

Special court helps curb domestic abuse

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Hundreds of women are being empowered to stand up to abusive partners thanks to a new specialist domestic violence court which has slashed prosecution times in half.

The pioneering court sessions at Norwich aim to make it easier for victims to seek justice by fast-tracking such cases and removing the risk of intimidation by their partners. In the past many have chosen to suffer in silence to avoid the distress of going to court.

Norfolk's top police officer has hailed the court a success and pledged that officers would support anybody wishing to break the cycle of abuse.

Officers in the county deal with about 4,000 domestic violence cases each year or the equivalent of more than 10 a day.

Yesterday alone magistrates dealt with cases including a man who rubbed dog faeces in his girlfriend's mouth, one who attacked his pregnant partner and disabled her car so she could not escape and another who locked his wife in the house and threatened to kill her.

Norfolk chief constable Ian McPherson said: I would like to reiterate the force's view on domestic violence - our officers will do all they can to give victims as much support as possible and to bring those people who do offend to account.

It is important to remember that attacks are not just men on women - they can also be women on men and can occur in same sex relationships. Help and support is available - please do not suffer in silence.

In the three months since the court was set up 46 people have been convicted - eight of whom were given custodial sentences. Another 53 cases are currently going through the system. Before the court was set up it took an average of 17 weeks to process each case whereas now cases are usually dealt with in nine weeks.

The courts work by having representatives from the police, probation service and Leeway women's aid all attend the weekly session to ensure magistrates have expert advice on hand. The same teams of magistrates oversee the courts making sure they adopt a consistent approach.

Magistrate Val Jenkins, who also serves on Norfolk Police Authority, said: This court brings all the agencies under one roof which means we can develop a deeper understanding of these cases and make sure they are dealt with quickly and fairly.

At Norwich magistrates' court yesterday Gary Russen, 44, of Bailey Close, Norwich, escaped jail but was ordered to carry out 200 hours community service and pay costs and compensation totalling £260 after admitting common assault. He came home drunk one evening last month before grabbing his partner by the throat and banging her head against a wall.

He locked her in the house and shouted that he would kill her until the attack was interrupted by his

wife's 18-year-old daughter.

Nigel Milliner, 40, of Brigham Close, Brundall, admitted common assault after beating his partner while she was four-months pregnant. He will be sentenced at a later date.

Det Sgt Ian Fox, who leads Norwich's domestic violence unit, said that on average victims are attacked 37 times before they contact police.

He said: Often with domestic violence you see one incident lead to a pattern of offending which gradually becomes more and more serious. By picking it up at an early stage we could ultimately prevent a murder.