



The South Australian Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme 2018-2024

An Independent Review

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Executive Summary

The South Australian Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) was introduced in Sept. 2018 and has since received 2581 applications for disclosure and organised 1064 disclosure meetings.

The DVDS is delivered in a coordinated partnership approach between Domestic and Family Violence Services and South Australian Police (SAPOL). Each agency's role and responsibilities are determined on the basis of their expertise, legal powers, and the rights, safety, and support needs of Persons at Risk (PARs).

Every applicant to the DVDS receives contact from a DFV specialist and is offered confidential trauma-informed support, domestic violence education, risk assessment, safety planning, onward referrals, and psychological support, irrespective of whether they are eligible and irrespective of whether a disclosure is made.

Demand for the DVDS has risen 200% over the 6-year period of its operation.

Culturally and linguistically diverse people, LGBTIQ+ and disabled people are underrepresented amongst applicants for a disclosure, in the context of the South Australian population. Future promotion and outreach relating to the DVDS should therefore seek to reach these groups.

The DVDS is proving to be an important opportunity for specialist services to engage with and support previously hard to reach victims and survivors. 86% of DVDS Persons at Risk are not receiving support from any DFV service at the time they apply for a disclosure and 67% have never received such support.

99% of clients were satisfied with the service they received from South Australia Police and the Domestic and Family Violence Service.

Clients report that the DVDS is as useful to them at the end of a relationship as at the beginning. The value of the DVDS therefore extends beyond early intervention, also protecting people at the riskiest time (the point of leaving). This has implications for how the DVDS is promoted.

Clients report that disclosures have an overwhelmingly positive impact on them including by making visible previously hidden patterns of abuse by serial perpetrators, correcting victim-blaming narratives, and helping clients make informed decisions about their relationship.

98% of clients found the DVDS helpful in making decisions about their personal safety and over 95% of clients found the disclosure meeting helpful in making decisions about other aspects of safety, including children and pets.

Concerns about the legal (e.g. privacy) risks of disclosing police records have proven unfounded. No legal challenges have been brought against SAPOL in relation to disclosures under the DVDS. No other jurisdictions operating disclosure schemes have reported legal challenge either.

Comparative data and client feedback show that South Australian DVDS represents good practice globally in domestic violence disclosure schemes. An anonymous survey for people who have applied for or received a disclosure in England and Wales found that 64% were satisfied with the service they received from police, compared to 99% in South Australia. 20% of respondents in England and Wales reported being 'very unsatisfied' with the service they received from police officers, compared to zero in South Australia.

The South Australian DVDS should therefore be considered a model for other jurisdictions looking to introduce new disclosure schemes or review existing ones.

Glossary

DFVS	Domestic and Family Violence Specialist
DVDS	Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme
FDVS	Family and Domestic Violence Section (South Australia Police)
PAR	Person at Risk
SOR	Subject of Request
SAPOL	South Australia Police
TPA	Third Party Applicant
WSSSA	Women's Safety Services South Australia

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to review the implementation of South Australia's DVDS between 2018-2024, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the scheme and identifying lessons learned. To that end, the report addresses the following questions:

- Who is using the DVDS?
- What is the impact of the DVDS on clients?
- How satisfied are clients with the service they receive?
- Were there any challenges in DVDS delivery and is there room for improvement?
- How does South Australia's DVDS compare to other disclosure schemes?

To address these questions, we carried out a policy and academic literature review of DVDSs in Australia and globally. We also analysed the following data:

- WSSSA monitoring data on all 2581 applications submitted between October 2018-September 2024.
- Responses to anonymous surveys to all clients who attended a disclosure meeting. Each client received two surveys, the first immediately after the disclosure meeting (Survey 1) and a follow-up 1 month later (Survey 2). Of the 1064 clients who attended a disclosure meeting, 269 completed Survey 1 (a robust sample size of 25%) and 91 went on to complete Survey 2. Responses are received by the Office for Women.
- 43 in-depth case studies, compiled on an ongoing basis for monitoring purposes and provided by WSSSA and its partners.
- 8 in-depth qualitative interviews with SA DVDS practitioners in Oct 2024 (5 WSSSA staff; 2 regional Domestic and Family Violence Specialists; 1 DVDS lead in South Australian Police)
- 1 observation of a DVDS disclosure at WSSSA premises in Oct 2024.

