the politics and challenges of local partnership working.

Victim safety and the focus on perpetrators

The need to place the safety of victims first is the central aim of a domestic violence reduction strategy. The *prevent* strand of such a strategy sits, and is operationalized, alongside the support and service provision or *protect* strand. The former and the latter are designed to do two things simultaneously – tackle perpetrators and support victims. This ‘holistic’ strategy can present challenges for domestic violence partnership work and this was evident in the MATAC partnership. Here we critically reflect on tensions related to the politics of doing partnership and multi-agency work.

Though all stakeholders were committed to the overall strategy, tensions can arise between members whose organizational and/or personal priority is ideologically and historically more clearly wedded to, and committed to prioritizing energy and funding towards, only one aspect of this overall strategy. Within the MATAC, this tension was exemplified in concerns from those working to support victims indirectly. For example, these members were insufficiently reassured about the impact – on victims – of serving the Perpetrator Letter. As other stakeholders directly involved in supporting victims were able to share at our Verification Workshop, an aligned, locally tailored protection package underpinned each letter served. Partners further afield clearly needed fuller information about the extent and nature of the wrap-around support accompanying the serving of the letter and provided to both victim and perpetrator. We found no evidence that victims of targeted perpetrators were being left unprotected or that women and children were being exposed to greater risks to violent attack or coercively abusive behaviour. We did however find *perceptions* that victim safety may be compromised. This tension illustrates the need for continuous information sharing and communication to ensure all stakeholders are aware of the protections surrounding victims and that they receive updates of the outcomes of MATAC decisions.

Managing tensions: Effective information sharing and communication

The MATAC highlights the crucial importance of information sharing and communication at the very, very local level. Perceived concerns about the Perpetrator Letter, highlighted underlying tensions. For us, these tensions illustrate the underlying politics of community safety and the politicized climate of it. A criminological analysis and

evaluation that ignores how these factors – which comprise the governance context – can negatively affect a partnership approach to tackling domestic violence is not only a poor criminological analysis, but also, is a weaker evaluation of any locally based approach to preventing domestic abuse and protecting victims.

Our Validation Workshop allowed concerns to be aired and conflicts and tensions to surface around loss of autonomy, victim safety/focus on perpetrators. It became an extension of the MATAAC agenda and as such our evaluation became in part a process evaluation. The Workshop served to enable the project team to manage, and, with partners, ameliorate tensions through information sharing and extended dialogue and communication about safety. The resurfacing of scepticism and undercurrents of concern however, is a real possibility given continued anxieties about what services and support will survive in a climate of continued austerity and economic uncertainty (Featherstone and Fraser, 2012). The ‘red herring’ of prioritizing a focus on victims *versus* a focus on perpetrators is likely to continue to raise its head for some who are continuing to feel the squeeze. Effective multi-agency information sharing and hard partnership work includes addressing undercurrents of concern as well as overt conflict. Opportunities, such as those provided by the Verification Workshop, which was attended by the key members of the MATAAC and focused on a range of issues including the safety of victims, are vital components to effective local partnership working.

Conclusion

While we have reported on MATAAC interventions designed to tackle domestic abuse, we have focused our discussion on the implementation of this project and the nature, extent and management of tensions within a local partnership designed to safeguard victims of serial perpetrators of domestic abuse. Furthermore, we have used this evaluation to explore the opportunities and challenges the localism agenda to criminal justice and community safety presents.

Our evaluation reveals considerable success in relation to the locally tailored partnership approach to tackling domestic abuse. Findings suggest that the MATAAC has made significant progress in relation to each of its key objectives of preventing further domestic abuse-related offending and improving victims’ safety, criminal justice system outcomes, offender behaviour and of course, partnership engagement. Experimentation, innovation and evaluation are key elements of evidence-based prevention and safety strategies and are pivotal to developing more effective responses to violence against women and girls where there are complex demands and limited resources. Following our evaluation, we have critically reflected on community safety politics at the local level. We have focused on perceived concerns about victim safety in the context of a heightened ‘focus on perpetrators’ and the MATAAC partnership. In this respect, our feminist influenced analysis has revealed tensions and challenges. However, our assessment also suggests that a range of agencies and individuals – with diverse priorities, professional backgrounds and practices – can work together to safeguard victims and tackle serial perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Our conclusion as regards the opportunities and challenges of the localism agenda in criminal justice is that partnership working remains important. The MATAAC project

ensures that local social dynamics, formal and informal networks and small units in communities remain issues that matter in ensuring domestic abuse is prevented and tackled safely and effectively. It is for these reasons that we have recommended the MATAAC approach continues and is rolled out in other regions. The problem of ‘transfer failure’ is widely noted in the policy literature, and in criminal justice and policing in particular where Brogden (2005), in the context of policing programmes for example, warns they are often found to be culturally inappropriate and unworkable when transplanted. This further confirms the vital aspect of the local in partnership work and, in particular, the local political and economic contexts in which initiatives flourish or wither. Thus while we recommend the wider use of the MATAAC approach, the many dynamics of community relationships will always be determined by the local context.

Maintaining a close, critical and independent watch on perpetrator-focused partnership approaches to domestic abuse is thus ever more important given the fast and ever changing local contexts in which violence reduction strategies are being implemented. Indeed, partnership working arrangements are being re-imagined in the shifting economic and political context in which local agenda setting and commissioning is occurring. Socio-political and economic impacts from the global to the national and the very local mean that innovative partnership approaches are emerging and, with hard and persistent work, can be effective, despite testing climates and shifting sands. The local still matters, and is as challenging as it ever was, in ensuring victim safety.

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Note

1. See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse#domestic-violence-and-abuse-new-definition>.

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Author biographies

Pamela Ann Davies' research interests focus on criminal and social justice and in particular on gender patterns and risks to crime and victimization. Pamela has published widely on gender, crime and victimization and has edited numerous books. She teaches and supervises in her specialist areas of gender and victimization and criminological theory.

Paul Biddle has undertaken research across a wide range of policy areas. His more recent research project collaborations have been criminal justice-focused, including an exploration of the experiences of older prisoners, healthcare and the provision of mental health services in prisons, domestic abuse, honour-based violence and domestic slavery.