



HILLINGDON
LONDON

RESIDENTS' AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES POLICY
OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

2006/07

*A SPECIALIST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURT FOR
HILLINGDON*

Members of the Committee

Cllr Shirley Harper-O'Neill (Chairman)
Cllr Kenneth Bartram
Cllr Janet Duncan
Cllr Graham Horn
Cllr John Oswell
Cllr Andrew Retter
Cllr Kay Willmott-Denbeigh



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chairman's Foreword



Hillingdon's Domestic Violence (DV) Forum pioneered the idea of a local SDVC and it was the key theme of their 'White Ribbon Day' conference in 2006.

The Council, in a motion inspired by the DV Forum and passed on 25 January 2007, asked this Committee to explore how Hillingdon can secure its own Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC) and to report back to the Cabinet at the earliest opportunity.

Domestic violence was for too long hidden behind closed doors - a scourge rarely talked about or taken action against. In recent years, this has changed; with awareness that domestic violence is no longer acceptable. However many victims feel that justice lags behind. Statistics tend to confirm this. About 25% of all violent crimes are domestic violence but only 1-2% results in a conviction. Too many victims' lives, and the lives of their children, are blighted by this lack of justice.

Specialist Domestic Violence Courts can usher in a whole new approach by justice and social agencies, from the time the crime is reported to police through to the conclusion of the case.

Our investigation has quickly established the facts of what needs to be done to set up an Specialist Domestic Violence Court in Hillingdon. We are particularly grateful to Helen Oliver from Brent Council, Anthony Wills from Standing Together Against Domestic Violence and Erica Rolle, our Domestic Violence Co-ordinator, for their advice. We hope officers and the relevant Cabinet Member, working with Hillingdon's Domestic Violence Forum, will now be able to bring a local SDVC to fruition.

Cllr Shirley Harper-O'Neill

1. Recommendations

The evidence and conclusions for these recommendations can be found in chapter 3 and the appendices.

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1 Justice for domestic violence victims

That a Hillingdon Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC) can make a substantial difference to justice for victims of domestic violence in the borough. The process of developing a SDVC brings agencies together to examine their practices. The court makes justice processes more victim-focused and encourages greater co-ordination across agencies. In the longer term, better justice will lead to improved social outcomes for victims and children and will help prevent repeat domestic violence.

Recommendation 2 A steering group

That a steering group be established with suitable partnership representation to take strategic decisions about establishing a local Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC).

This would function as a task group to set up the court and monitor its early progress. Our proposals are that this is based on the DV Forum Executive with expanded representation to ensure participation from key local agencies, i.e. the local Courts administration, Crown Prosecution Service, Witness Support, Police, Probation, PCT, Housing and Social Services, the Mental Health Trust and drugs and alcohol services. Cllr Mary O'Connor would be the Chairman. The steering group is likely to need to meet more frequently than the DV Forum Executive while setting up the court, but where possible meetings should be dovetailed.

Recommendation 3 A project officer

That Hillingdon's DV Co-ordinator is asked to take on the formal role of SDVC project officer alongside her other tasks and moves into the Community Safety Team to develop stronger links with local justice agencies.

The Community Safety Team will be able to provide support and links with other justice agencies that will benefit her work on the SDVC and on domestic violence generally. In other local authorities the DV Co-ordinator works in the Community Safety Team.

Recommendation 4 Key steps

That the Steering Group and project officer take action to:

- ***Ensure the full support of the local court and the formal agreement of the local Justice Issues Group.***
- ***Ensure that independent DV advice services (IDVA) will be in place and sufficient to meet court needs***
- ***Plan to introduce multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)***
- ***Draw up a protocol to be agreed by the council, the local justice system and voluntary sector partners who would be involved with the court.***

These are the key steps to be taken and resource gaps to be filled for the court to come into being. Funding for the court need not be substantial as most of the elements of the court exist already – becoming a SDVC is largely about improved ways of working. Extra funding is likely to be required for IDVA, though there may be Home Office funding for this. A task for the steering group and project officer should be to identify the resources needed and potential sources of funding so that, if necessary, the Council and partner organisations can bid for these in the next round of budget planning.