This report was researched and written independently, with funding support from the British Academy Fellowships programme.

2. The DVDS Process

The South Australian Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) was introduced in 2018 as an initiative of the previous South Australian Liberal government.

The aim of the DVDS is to provide information and support to people at risk of domestic violence, and to enhance their ability to self-determine the future of their relationship by providing them with information about the risk their current or ex-partner poses to them and their family. It does so by enabling someone who has concerns about their partner or ex-partner to find out if that person has a history of using violence in previous relationships. Under the DVDS, a person at risk (PAR) can apply online to police for any relevant information held on police systems to be disclosed. A third party applicant (TPA) can also apply on behalf of someone else if they are concerned about a risk to their safety, but the information will only be shared with the PAR.

The DVDS is underpinned by a detailed Service Model which sets out each step in the process and was co-produced by Office for Women (OfW), Women's Safety Services South Australia (WSSSA) as the lead Domestic Family Violence service and South Australian Police (SAPOL). OfW provides funding to WSSSA to implement the DVDS throughout South Australia, which covers 3.2 FTE of specialist support staff at WSSSA and subcontracted regional and specialist partners.² SAPOL receives no dedicated budget to operate the DVDS. Since its launch in 2018, 1828 of the 2553 applications for disclosure have been assessed as eligible and 1064 disclosure meetings have been held. This report is the first independent review of the SA DVDS.

Legal basis, applicant eligibility, and information eligible for disclosure

The legal basis for the DVDS rests in the South Australian Government's Information Sharing Guidelines for Promoting Safety and Wellbeing. These stipulate that information may be shared about any person who may pose a risk to themselves or to public health or safety, when it is believed a person is at risk of harm.

Eligibility criteria are:

- Ordinarily resides in South Australia
- Is aged 17 years or older
- Is in an intimate partner relationship, or has been, and there is ongoing contact due to children, ongoing violence & abuse or a likelihood of returning to the relationship
- Presence of behavioural indicators of concern

² Limestone Coast DVS - CentaCare, Yarredi DFV Service and UCSA Port Augusta Regional Domestic & Aboriginal Family Violence Service.

Information that informs a disclosure and can be shared include:

- Convictions for relevant offences, including physical and sexual assault, property damage, stalking and unlawful threats
- Reports of relevant offences
- Current and historical Intervention Orders
- Breaches of Intervention Orders
- Convictions for relevant offences committed outside of South Australia
- Any other relevant information that may impact of the safety of the person at risk

Coordinated Partnership Approach

The DVDS is delivered in a coordinated partnership approach between SAPOL and the DFVS, with each agency taking responsibility for the aspect of the scheme that falls within their expertise and powers. As the lead agency, SAPOL manages the online portal and receives all applications.

The respective roles of the two coordinating partners are outlined in the table below.

Table 1. SAPOL and DFVS Partnership Approach

SAPOL (Lead Agency)	DFV Specialists
A central team of officers with a specialisation in Domestic and Family Violence assesses eligibility, collects and compiles information to enable a search of police databases, carry out those searches, and draft the disclosure script. The team reconsiders eligibility if prompted by DFVS.	Contacts PAR or TPA safely, collects information about circumstances and risk, and if this information suggests the need to review eligibility, makes a recommendation to SAPOL to do so. Provides PAR with initial support, education, safety planning, counselling and onward referral to other services as necessary.
Shares the disclosure script with the DFVS in advance of the disclosure meeting to support DFVS awareness of SOR patterns of behaviour. This enables the development of better safety management strategies to mitigate risk in the context of PAR's life.	Coordinates the disclosure meeting and ensures it takes place in a safe location. Conducts pre-meet case meeting with SAPOL officer in advance if necessary.
Attends the disclosure meeting only to confirm identity, read the disclosure script, provide advice related to criminal justice if requested (e.g. about reporting a crime or making an intervention order) and to administer the confidentiality agreement. Once that role is completed, the officer leaves the meeting to allow a debrief and support session to take place.	Debriefs with PAR confidentially after within the context of intimate partner relationships disclosure. Provides support, counselling, risk assessment, safety planning and onward referral in the meeting and follow-up as necessary.

