

# Children and Domestic Violence in Rural Areas

## Executive summary

### Background

The Countryside Agency commissioned Save the Children to manage this research, which took place in 2002. It aims to explore the nature and extent of domestic violence support provision for children and young people living in rural areas in England, to identify examples of good practice, and to highlight implications for policy, practice and improvements in the provision of domestic violence services. It responds to an identifiable research and policy vacuum relating to domestic violence services for children and young people living in rural areas.

### Aims of research

The aims of this research are:

- principally and distinctively, to enable children and young people who experience domestic violence in rural areas to identify and articulate their own specific service needs
- to evaluate the service response to these needs and identify any discernible gaps in provision
- to identify implications for policy and practice changes at local, regional and national levels.

### Methodology

The research project was conducted in three principal stages over a period of approximately eight months in 2002.

**Stage 1:** Detailed review of the research, legal and policy framework underpinning domestic service

provision for children and young people in rural areas.

**Stage 2:** The distribution of a postal and email questionnaire to 300 service providers nationwide, of which 29 were returned completed. The low response rate can be attributed in part to the saturation of domestic violence services with questionnaires and is reflected in other similar research studies.

**Stage 3:** Consultation with 19 children and young people between the ages of 5 and 16, and 5 parents, about their experiences of domestic violence service provision in a rural context. They were accessed primarily through refuges in Warwickshire, Lancashire and Herefordshire. This stage also included consultation with 39 key service providers in Warwickshire, Lancashire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire, including representatives from the refuge, health, criminal justice, education, social services, housing and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors.

The methodology applied for the project was heavily centred around eliciting children and young people's views of services. However, consultation with service providers was conducted prior to interviews with children and young people to identify potential gatekeepers and gain an overview of domestic violence support services for children. Access to children and young people was in general restricted by the understandable concern of gatekeepers about how the child's welfare might be affected and by the transient, often short-term, nature of refuge life.

## Overview of research findings

The findings indicate that there is an acute gap in provision for children and young people in virtually every service area we examined. Our analysis considers these gaps in the context of eight key themes.

### Access to and awareness of domestic violence services

Access and awareness are clearly central to the effective provision and receipt of domestic violence services. While significant strides have been made to raise public awareness of what domestic violence actually is and to facilitate access to help, these endeavours have predominantly targeted women rather than children and young people. Clearly, the launch of charitable services such as Childline has raised the profile of children's needs in this respect and they provide a vital, accessible source of help and advice. There is still, however, insufficient awareness of the range of services available to children and our study indicates a need for service providers to be more proactive in advertising and improving access to their services for children. This is a particular issue in rural areas where limited channels of information significantly restrict both awareness and physical access.

### Friends, leisure and social networks

The impact of domestic violence on friendships and social integration featured most prominently in children and young people's accounts. Removal from friends (often very suddenly without an

opportunity to say goodbye or explain their reasons for leaving) was particularly distressing. The abrupt introduction to a new school and social environment makes it difficult, particularly for the older children, to make new friends quickly. The confidentiality policy, which is so essential to refuge life, coupled with a need to keep a low profile following a move, meant that many children and young people found it difficult to forge close friendships or to spend any time with other children and young people outside school hours. This, in addition to the geographical isolation of rural life (particularly if a child has been moved from an urban into a rural environment), can be particularly disengaging.

While these issues are more difficult to address in terms of specific service provision, facilitating access to social clubs, youth groups and other extra-curricular programmes is an important means of engaging children and young people with new networks and enhancing their confidence and sense of self-worth.

An area of concern was the impact of domestic violence on household pets, particularly in relation to the health and safety of pets that children had to leave behind with the perpetrator (because of refuge restrictions, for example). Small charities such as Paws for Kids were identified as fulfilling a vital role in caring for the animals of those whose lives had been disrupted as a result of domestic violence. For farming families, however, the problem is more acute since many women and young people find it impossible to flee a domestic violence situation if it means abandoning their responsibilities towards their farm animals and, indeed, their livelihood.

## Refuge services

Refuges are clearly a crucial aspect of domestic violence support. They not only offer women and children a safe, supportive environment away from the perpetrator, but also are an essential gateway to other key services.