Recommendation 5 Additional consultancy and support

That a small amount of seed corn funding (up to £20,000 in 2007/8) is provided from either :

- a. ***The unallocated budget for Executive Priority growth for 2007/8; or***
- b. ***The Development and Risk Contingency***

to engage specialist expertise and meet costs involved in setting up the court and gaining accreditation.

Experience of other councils has been that engaging specialist help to develop protocols, provide training and encourage participation has paid dividends in terms of partnership from agencies and accreditation by the Home Office.

Recommendation 6 Timetable and reports

That the Steering Group set a timetable and target date for implementing the SDVC in June/July 2008 and report progress towards this goal periodically to the DV Forum and Cabinet.

The Steering Group are recommended to discuss and agree an action plan and timetable at their first meeting. On the basis of evidence given to the Committee, a practical target date for the start of the Court would be in June/July 2008. The Committee recommend that progress is reported to DV forum meetings and a further report is made to Cabinet in October 2007 to set out forward costs and plans.

2. Background, Importance and Methodology

Background

1. On 25 January 2007, the Hillingdon Council passed the following motion, which set the terms of reference for this short investigation by the Committee:

“This Council congratulates the Hillingdon Domestic Violence Forum for adopting the theme of “Justice for Domestic Violence (DV) Victims” at the recent White Ribbon Day Conference.

The Council recognises that it is hard enough for victims to report to the Police that they have been subjected to domestic violence and that past experience has shown the criminal justice system to be slow, inefficient and downright insensitive in responding to their plight. In the case of DV it is not just a matter of justice delayed being justice denied but it is also a question of untold fear and mental turmoil while a victim waits months and months for a date for a hearing.

The White Ribbon Day Conference showed that the Police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Magistrates Court have at last woken up to these realities and that improvements are in hand. In particular the Council notes that in other parts of the country great progress has been made as a result of the introduction of specialist domestic violence courts with specially trained prosecutors, Magistrates, legal officers and Police officers. Not only have these courts provided a much improved service they have also increased the number of guilty pleas and convictions, sending a clear message that abusers will be punished and victims protected.

In view of the continuing high incidence of domestic violence in this Borough the Council therefore urges the Residents’ and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee, with the full involvement of the Domestic Violence Forum, to explore how Hillingdon can secure its own specialist Court and report to Cabinet at the earliest possible opportunity.”

Importance

2. Hillingdon currently has a relatively high level of DV crime. The following table gives an overview of reported incidents to the police:

DV reported offences (confirmed figures):

Apr 2006-Mar 2007 Hillingdon Police received and recorded approximately **1826** reports of domestic violence.

This accounts for approximately **30% of all violent crime** (6136) in Hillingdon.

Arrests and Charges:

Apr 2006-Mar 2007 in relation to DV Hillingdon Police made:

830 arrests 374 charges

Cases progressed to Court:

Apr 2006-Mar 2007 in relation to DV the following cases progressed to court (have been charged):

Offence charged:	No. of cases
ABH	186
Common Assault	40
Harassment	29
Threats to kill	21
GBH	13
Murder	0
Rape	3
Other*	82

*Includes drugs, theft, blackmail, kidnap, etc, which have been flagged as DV.

3. More than fifty areas across the country now have specialist domestic violence courts. In London, the West London SDVC and Croydon SDVC have been operating longest. The West London SDVC, which covers the boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea, has seen an increase in its conviction rates over the last 3 years. Positive outcomes from that court include more defendants arriving at court, fewer discontinued trials, an increase in early guilty pleas and an increase in the proportion of defendants convicted. These findings are described in greater detail in the Chapter 3. Brent Council has recently successfully launched its specialist domestic violence court and Newham is setting up a SDVC.
4. The potential benefits of a SDVC in Hillingdon lie in providing a specialist service to clients suffering from this crime. This means more effective justice, so that witnesses feel more able to come forward, cases go forward with fewer interruptions or drop outs, victims feel more supported and in touch with the progress of the case and treatment is offered to perpetrators, where appropriate. The ultimately aim is, by providing effective justice, to deter and reduce the number of incidents of domestic violence.