All applicants to the disclosure scheme receive contact from a DFVS and are offered confidential trauma-informed support, DV education, risk assessment, safety planning, onward referrals, and psychological support, irrespective of whether they are eligible and irrespective of whether a disclosure is made. All clients attending a disclosure meeting receive confidential pre- and post-disclosure support from the DFV service. While WSSSA is the lead agency, local DFV services provide services to DVDS clients in regional areas.

The DFVS professionals delivering the DVDS service are specialists in domestic and family violence. Knowledge and experience in the field is considered important as the DVDS intervention is brief and often one-off if not eligible for a disclosure. WSSSA, who coordinates and supports the significant majority of disclosures, requires that its workers have significant experience in the DFV field. Practitioners are therefore able to understand and assess risk and safety in intimate partner relationships confidently and skilfully. Regional and remote service providers face additional challenges. There are fewer experienced DFV Practitioners than in metropolitan areas. This is due to historic underfunding of core DFV services in regional South Australia, creating a gap in “feeder” programs for staff development and expansion of knowledge. Regional service providers equally demand expertise and knowledge in specialists working on the DVDS programme. They achieve this by self-funding the significant resources to upskill and train their specialists as well as providing ongoing professional development, commensurate with the requirements of DFV brief intervention.

Table 2. DVDS Framework and practice approach

DVDS Framework and Practice approach
<p>Feminist understanding of DFV</p> <p>DFVSs will understand the nature and dynamics of DFV. Clients are supported to understand that DFV is perpetrated as patterns of behaviour within intimate partner relationships that seek to obtain and maintain power and control over another person and produce fear or intimidation. The person subjected to the violence is not responsible for the violence. The intrinsic link between the structural inequality of men and women and violence against women is recognised.</p>
<p>Client centred and strengths based</p> <p>The DFVSs will work from the premise that they and the client are equal partners in the work. Clients are supported to identify their own goals and needs and DFVSs will recognise that the client is the expert of their own life. DFVSs will work with clients to identify their unique strengths and coping mechanisms and will reflect these strengths back to the client.</p>
<p>Intersectional</p> <p>DFVS will recognise the different experiences that women and children have of DFV and understand the various ways in which both difference and disadvantage can apply across communities. This</p>

includes the impact and application of age, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, class, ability and religion. DFVSs will tailor service responses to meet the diversity of our client group and demonstrate an understanding and knowledge to ensure inclusivity and access to the Scheme. This ensures that risk issues unique to individuals are addressed; and that the service is responsive to all sections of the community.

Child focussed

DFVSs will be aware of and sensitive to the needs of children and young people. Children and young people's safety will be paramount in interventions with their mothers/carers; and DFVSs will support the mothers/carers of children and young people to identify and meet their needs. This will include sharing information and knowledge of the impact of violence in all its forms on children and young people.

The Service Model states that SAPOL and the DFVS have 14 days each to process applications. Monitoring data shows that the median time from application to disclosure is 21 days. The average duration of a disclosure meeting is between 1-2.5hrs.

The initial intent of the DVDS was for disclosure meetings to be held in person. This was rapidly adjusted to phone disclosures with the COVID pandemic to ensure continuity of service. At the time this report is being written, a combination of in-person and phone occurs. Budget limitations for regional travel impact on rates of in-person disclosures in some rural and remote locations.