The commitment of the staff in refuges is beyond question. Many of them make significant personal sacrifices to provide residents with ongoing care and support. Problems associated with sustaining and building on resources are common to all refuges, and this impacts significantly on the level of provision available for children. The Women's Aid Federation of England (WAFE) is a national umbrella organisation which supports a network of 270 refuge organisations (organisations which run one or more refuges), managing an estimated 567 safe houses in England and Wales. WAFE recommends that all refuge organisations that provide accommodation for children should have a playroom and at least two children's support workers to comply with the National Standards for under Eights Day Care, but recent research indicated that many women's refuge organisations do not have adequate funding to do so.

Most support offered to children is in the form of children's one-to-one and group play activities and trips out. These activities provide (particularly younger) children with an opportunity to build up trust with refuge staff, but also with an essential diversion from the trauma associated with domestic violence and the upheaval of moving. There is a clear gap, however, in provision addressing the specific needs of

teenagers in the refuge, whether it is an appropriate, more grown-up activity or homework space, tailored counselling or anger-management sessions. This, coupled with the lack of activities available for young people in rural areas more generally, can exacerbate their sense of social and emotional dislocation.

## Education of children

Education, both formal and otherwise, is central to children's experience and understanding of domestic violence. Our snapshot of children and young people's experiences suggests a correlation between direct experience of domestic abuse and children's progress at school. This often leads to significant learning difficulties and/or behavioural problems.

Most mainstream schools have yet to equip themselves with the necessary expertise to accommodate children who are displaying educational or behavioural problems because of domestic violence. More focused measures need to be put in place, therefore, not only to assist the child, but also to improve teachers' understanding of domestic violence issues and, ultimately, their chances of identifying children who are experiencing domestic violence.

A number of respondents also reported problems of gaining initial access to schools (particularly secondary schools) when domestic violence had resulted in geographic relocation. In many cases, it could be a number of months before a school place was secured, with significant social and academic consequences for the young person.

Respondents associated many of the access problems with lengthy, over-bureaucratic procedures. Many schools have concerns about the perceived impact that taking in 'problem' children would have on exams and performance ratings, existing problems of overcrowding and the perceived likelihood of the child moving again in the near future.

## Housing children and young people who experience domestic violence

Housing is a key area of concern for women and children who experience domestic violence, which so often necessitates them moving out of the home, in spite of existing legal mechanisms to remove the perpetrator. Assistance with benefits and local authority housing applications is readily available to those who move into refuge accommodation in the first instance, since refuges generally have established contacts within the housing authority and knowledge of local one-stop-shops. It is more difficult, however, for those faced with making these arrangements independently.

Efforts have been made at statutory and governmental level to improve services and raise awareness of the housing needs of those affected by domestic violence. The Homelessness Act 2002, for instance, places an obligation on local authorities to afford priority to those who have become homeless unintentionally, reinforcing pre-existing obligations in respect of those who experience housing problems as a result of domestic violence. Furthermore, the government has issued comprehensive guidelines within its

Supporting People programme as to how services can provide a more effective, co-ordinated response to providing emergency and more long-term accommodation in cases of domestic violence.

Although such developments are to be welcomed, they primarily target the situation of women, with only cursory reference to the specific housing needs of children and young people. Not surprisingly, therefore, our research reveals that women and children escaping domestic violence face continuing problems in accessing appropriate, *child-friendly* housing.

## Health and welfare

This aspect of the research considered the emotional and physical health and welfare of children and young people who experience domestic violence. The findings indicate an emphasis in service provision on the physical well-being of the child, often within the remit of existing child protection policy. Furthermore, there was a widespread perception held by many mothers that social services' involvement in domestic violence situations would lead to their children being taken away. This clearly discourages many mothers from seeking help at an early stage.

Health professionals in particular, by the very remit of their work and their capacity to access vulnerable groups, provide a potentially invaluable means of reaching children and young people who are experiencing domestic violence.

Less acknowledged within these services are the needs of children who have been emotionally damaged through *witnessing* domestic violence. Much of the work in this respect is absorbed by the voluntary sector, by refuge staff, or – on a much more informal basis – by family members and friends. While youth-led support networks and counselling services such as that provided by Relate are now being promoted, the research indicated a significant gap in counselling provision for younger children between the ages of five and eleven.