Methodology (witnesses, documents and visits)

5. The Committee carried out their investigations as follows:

Documents consulted:

- Home Office national guidance: Specialist Domestic Violence Court – Resource Manual
- Standing Together against Domestic Violence: information pack issued on visit to West London SDVC.
- Information Pack given out at the launch of the Brent Domestic SDVC.

Witnesses

- **Helen Oliver, Senior Community Safety Officer, London Borough of Brent Community Safety Team**, who was project officer for setting up the Brent SDVC described the process of setting up the court at the Committee's meeting on 12 March 2007.
- **Anthony Wills, Chief Executive of Standing Together Against Domestic Violence**, attended the Committee's meeting on 10 April 2007. Standing Together helped set up the West London SDVC and assisted Brent with setting up their SDVC.
- **Erica Rolle, Hillingdon's Domestic Violence Co-ordinator**, presented reports and an action plan to the Committee's meetings on 12 March and 10 April 2007.

Visits

- **Launch of the Brent SDVC 14 February 2007:** Cllrs Mary O'Connor and Janet Gardner (respectively Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Domestic Violence Forum), Cllr Shirley Harper-O'Neill (Chairman of the Residents' and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee), Erica Rolle (Hillingdon DV Co-ordinator) and Maureen Colledge (Scrutiny Advisor) attended the launch and were able to see the Brent court and discuss it with Magistrates and officers.
- **Day visits to the West London SDVC 29 March and 5 April 2007:** Most members of the Residents' and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee, Cllr O'Connor, Cllr Gardner, Erica Rolle and Maureen Colledge spent a day seeing the West London SDVC in action and talking to the co-ordinating officer for the Court.

Liaison with Hillingdon Domestic Violence Forum

- **The Chairman and Vice Chairman of Forum** took part in the Committee's meetings on this issue.
- **DV Forum on 12 April 2007:** a report on the Committee's work was presented and discussed.

3. Summary and Conclusions

This chapter explains the rationale behind our recommendations:

Recommendation 1 Justice for domestic violence victims
That a Hillingdon Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC) can make a substantial difference to justice for victims of domestic violence in the borough.

What is an SDVC?

1. The Home Office resource manual describes specialist DV courts as:

“A **co-ordinated community response** to DV which combines both criminal justice and non criminal justice interventions”

Generally an SDVC does not need new court buildings or facilities, as usually suitable courts already exist, what makes it special is the work that goes into building a co-ordinated approach from justice agencies and other services to responding to cases of domestic violence.

2. The clearest way of describing an SDVC may be to describe the West London SDVC that members of the Committee spent a day observing. The West London SDVC was the first court of its kind in London and the first to hear trials nationally. It started hearing cases in October 2002 following six months of development work.
3. The operation of the West London SDVC is governed by a multi-agency protocol signed by all agencies from the statutory and voluntary sector involved with the court. The court serves two boroughs, Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham. A multi-agency Court Management Group that meets on a quarterly basis and is chaired by Jan Lesser, Head of Legal Services at West London Magistrates Court, manages it.
4. The West London SDVC sits on a Thursday and hears all cases flagged and listed as DV cases. The Crown Prosecution Service provides a specialist DV prosecutor. Others in the court – Police Officers, Probation Officers and the Legal Advisor – are aware of and trained in the specialist nature of the court. Domestic Violence Support Services sit in the court and act as the bridge with the victim, keeping her or him informed at all stages of the progress of the case. These and the witness support service provide victims and witnesses with the support often needed for them to see through a case to the end. A court co-ordinator ensures the process works.
5. In the West London SDVC, the advice/support services are provided by ADVANCE – a specialist advocacy service – for victims in Hammersmith and Fulham, while Eaves Women’s Aid and Victim Support provide these services for Kensington and Chelsea victims. These independent DV advice services (known as IDVA) are a key component of the court.

6. Standing Together Against Domestic Violence – a consultancy – provides the co-ordination for the West London SDVC, although in other courts this is sometimes fitted into the job of an existing court official.