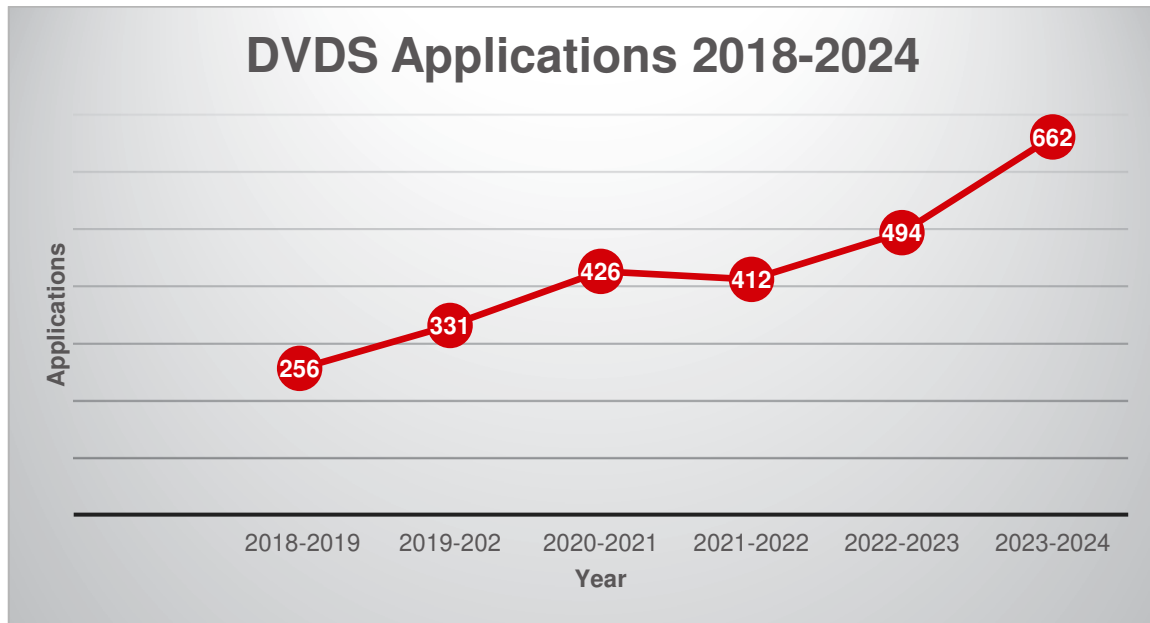
Table 3 format of disclosure meetings between 2018-2024

In person	Tele-conference	Video conference
64.5%	35%	0.5%

Public awareness and demand

The DVDS is promoted through word of mouth and the DFV services' contacts, as well as paid-for Facebook posts twice a year. Despite this modest public awareness activity, demand for disclosures has risen significantly year-on-year and over 200% since its launch.

