

COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP

10 OCTOBER 2012

Present: Councillor R Martins (Chair)
Councillors J Aron, A Joynes, A Khan (for minute numbers 11 and 12), A Lovejoy, K McLeod and M Meerabux

Also present: Chief Inspector Caveney, Hertfordshire Constabulary (for minute number 11)
Charmaine, Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (for minute numbers 8 to 11)
Alison, Watford Women's Centre (for minute numbers 8 to 11)
Jennifer, Children's Centre Manager (for minute numbers 8 to 11)
Sue, Children's Centre Manager (for minute numbers 8 to 11)

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (JK)

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence from the Task Group but the Community Safety Manager had sent her apologies.

9 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

10 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting on 11 July 2012 were submitted and signed.

11 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN WATFORD

The Chair invited everyone to introduce themselves and explained that the Task Group's role was to look at the strategic direction of the Community Safety Partnership. The Task Group's role was that of a critical friend and to consider whether any action was needed.

Alison explained that she had distributed the quiz to set the scene and she discussed the answers with the Task Group. The Task Group felt that the statistics were roughly what they had expected but noted that domestic violence was not decreasing.

The Chair invited Charmaine to address Members.

Charmaine explained that she was an Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) and she covered Three Rivers and half of Watford. The number of posts had been reduced and another IDVA covered the other half of Watford and Dacorum. She described how victims were referred to her from a variety of agencies. She added that it was her role to ensure that victims had the tools they needed to know their options. It often took a long time for victims to feel comfortable to contact the Police and statistics went up with increased reporting.

The IDVAs had a disclosure policy which they made sure that their clients understood. Many victims feared the Police and did not want Children, Schools and Families involved. They would feel embarrassed if the Police came to their home and they did not necessarily want the perpetrator to get into trouble. She explained about the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) where high-risk cases were discussed; consent was not needed to discuss a case at MARAC.

Charmaine explained that domestic violence affected people across the community. The latest Home Office definition applied to all over-16s and she also worked with a number of families where the teenage sons were abusing their parents.

She described some of the barriers faced in their work including language barriers with victims and options for those without recourse to public funds as they were not able to access hostel services. There was also a lack of male support workers for male victims and as they often worked it was more difficult for them to access existing daytime services.

She noted the opportunities that being based in council offices presented; she had easy access to housing services, leisure services and the community safety team.

Councillor Khan asked about domestic violence where the perpetrators were teenagers. Charmaine responded that parents were often reluctant to call the Police about their children. She added that she referred the families to Herts Practical Parenting to enable them to manage the behaviour.

The Chair invited Chief Inspector Caveney to speak to the Task Group.

Chief Inspector Caveney explained that there had been a very small increase in domestic violence in the last year. The major challenge was to increase the conviction rate. He explained that in November 2011 the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) changed their policy about how they dealt with victimless prosecutions. The CPS were measured on their positive conviction rate in court and some cases that did not have victim support were challenging. He added that like for other crimes, a small number of people were responsible for a disproportionately high number of offences. The Police had influenced the CPS to change their policy but Watford was still suffering from its legacy.

When the Police had analysed the statistics around domestic violence they had not found 'attractors' which created hotspots which was often the case for other types of offences. However the night-time economy in the town centre was one clear hotspot for alcohol-related domestic violence. The Police's emphasis was to focus on the individuals who caused disproportionate harm.

The Chair asked about how the Police tackled troubled families. Chief Inspector Caveney responded that 'Thriving Families' was a Hertfordshire-wide agenda and domestic violence was one risk factor.

In response to a question from Councillor Khan, Chief Inspector Caveney explained that the CPS had looked less favourably on victimless domestic violence prosecutions as the evidential standard was less likely to render a conviction. However, it could be that a victim-supported prosecution lacked believability and a victimless prosecution had reliable third-party evidence. Councillor Khan asked why Watford was seventh out of the ten districts for their conviction rate. Chief Inspector Caveney answered that this was due to the detection rate, but no reason could be found as to why this was lower, and the crime volume where the night time economy presented a particular challenge.

The representatives from the children's centres were invited to speak.

Jennifer circulated a report and explained that she was the Manager a children's centre. They worked to the Every Child Matters agenda which included 'staying safe' as a priority. She highlighted that the capacity of the social care service at Hertfordshire County Council had been reduced and as such the threshold for referrals was higher. She highlighted the local and family knowledge that the staff of the children's centres had.

She explained that the children's centres hosted the 'My Life' course because funding cuts had meant that the Women's Centre were no longer able to offer crèche facilities. As the children's centres offered a variety of services, victims could come to courses without raising suspicions. She explained how the children's centres referred to the other agencies and enabled families to access other services. Play therapy had been offered to families but this was no longer possible due to funding cuts.

Jennifer highlighted the additional stresses that families were facing including financial and emotional pressures. Families were struggling to understand their entitlements under the new benefit systems. She added that there was also a lack of male role-models and an increase in multi-generational domestic violence where it had become the norm in families. She noted that some victims from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities would not report domestic violence for fear of ostracism. Some victims also experienced problems with language barriers and had no funding for interpreters. Many lacked the self-confidence to report domestic violence and those suffering from emotional abuse often would not report it until the abuse became physical.

Councillor Khan asked about the change in the criteria for intervention by Children, Schools and Families. Jennifer explained that previously child

protection proceedings would begin as domestic violence constituted neglect. The children's centres were now asked to undertake an assessment and there was less involvement from Children, Schools and Families.

Councillor Meerabux noted that the lack of role models was a concern.

Alison was invited to speak to the Task Group.