The benefits of an SDVC

7. The benefits identified in the first three years of operation of the West London SDVC are:

- An increase in the number of defendants arriving at the court
- An increase in the percentage of defendants convicted
- An increase in the percentage of early guilty pleas
- A decrease in the mean number of hearing per completed case
- A decrease in the number of days between charge and completion
- A decrease in the percentage of discontinuances/withdrawals
- A decrease in the number of non evidence offered (NEO) dismissals

Table 1: Successes achieved by the West London SDVC

<i>Key indicators of the SDVC by year</i>	Year1	Year2	Year 3
Defendants arriving at court	221	158	262
Percentage of defendants convicted	36.2%	45.6%	50.4%
Percentage of defendants entering early guilty pleas	22%	20%	25%
Mean no. of hearings per completed case	4.5	4.5	4.1
Average no. of days between charge and completion	98	85	90
Percentage discontinuance / withdrawal	26.7%	18.4%	14.5%
Percentage NEO (no evidence offered) dismissal	22.2%	20.3%	18.7%

Source: Standing together against domestic violence (2003-6)

A continuing process

8. Whilst these achievements are impressive, as the Committee observed on their day visits to the courts, co-ordination is something that needs continued attention and can be blown off course if resources are not in place when needed. This may mean, for example, court delays waiting for reports, or long waiting lists for suitable perpetrator programmes. It is important therefore to see the court not as an end in itself but as part of building an effective system of justice dealing with domestic violence cases.

Recommendation 2 A steering group

That a steering group be established with suitable partnership representation to take strategic decisions about establishing a local Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC).

9. The Home Office resource manual for SDVCs recommends that a steering group is needed to “develop, monitor and performance-manage the SDVC”. It advises that all partners who have a delivery role should be involved and representation should be at an appropriate level. It also suggests that the steering group is different to the Domestic Violence Forum. Anthony Wills, who helped set up the West London and Brent SDVCs, gave similar advice in evidence to the Committee. He suggested the steering group should be focused on the specific task of setting up the SDVC and have the right level of representation to be able to commit necessary resources.
10. At a meeting on 25 April 2007 attended by the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Domestic Violence Forum, the Chairman and Scrutiny Advisor for this Committee, Hillingdon’s DV Co-ordinator, managers from Housing and the Head of Democratic Services, it was agreed that a Steering Group, if approved by Cabinet, could be based on the DV Forum Executive. This would need to be expanded to include key agencies not already represented, with representation invited at senior or Director level.
11. It was agreed that the Group would need to meet more frequently than the quarterly DV Executive Committee during the period of setting up the court and that this would start with a meeting early in June 2007. There was agreement that the following agencies were vital partners in setting up the court: the local Courts administration, Crown Prosecution Service, Witness Support, Police, Probation, PCT, Housing and Social Services, the Mental Health Trust and drugs and alcohol services.

Recommendation 3 A project officer

That Hillingdon’s DV Co-ordinator is asked to take on the formal role of SDVC project officer alongside her other tasks and moves into the Community Safety Team to develop stronger links with local justice agencies.

12. Whilst the Steering Group will provide overall direction for the work of setting up the court, a project co-ordinator is needed to carry out the detailed work of contacting and co-ordinating, preparing reports and protocols, negotiating and bringing partners together, etc. Appointing a project co-ordinator is an action recommended in the Home Office resource manual.
13. The Committee heard from Helen Oliver who had performed this role in relation to the Brent SDVC. It was clear that Helen had played a vital role in developing partnership, preparing the case for the court and seeking adequate funding from a variety of sources to ensure that services were in place to meet the needs of the court.

14. In Hillingdon, a natural home for this role is with the existing DV Co-ordinator, Erica Rolle, who has taken an active part in the Committee's investigations. For historical reasons, Erica's post is currently situated in the Emergency Housing team. A more suitable location in terms of the links that Erica needs to make is within the Community Safety Team. This is the location of DV Co-ordinators in most London boroughs. The Committee therefore recommend that Erica Rolle take on this role, alongside her other tasks as DV Co-ordinator, and moves into the Community Safety Team. Her current line management and the Community Safety Team see no difficulties with this recommendation.

