

Hitting home

Annemarie Flanagan on why the government's strategy on domestic violence is in trouble

Tuesday January 30, 2007
SocietyGuardian.co.uk

Domestic abuse is an ever present reality. Two women each week are killed by someone they know, and it's estimated that one in four will be affected over their lifetime. Men are victims too, but comparative figures show a much smaller scale problem.

Although massively under-reported, 'domestics' account for 16% of all violent crime, and the Home Office - currently under attack from all sides - is keen to show that its strategy is working. Some £14m has been invested in tackling domestic violence, but there are now real concerns that the policies - designed to help the victim - could be putting them more at risk.

The 2004 National Action Plan gave new powers of arrest to the police and increased the number of specialist courts designed to fast track offenders through the system. By April this year there will be 64 of these in operation.

This new 'tough on crime' approach appears, on paper at least, to be working. Recent figures have shown that successful prosecutions of domestic violence cases have increased from 46% in 2003, to 59% in 2005. The special DV (domestic violence) courts have an even higher conviction rate at 71%.

Whilst prosecution is paramount, rehabilitation, in this particular crime, is absolutely vital. Domestic abuse is highly complex, and very rarely the result of a one-off incident. Police are often called repeatedly to deal with the same people; reoffending rates are high.

Cases are generally dealt with by magistrates, and sentencing for first or less serious offenders will often involve a community rehabilitation order (CRO). Previously known as a probation order, the CRO can last up to three years and is designed to help the offender. Magistrates can add conditions to this order including participation in specialist anti-violence sessions, one of which is the integrated domestic abuse programme (IDAP).

Although a relatively new development the IDAP is based on a highly effective American scheme that has proved successful in cutting rates of reoffending. It challenges the perpetrator's use of violence and aims to change the behaviour which leads to it. Following sentencing many men move back with their partners and to prevent a reoccurrence of abuse it is recommended that they be placed on the IDAP as a matter of urgency. This is not happening.

Suffering from low morale and currently under threat of privatisation, the Probation Service is struggling to cope with the demands placed upon it. It hasn't the staff or resources to deal with the increasing number of men being processed through the courts.

There are waiting lists for IDAP places throughout England and Wales. In London, Wiltshire, Avon and Somerset, for example, delays of up to a year have been reported; other probation areas say waiting times are 'legendary'. With too few facilitators and too many cases, the IDAP is falling victim to its own success.

Harry Fletcher from the National Association of Probation Officers describes the situation as dire, with many staff totally fed up that they can't deliver a programme regarded as essential. His concerns about domestic violence perpetrators are echoed by magistrates.

Cindy Barnett JP, chairwoman of the Magistrates Association, says: "It is crucial to address the

issues which underlay the behaviour, and programmes such as IDAP are designed to do just that. Any lack of availability or long delay is simply not acceptable; it places the vulnerable victims of domestic violence and often their children at further risk."

The government undoubtedly has made inroads into the very thorny problem of domestic abuse. It is confident the message is getting through that such violence will not be tolerated, and victims are given more support than ever before. The fast track domestic violence courts are dealing with an ever increasing number of cases resulting in more successful prosecutions. But in failing to provide abusive men with adequate help following conviction, the whole process begins to fall down.

The integrated domestic violence programme requires the willingness of the offender to participate. Contrary to popular perception, many men want to stop their abusive behaviour and the IDAP is one step towards that goal. Agencies working with offenders say if it is not immediately accessible men feel let down and de-motivated. When they finally get placed the momentum has been lost.

Perhaps more worrying is the issue of victim safety. Figures from America have shown that men on domestic violence programmes are less likely to reoffend. Conversely it can be argued that those who don't have access to such a scheme are more likely to do so. The provision of the IDAP is regarded not as a luxury, but a necessity.

While the Home Office is aware of the problem it refutes allegations that failure to deliver such programmes is placing anyone at risk. A spokesperson says: "All offenders sentenced to the programme will complete it within the period of the order." Unfortunately for some, that may come too late.