## Outreach services

Outreach services are an essential means of bringing domestic violence services to otherwise ‘invisible’ and inaccessible children and young people. The need is even greater in rural areas where access to and availability of domestic violence services are so limited. Our study revealed significant variations, both between different service sectors and within a given service sector, in the nature and extent of outreach provision. For instance, the availability of refuge outreach is, like so many other aspects of refuge provision, contingent upon the level of funding and staff resources available to that refuge. Much of the outreach work was therefore concerned with ex-residents’ aftercare. It was largely negotiated on an informal basis, often at the instigation of the child who would make a point of visiting the refuge on a weekly or monthly basis following his or her departure.

The varied nature of formal outreach work clearly demands effective and ongoing inter-agency

co-operation to ensure that the child’s needs are continually monitored and addressed. Indeed, an inter-agency approach to outreach is viewed as an important means of facilitating and de-stigmatising access to domestic violence support.

## Specific problems experienced by teenage boys

Our research highlighted the marginalisation of teenage boys in a number of areas of domestic violence service provision. Refuges are limited in their formal capacity to assist older teenage boys as a result of admission policies and practices. While such policies are, in some cases at least, necessary, they can act as a major disincentive for many women to move into the refuge because they do not wish to be separated from their teenage sons. In cases where the mother does move into refuge accommodation, our research suggests that teenage boys frequently remain at the family home. Alternatively, they may move in with friends or relatives, with limited opportunity to visit their mother or younger siblings. This ‘policy of separation’ could raise a number of concerns in relation to, for example, the health and safety of teenage boys who remain with the perpetrator, their sense of abandonment or of isolation from their mother and other siblings, or perceptions that they might adopt the violent characteristics of the perpetrator. However, it is clear that further research is required to explore the current situation of teenage boys.

At the other end of the spectrum are teenage boys who have exhibited violent or abusive behaviour,

forcing mothers or siblings to flee the family home. We found a common reluctance of mothers to report such incidents to the police, which adds to the complex nature of this problem.

## Summary of key implications for policy and practice

### Access to and awareness of domestic violence services

- At a national level, strategies for tackling domestic violence should be child-focused and reflect the need for longer-term funding for the development of new domestic violence support services in rural areas. This should be discussed by the Inter-Departmental Group on Domestic Violence and, in turn, be acknowledged and recognised by potential funders (such as *local authorities, NGOs, primary care trusts and charitable trusts*) of domestic violence services.
- *Local authorities* should encourage and facilitate joint service provision or shared facilities (such as *local health or community centres*) as a means of improving access to domestic violence support in rural areas. *Primary care trusts* and *strategic health authorities* could play an important role in supporting and developing such provision.
- Greater use should be made of school premises, leisure centres, etc, where children and young people already go, for the provision of information, advice and support services.
- *The police, children's charities and counselling services* should consider using more innovative methods of reaching children in remote areas,

such as Internet advertising, or art, craft and drama displays in local schools, churches and youth clubs.

- *Domestic violence support services* and *relevant children's charities* (such as those which provide telephone helplines) should be encouraged to develop more innovative and proactive methods of reaching children experiencing domestic violence in rural areas. This may include developing accessible Internet gateways.

### Friends, leisure and social networks

- Activities of organisations such as Paws for Kids need to be more widely advertised through the local press, veterinary surgeries and pet shops.
- Further research is needed on the correlation between school bullying and domestic violence.
- Teacher training programmes need to include more standardised and systematic awareness raising on domestic violence issues and the specific vulnerabilities of young people experiencing domestic violence.
- *Local authorities and NGOs* should develop and promote youth-led advocacy and mentoring groups as an effective means of helping young people integrate into a new environment.

### Refuge services

- *The Government*, through the Inter-Departmental Group on Domestic Violence, should urgently address the need for statutory funding to enable children's services in refuges to comply with the required staffing ratios and

space standards in order to prevent children's services being reduced or closed down.

- *Schools and refuges* should liaise with one another to provide education and talks to staff and children on refuge life. Through the development of such partnerships and advertising in the media, refuges can help to promote awareness of their service and dispel many of the misconceptions surrounding refuge life.
- Collaboration and closer links should be made between *refuges, external NGOs and other organisations* (such as Relate, Connexions and local community groups) to provide adequate service provision for teenagers who live in refuges.
- *Organisations that support women's refuges* should provide more specific guidance on how to get the best out of the Supporting People policy. Women's *refuges* should also capitalise on opportunities to consult more readily with each other on this issue.
- *Local authorities* should address the needs of children experiencing domestic violence in their local preventative strategies and children's services plans. Core funding needs to be identified for all refuges, including specific support for a children's support worker in every refuge.
- *Refuges* should, wherever possible, identify adequately spaced and furnished rooms for use by young people.