Recommendation 4 Key steps

That the Steering Group and project officer take action to:

- ***Ensure the full support of the local court and the formal agreement of the local Justice Issues Group.***
- ***Ensure that independent DV advice services (IDVA) will be in place and sufficient to meet court needs***
- ***Plan to introduce multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)***
- ***Start drawing up a protocol to be agreed by the council, the local justice system and voluntary sector partners who would be involved with the court.***

15. Advice from Helen Oliver and Anthony Wills in respect of the steps taken to set up the Brent and West London SDVCs, along with the recommendations of the Home Office Resource Manual, have helped the Committee identify key tasks that the project officer and Steering Group are recommended to give early attention.
16. The support of the courts and the actions that they need to take to create the SDVC are a crucial part of establishing an SDVC. Explaining and consulting about the nature of a proposed Hillingdon SDVC to all parts of the court, e.g. Magistrates, courts officials, witness support units can help to iron out any problems, or potential problems if done early.
17. Hillingdon should benefit from the Brent experience of successfully setting up an SDVC, as Uxbridge Magistrates Court (the only magistrates court in the borough) is part of the same court administration district. It will be necessary to go through the formal procedure of seeking the approval of the local Justice Issues Group (JIG). In Brent's case this took about six months but may be quicker in Hillingdon's case.
18. The Home Office Resource Manual sets out guidelines for developing independent domestic violence advice (IDVA) services and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs). These are seen as vital parts of the SDVC system and the ones that do need resourcing to set up. In both cases, there are embryonic services already in place in Hillingdon that may be built on. IDVA services are usually provided by voluntary sector organisations such as Victim Support, who already provide witness support services in the borough. Early

discussions will be needed with relevant voluntary sector organisations to see how IDVA might best be developed.

19. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences were pioneered by Cardiff. They bring agencies together at the beginning of serious DV cases to ensure the victim's safety and that of any children involved – they could, for example, lead to extra locks or a secure internal room being provided or additional watch actions by the police. Typically agencies get together periodically (recommended to be fortnightly) and go through a list of cases, spending about 10 minutes on each considering safety issues. The benefits are the sharing of information (Hillingdon already has an information sharing protocol that enables this) and early protection and support of victims. Early discussions are needed with relevant agencies to reach agreement on introducing these arrangements by the time the court comes into operation. Resource costs are a co-ordinator to assemble the cases and arrange the meetings (as part of their existing job) and agencies' staff time attending meetings and following up actions.
20. Every SDVC is recommended to have a protocol that identifies and establishes the role of different agencies and records their commitment to the SDVC system. Examples already exist for other courts and guidance on the protocol is in the Home Office resource manual. The task will be to develop a protocol that meets the specific needs of a Hillingdon SDVC and is supported by all partners.

Recommendation 5 Additional consultancy and support

That a small amount of seed corn funding (up to £20,000 in 2007/8) is provided from either :

- a. ***The unallocated budget for Executive Priority growth for 2007/8; or***
- b. ***The Development and Risk Contingency***

to engage specialist expertise and meet costs involved in setting up the court and gaining accreditation.

21. Advice from our witnesses suggests that there will be some resource costs in setting up the SDVC, e.g. in preparing protocols, meetings, training, consultation and applications for funding, although the activities that the SDVC deals with already exist and costs are generally not substantial as the main changes are in ways of working. Both Brent and West London were set up with the help of purchased specialist expertise. In Brent this involved consultancy with Standing Together and the purchase of the Standing Together toolkit for staff involved in the court (this consists of a day of consultancy with partners and a manual to take away). Helen Oliver recommended both these as parts of their success.
22. On the basis of the advice received from witnesses and government bodies, the Committee recommend that Cabinet agree a small amount of funding (up to £20,000 in 2007/8) to help set up the court. The calls on this funding are likely to be expert consultancy help with drawing up protocols; specialist training; co-ordination of processes; and production of consultation and application

documents. This specialist help would supplement the input from the Domestic Violence Co-ordinator, who has a number of other DV tasks to manage.