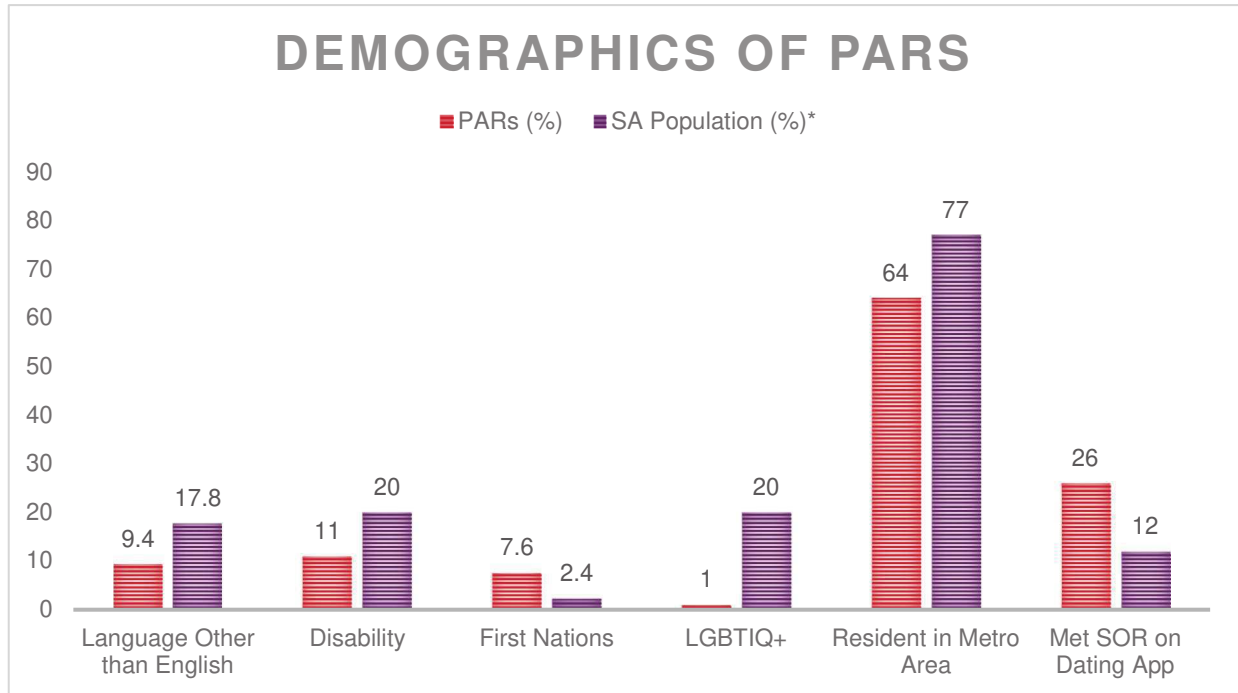
Fig.1 DVDS applications



3. Who is using the DVDS?

This section presents data collected by the DFVS on the age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability and parental status of applicants, providing an overview of the sources of demand for disclosures in South Australia. Fig.2 below shows some of these factors in their regional context.

Fig.2. Demographics of DVDS Persons at Risk³



96% of applicants for disclosure are female and just over 3% are male, less than 0.5% are trans or non-binary. The median age of PARs and SORs matches South Australia’s average of approx. 40yrs. Additionally, 67% of PARs had children and 6% were pregnant at the time of the disclosure.

³ References for the population figures for the relevant categories are here: Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) 2020-2024. https://www.publicsector.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/308329/OCPSE-DAIP.pdf; ABS South Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population summary 2022 [https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/south-australia-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary#:~:text=In%20South%20Australia%2043%2C000%20people,Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander.](https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/south-australia-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary#:~:text=In%20South%20Australia%2043%2C000%20people,Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander.;); IPSOS Pride Survey 2023. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-06/Ipsos%20Global%20Advisor%20-%20LGBT%2B%20Pride%202023%20-%20AUSTRALIAN%20Press%20Release.pdf>; Relationships Australia Survey 2023. <https://www.relationships.org.au/document/online-dating-and-the-rise-of-open-relationships/#:~:text=Almost%201%20in%204%20younger,than%2010%20years%20met%20online.>

First Nations people⁴ and people who met the SOR on a dating app are overrepresented amongst clients, confirming research that shows increased vulnerability to abuse amongst these groups.⁵

Other vulnerable groups, including those from ethnic minorities, those who identify as LGBTIQ+ and those with disabilities are underrepresented amongst clients.⁶ This suggests that more might be done to reach out to these groups to raise awareness of the DVDS. As such groups may be reluctant to engage with police or other authorities, any such outreach should emphasise that a disclosure does not require applicants to visit a police station or to report crimes to police.

In 2020, online dating increased significantly and evidence⁷ revealed the fast tracking of relationships and obsessive behaviour were notable risk factors for future violence and abuse in relationships. The DVDS began collecting data on where PARs met the subject of the DVDS request. Those figures show that 26% of relationships began online, which is significantly higher than the South Australian average of 12%.⁸

The DFVS also collect information on whether PARs are receiving or have received support for their abuse in the past, to monitor the extent that they are reaching people not already connected to the DFV sector.

⁴ The DFVS are committed in the Service Model to providing a culturally competent service, recognising the intergenerational trauma experienced by First Nations Peoples through practices of dispossession of culture and Country, through the Stolen Generations and ongoing colonisation. The DFVS are committed to deep listening and work in partnership with First Nations clients to strengthen pathways for safety for themselves and children in their care. DFVS consult with First Nations DFV services where required.