#### Education of children

- *The Department for Education and Skills (DfES)* should work with a sample of schools to pilot child-held education records for

children experiencing domestic violence and periods of high mobility to ensure the quick exchange of information between local education authorities and schools.

- *Teacher training courses* should include awareness of domestic violence, the effects on children and young people and strategies for identifying and managing the disclosure of domestic violence.
- *Local education authorities* should endeavour to nominate a member of the teaching staff or a peripatetic representative to co-ordinate such activities in the region.
- *Local education authorities, schools and admissions forums* should strengthen communication with local refuges and other domestic violence support services and develop strategies to facilitate children's access to and progress in school.
- *Local education authorities and schools* need to ensure that children whose schooling has been temporarily interrupted as a result of domestic violence are provided with alternative educational resources.
- *Local education authorities, health authorities and social services* should consider developing protocols for sharing information as part of the local preventative strategy while developing a system for the identification, referral and tracking of children and young people.
- *Schools* should incorporate awareness of domestic violence issues more explicitly into the citizenship curriculum at junior and secondary level, both to inform children of what is appropriate behaviour at home and to encourage and support disclosure.

- Further research with children is required to explore the educational experiences of children who reside or have formerly resided in refuges.

Housing children and young people who experience domestic violence

- The *Office of the Deputy Prime Minister* should extend the criteria of the *Supporting People funding* to facilitate the resettlement of, and improve housing security for, children and young people affected by domestic violence. Implementation of the *Supporting People programme* should also be monitored to ensure that it is meeting the needs of children and young people escaping domestic violence.
- *Social services, health workers and housing authorities* should be encouraged to work together to facilitate inter-agency training and communication to raise awareness of the specific housing needs of women and children in the context of domestic violence and to ensure cases involving children are prioritised.
- *Housing authorities* need to liaise with *social services and health workers* to consider the specific needs and safety of children when making decisions about where to re-house families.
- *Housing authorities* should address the need for affordable housing for families who have experienced domestic violence, particularly where the size of families means that refuge provision can be unsuitable.
- *Housing authorities* need to implement effective and consistent mechanisms in collaboration with *social services* for monitoring the housing

needs of women and children who have been re-housed as a result of domestic violence.

Health and welfare

- *Local authority departments (including education and social services, regional health authorities and housing authorities)* need to designate a representative to regularly attend, engage with and report back on the activities of domestic violence forums.
- Specific training should be provided to *health workers* on how to detect and address sensitively cases of domestic violence.
- *Schools, social services and the media* could do much to raise public awareness about the role of social workers to dispel existing preconceptions and to foster a more positive, accessible image.
- *NGOs such as Relate* need to publicise youth counselling services more so that young people are aware of these services. Additional support for youth-led support and advocacy groups would enable more young people to play a more active part in promoting such services.

Outreach services

- *The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister* should extend the *Supporting People programme* to include funding for the provision of general outreach activities.
- *Police, health workers, legal practitioners, counsellors, domestic violence charities and social services* need to achieve more effective inter-agency co-operation as part of local preventative strategies and through domestic violence forums to explore methods of

providing appropriate and sensitive outreach services for children.

- *Women's refuges* should consider establishing more consistent aftercare services for former refuge residents. Instances of good practice and information on sources of funding for outreach activities should be more readily exchanged and shared between refuges.
- *Social services* should adopt a more proactive approach to tracking children following a move from the refuge or after they have fled from a domestic violence situation. This should be linked to the identification, referral and tracking system that all *local authorities* will be implementing as part of their local preventative strategies.

Specific problems experienced by teenage boys

- Further research is needed with teenage boys, families and professionals to explore the housing provision, options and needs of teenage boys who experience domestic violence.
- *Housing authorities* should ensure that suitable temporary accommodation and permanent rehousing is identified for mothers and teenage boys who are fleeing domestic violence.
- *Housing authorities and social services* should prioritise and monitor the housing needs of teenage boys who do not have access to refuges.