23. The Government's initial programme for funding of SDVCs has ended but the Committee has been advised that a government announcement of the next stage in developing DV courts is likely to be made towards the end of June 2007. This may provide the opportunity to bid for funding of a Hillingdon court, and/or for IDVA and MARAC. However, advice is that assessments might not take place until quarter four 2007 so that any funding provided as a result is not likely until late in 2007/8. Advice given to the Committee in relation to Brent was that the funding they received from Government was not substantial and came late in the process, but that there were other potential sources of funding, e.g. for tackling violent crime. In the Committee's view therefore the Cabinet is recommended to put forward the small amount of seed corn funding described above, and to ask officers to seek any further funding from a variety of potential sources, including the government and other funds, as required.
24. The Home Office have been devolving decisions about approving courts to the regional level. The Government Office for London and the London Criminal Justice Board are already aware of Hillingdon's interest in having a SDVC. Early work directed by the Steering Group can help to put Hillingdon in a good position to be selected in the next stage.
25. The sum recommended is small in comparison with the costs of domestic violence within the borough. Anthony Wills advised the Committee that, based on government-accepted academic research, domestic violence is likely to be costing the borough £13.8m a year in police, court, social agencies and other costs.

Recommendation 6 Timetable and reports

That the Steering Group set a timetable and target date for implementing the SDVC in June/July 2008 and report progress towards this goal periodically to the DV Forum and Cabinet.

26. The Committee recommend that one of the first tasks of the Steering Group is to set a timetable and agree an action plan. On the basis of advice given to the Committee a realistic date to aim for is implementation of the court in June/July 2008.
27. It will be important to monitor and check on progress during this period and the Domestic Violence Forum provides a suitable forum for this, as well as keeping a wider range of agencies than on the Steering Group in touch with the development of the SDVC.
28. The Committee recommend a further report is made to Cabinet by October 2007 setting out forward costs and plans for the court. This will enable any continuing call on resources to be considered during budget-setting.

Appendix 1: Evidence Summaries

1. Evidence from Helen Oliver, Senior Community Safety Officer, London Borough of Brent Community Safety Team, on how Brent went about setting up their specialist DV Court, given to the Committee on 12 March 2007

Key points:

1. Helen said they started work towards their DV court in November 2005.
2. Her first task was to write a scoping report and circulate it to their Justice Issues Group (JIG), which is the same as ours - North West London. In February 2006 she heard back from JIG that they supported the proposals.
3. While waiting for the JIG's response, Helen cultivated interest and support for a bid from relevant agencies and groups across the criminal justice system, e.g. their Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) and their local Criminal Justice Board (CJB).
4. After JIG approval and further work to develop and sign up support from agencies, she sent in a bid to the Home Office. This generated an assessment that covered all the eleven components set out in the Government's resource manual for specialist DV courts.
5. To pass the assessment it is necessary to have the local criminal justice system signed up to the plans, court facilities such as separate entrances and a secure dock in place or planned, advocacy in place, arrangements for multi-agency assessment conferences worked out (although MARACs had not started when they bid) and training of relevant staff and Magistrates planned or in place.
6. A multi-agency task group assesses the arrangements. They visit to discuss as well as seeking written information.
7. In the last round, Brent was the only London Borough accepted for a government grant (£25,000) towards a specialist DV court. It took them 15 months from the start to reach this stage.
8. A key element in their success was the work put in to ensure good multi-agency working. They had set up a small high-level group, separate from their DV forum, to progress the work. Arrangements for each agency are now formalised and signed up to in a protocol.
9. Project management was mainly by Helen but shared with Margaret O'Keefe from the Court Service and with strong police input from their specialist DV officer.

10. To reach the stage of bidding, required work to ensure services were in place. It was necessary to seek extra funding. For example, the police were able to help fund the advocacy project; while the local Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) provided funds for work on DV connected with drug and alcohol abuse. Helen's advice was to think creatively in terms of seeking funding.
11. Helen recommended the toolkit from Standing Together and had found the further help they purchased from Standing Together very useful.
12. Brent's biggest extra cost had been setting up the advocacy project – they have six advocates but other areas have had as few as one. But using research by Betty Stanko, they had calculated that spending on a DV court was a good investment compared to the costs of DV-related crime.
13. The Government Office for London and the Home Office were helpful sources of advice.

2. Summary of advice given by Anthony Wills, Chief Executive of Standing Together against Domestic Violence, to the Committee on 10 April 2007

Anthony mentioned his background in the police and more recently working for the Local Government Association helping councils take action on domestic violence.