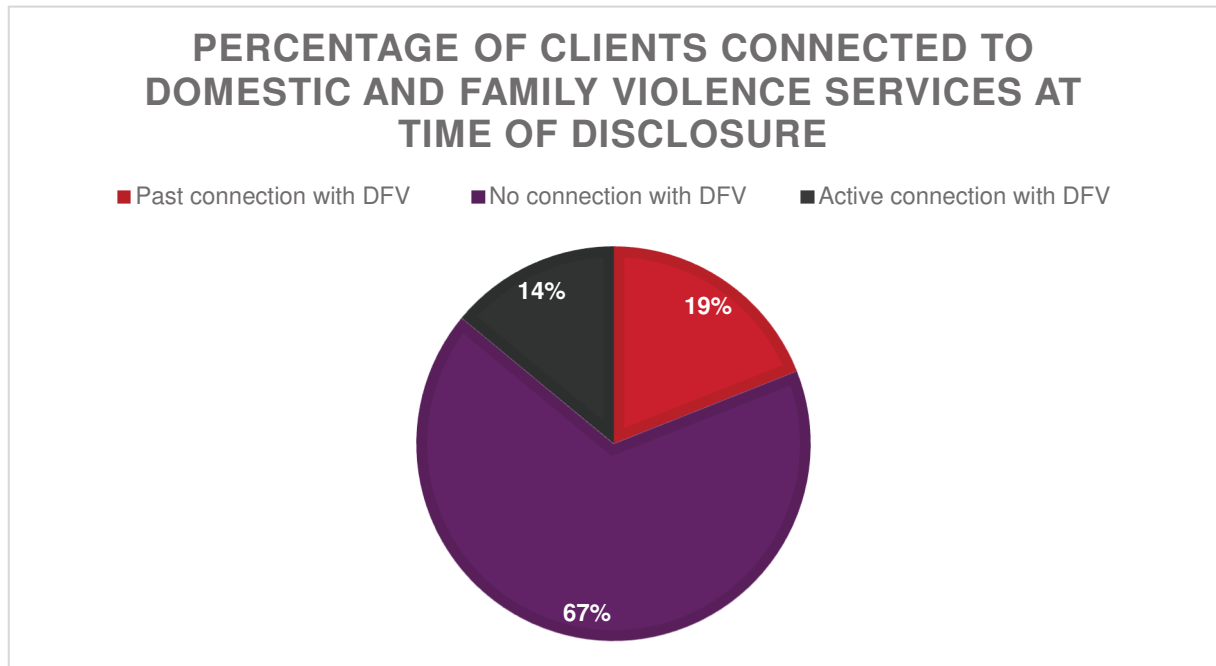
⁵ See, for example: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>. And a Monash research briefing on family violence experiences of LGBTIQ+ people: https://arts.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1528657/rb-lgbtiqfv.pdf

⁶ When working with clients from the LGBTIQ+ populations the DFVS recognises the importance of identity in sexuality, gender, and pronouns and hold awareness of the various contexts of relationships. For clients from CALD background the DFVS seeks to work with interpreters and can consult with Migrant Women's Support Program located at WSSSA.

⁷ For example Wolbers H, Boxall H, Long C & Gunnoo A 2022. Sexual harassment, aggression and violence victimisation among mobile dating app and website users in Australia. Research Report no. 25. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

⁸ Relationships Australia. <https://www.relationships.org.au/document/online-dating-and-the-rise-of-open-relationships/#:~:text=Almost%20%20in%20%20younger,been%20in%20an%20open%20relationship>.