Alison outlined her role at Watford Women's Centre and explained that the centre had lost 50 percent of its funding last year. The main venue was a women-only space but men who wished to access services were accommodated elsewhere. She underlined that the cuts meant that no childcare could be available for women attending courses. She advised that Children, Schools and Families advised families to access their services but they did not provide any funding to the Women's Centre. Equally, the health authority referred people for counselling but did not fund the centre.

She explained that individuals were given time to discuss their needs and talk about confidentiality. They could talk to other agencies about a case with the client's permission. A lack of funding for interpreters and childcare were also problems for the Women's Centre. The children's centres could sometimes offer funding for childcare to enable a client to attend one of the courses. The courses enabled women to make choices and looked at safety planning as well as self-esteem and resilience.

Alison noted that statistics around domestic violence were difficult to collect; sometimes the same family was in contact with several agencies and an increase in the statistics could indicate a higher level of reporting. She highlighted the most recent statistics for the levels of domestic violence amongst clients of the Women's Centre and attendance levels at the My Life course where there was an increase in demand. She noted that the centre's location in the town made the service particularly accessible.

Alison highlighted the courses available for perpetrators and she added that domestic violence was not about anger management but about power and control. She noted that couple's counselling was not effective as the victim was less likely to disclose in that environment.

She outlined the current challenges faced by the Women's Centre. These were the lack of funding for crèche provision and access to refuges for victims with no recourse to public funds. She noted that the new Home Office system meant that women in the country on a spousal visa had fewer options. A barrier to the future was long-term secure funding. She added that a priority was to work with young people and services for children affected by domestic violence.

Councillor McLeod asked whether the Police were trained to signpost victims. Chief Inspector Caveney confirmed that this was the case and there were positive intervention policies around domestic violence. When the Police were called to a domestic argument, domestic violence was one of the first things considered. There was a harm-reduction unit which acted as the referral

gateway and front-line officers would refer to them. Charmaine added that Police officers sometimes referred cases to the IDVAs.

The Chair asked where there were missing links in the process. Jennifer advised that early intervention was not as joined-up as it could be. There was not a statutory duty for families to work with the children's centres.

Following a question from Councillor Joynes, Jennifer confirmed that every agency which worked with children had a designated child protection officer.

Councillor McLeod advised that she was a governor at a primary school and there were teaching assistants who spoke all the languages that the children spoke. She asked if this could help with meeting the need for interpreters. Jennifer said that training of community translators had been considered but there were issues of confidentiality and legality. There were also risks associated with children acting as interpreters.

Councillor Khan noted that there were repercussions for the decisions that the Council took. He observed that the network of agencies working on domestic violence was excellent. Funding cuts and benefit changes were exacerbating the problems. He asked what the Council could do.

The Chair noted that a lot of good work was happening in picking up the pieces in these cases. The Task Group needed to take a strategic view and it was not within their gift to unblock the finance.

Sue advised that the agencies would be helped if a longer-term view was taken. There were pots of money for short-term projects which had to be restarted in a new guise in order to secure further funding.

Jennifer recommended that the Council be an advocate for the issue to the County Council and to help the local agencies keep the funding they have. There could also be an advocacy role for fund-holders. The funding criteria were often too prescriptive; she had never applied for a grant from Watford Borough Council as being based at a school precluded the children's centre from the funding programmes. She also noted that some of the work did not show a measurable impact for a number of years.

Alison raised the issue of joint tenancies which made it difficult for some victims to leave the relationship. A zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence and domestic abuse was needed.

Alison informed Members that the agencies were keen to go into schools as there could be problems in teenage relationships. Councillor Joynes highlighted the potential for drama groups to go into schools. Councillor Khan advised that targeting colleges would also allow the agencies to reach young people aged 16 and over. The Chair advised the agencies present to inform the councillors when events were taking place to help raise awareness.

Councillor Meerabux emphasised that Members had roles as decision-makers and noted his concern for the environment that people lived in.

Councillor McLeod noted that different Members sat on the boards of a variety of organisations and these positions could be used to advocate for domestic violence issues.

Chief Inspector Caveney noted that all parties had retracting budgets and had to retreat into core services. The focus of partner agencies were those in the greatest risk and MARAC was effective for this. There was an opportunity to ensure that domestic violence was recognised at an earlier stage. A forum along the lines of MARAC could consider lower-risk cases. He added that Police governance was on the cusp of significant changes with the forthcoming election of the Police and Crime Commissioner. Mayor Thornhill would be the Borough's representative on the Police and Crime Panel and she could be asked to raise areas of concern.

The Chair asked if Members could be informed of the dates of the Domestic Violence Forum. Alison said that the attendance of representatives from alcohol and mental health agencies would also be welcome.

The Chair noted that the County Council held the purse strings and he suggested that the Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Families be invited to the Task Group.

Councillor Khan added that advocacy and assisting with funding, including criteria setting, were important roles for Members.

The Chair suggested that an all-Member briefing could be very useful to raise awareness. This could also include training on how to spot the signs of domestic abuse. The content of the briefing could be discussed with the Task Group over email.

Councillor Lovejoy expressed her concern about the lack of crèche facilities available for victims of domestic abuse.

The issues surrounding joint tenancies for the victims of domestic violence could be raised at the Housing Policy Advisory Group.

AGREED –

that an all-Member briefing to raise awareness of Domestic Violence be arranged before the end of the calendar year.

12

WORK PROGRAMME

The Task Group received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer including proposals from councillors.

The Chair said that there was more work that could be done on the domestic violence topic to consider the actions. It was suggested that an appropriate officer from the County Council could be invited after consultation with the Community Safety Manager. This could be part of the meeting in February 2013 but this would be confirmed at the next meeting.

Councillor Aron noted that domestic violence could dovetail well with the drug and alcohol topic.

The Task Group confirmed that they were happy with the proposals for the December meeting.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to find a new date for the February meeting.

Chair

The Meeting started at 6.00 pm
and finished at 8.30 pm