As CE for Standing Together he had helped Hammersmith & Fulham and Kensington & Chelsea set up the West London SDVC, and helped Brent set up their SDVC.

He congratulated the council on taking the initiative and passing a motion to set up a Specialist Domestic Violence Court (SDVC). In his view, councils should take the lead.

Anthony described his involvement with the Home Office on DV. He works with them to accredit SDVCs. The Home Office strategy was to use the setting up of SDVCs as a catalyst to better DV justice. Their policies were broadening and there may not be another round of Home Office funding for SDVCs this year. But this should not stop us going ahead because, as Brent found, Home Office funding had not been substantial or early in the process.

The Government decided action on DV justice was needed because, while domestic violence accounted for about one quarter of all violent crime, Anthony estimated that only 1-2% of DV crime resulted in a conviction. SDVCs can be a driver to better delivery of justice by encouraging improvements within and across partnership agencies.

Of the SDVC components, the three crucial elements are:

- 1. a co-ordinated community response to violence**
- 2. Independent domestic violence advocacy/advisers (IDVA)**
- 3. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC)**

A Co-ordinated Community Response to Violence

This requires changes within organisations and across organisations in the way they deal with DV, e.g. social services working better with the police. This should be supported by protocols, accountability and a performance management framework.

Independent domestic violence advocacy/advisers (IDVA)

This can be assisted by having one or more specialist independent domestic violence adviser(s) who deal directly with the victim and make things work for her or him. Experience is that this support helps the victim take safe and sensible decisions about their future and gives them the courage to go to court and stick with the case.

Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC)

These consider high-risk victims as opposed to the MAPPA process which concentrates on offenders. Cases may be identified by anyone with reasons to believe there is a serious risk, e.g. police, social services, probation. A committee of officers from relevant agencies meets to review the cases and decide action, e.g. extra locks, moving the victim to a safe place, seeking restrictions on bail, etc. Typically the committee would meet regularly, review a large number of cases and spend about 10 minutes on each. There needs to be a MARAC co-ordinator. Cardiff pioneered the MARAC approach and found it reduced repeat victimisation from a high 40% to single figures.

Next steps

In the Hillingdon context, our key task now should be to find out the gaps, e.g. missing partners and funding.

It is vital that the court is on board. We need informal discussions to ensure the local court is on side and then to take proposals through the local Justice Issues Group (JIG). The latter is a formal process.

Suggested **first steps** for us:

1. Discuss and **engage local court** via the lead legal adviser (Head of Legal Services?)
2. Set up and work through a structure, either around your DV forum or even better with **a strategic group of high level officers from key agencies** who can take decisions about committing their resources. It was agreed that our DV Forum executive might be this body. *Anthony offered to come to the first meeting to discuss creating an SDVC.*
3. After this, when agencies are on side, arrange **a Consultancy Day** at which he will deliver the Standing Together Toolkit to us and partners (we have paid for this). This is an event for mid-level operational people who will be working with the court. He will present it and can make the day Hillingdon specific.

The SDVC is not just a court process, but needs to be an end-to-end system from supporting the victim and responding appropriately to the first report to ensuring there are perpetrator programmes at the conclusion of the case.

Questions:

Court delays

Asked about waiting for reports and deferments for places on perpetrator programmes, which Councillors had seen on their visit to West London SDVC, Anthony said the court system had been worse before and while the SDVC had helped, it was not perfect. Problems crop up, e.g. the Probation Service recently said they were not sufficiently resourced to meet Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme orders. As an example of change the Crown Prosecution Service had

turned round its approach, but there needs to be a continuing effort across all agencies.

Funding

Asked about this, Anthony said that the government had funded two rounds of SDVCs and had put funding into IDVA and MARAC. He advised that there is a strong case for councils and partner agencies funding SDVCs as the direct costs to partners in Hillingdon of domestic violence are approximately £13.8 million. Setting up an SDVC will lead to benefits, e.g. for the children involved, reduced violent crime, fewer social problems, better co-ordination, etc.

Agencies that should be on the strategic steering group

Asked which agencies should be part of this, he advised as a minimum: police, CPS, courts, probation, Local Authority and the voluntary sector who might provide the independent domestic violence advisers.

This summary agreed by Anthony Wills on 19 April 2007