Fig.3. PAR's reported connection to DFV support at the time of disclosure

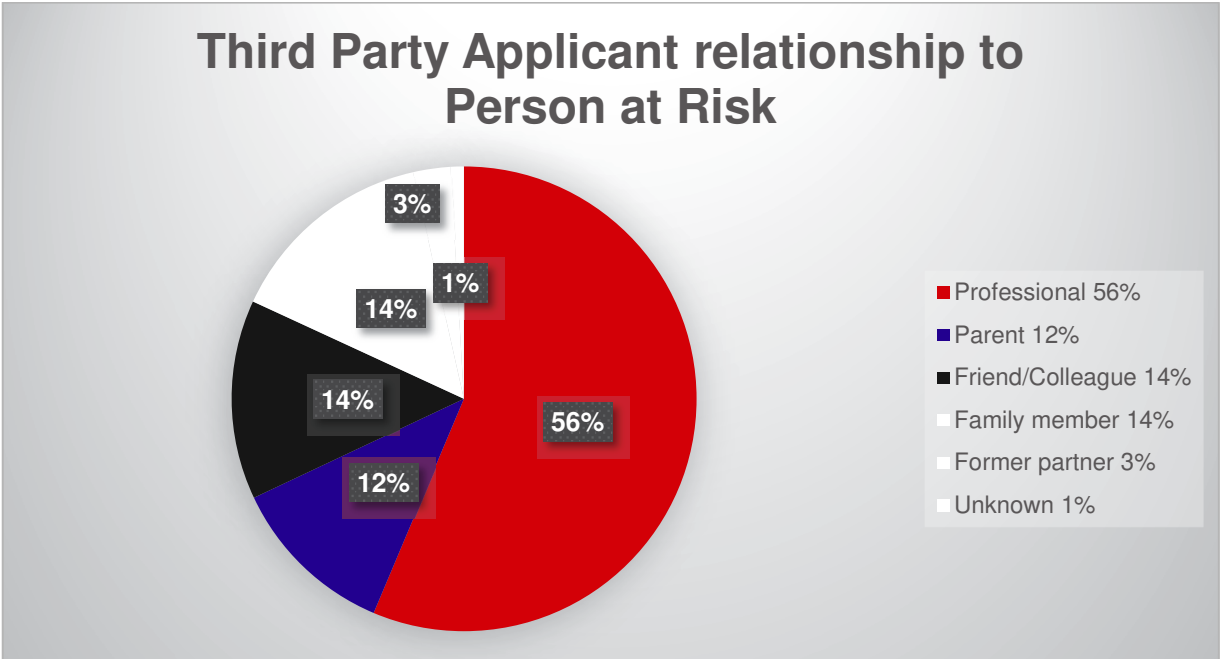


For a significant majority of PARs, the DVDS is their first encounter with a specialised domestic and family violence (DFV) service. These figures show that the DVDS provides an important opportunity for DFVS to engage with and support people at risk or experiencing violence and abuse who are not currently receiving (81%) or have never received (67%) support from specialised DFV services.

Third Party Applicants

33% of applicants to the DVDS are Third Party Applicants. As the below figure illustrates, just over half of those are professionals. Of these professionals, less than 30% are DFV specialists already supporting PARs with concerns or experiences of DFV. DFVS participants to this study reported that the remainder tend to be other professionals from SAPOL officers within SA, Health, DCP, NGO's, Correctional Services and Housing. The remainder of TPA are friends, colleagues and family of the PAR.

Fig.4 Third Party Applicants relationship to PAR



4. Client perspectives and satisfaction

Every PAR who attends a disclosure meeting receives a link to an online survey to gather feedback. The survey is voluntary, anonymous and confidential and they complete it if and when they choose. Questions explore:

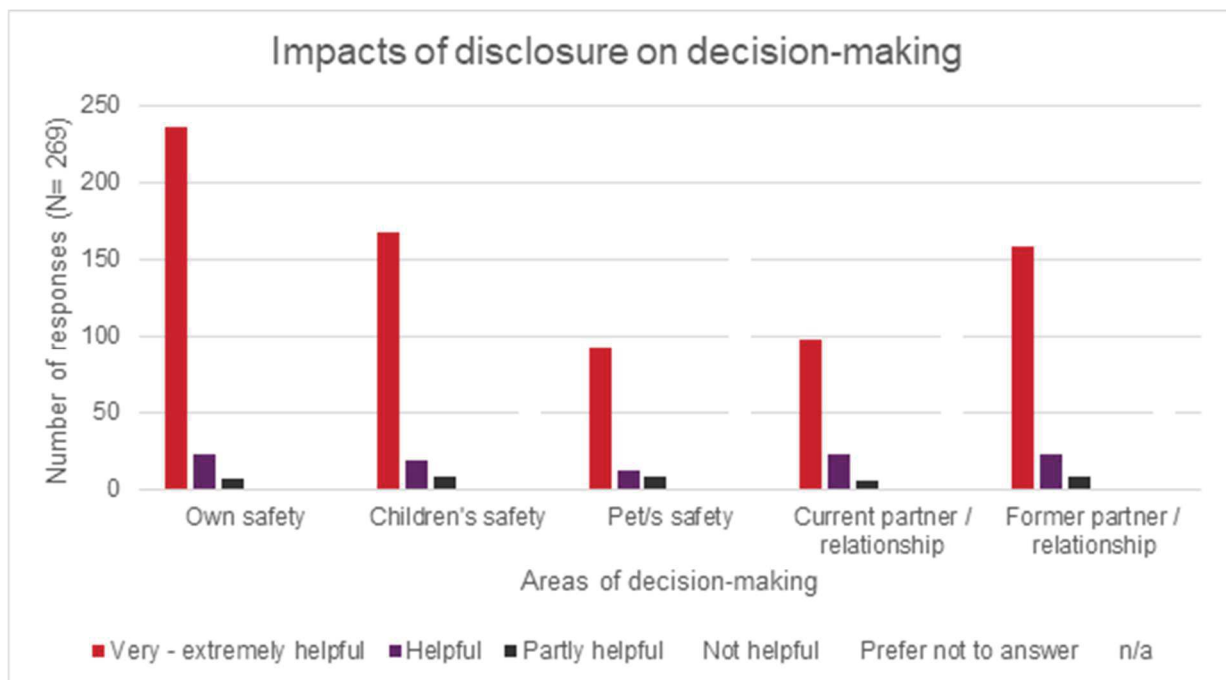
- how satisfied clients were with the service they received overall and in terms of specific aspects of the process and the support offered or not offered;
- whether there are any improvements that could be made;
- how useful the disclosure meeting was in supporting clients to make decisions;
- whether the disclosure meeting was helpful in any other way;
- how likely clients are to seek support from other services

269 clients completed a feedback form between 2018-2024. Of those, 90% had received a disclosure, while 10% had attended a meeting at which no information was disclosed due to no relevant history having been recorded in police systems.

What is the impact of the DVDS on client decision-making around safety?

One of the key aims of the DVDS is to support PARs in their decision-making about safety. In the feedback forms, clients were asked whether the disclosure meeting helped them in making decisions about specific areas of safety and how helpful the meeting was. Their responses are presented in the graph below.

Fig. 5 Client-reported impact of DVDS on decision-making



These responses show that the overwhelming majority of clients found the DVDS very helpful in their decision-making around their own and their children's safety and around their safety with respect to a current or former partner.

Some participants used the free-text boxes to provide further information.

It helped me realise the depth of the situation and that I am unsafe, however I feel empowered with the information provided to me. I feel I now have the knowledge to deal with this situation.

It assisted me in making informed choices to make no further contact with person in question. I had a gut feeling [they] would be back in contact and they did contact me the day following the meeting. But I felt strong enough to not further communicate with this person.

It has given me more clarity around my decision to leave my current relationship. The support worker was excellent in listening to my entire story after the disclosure and making sure I had relevant processes in place if I wanted to exit the relationship.

Notably, a higher total number of clients reported on decisions about their safety with respect to a former partner than to a current partner (though there may have been some overlap between the two where a client was at risk from both). This shows that disclosures and the support provided around them are as useful to people at the (potentially riskier) end of a relationship as they are to those at the beginning. In other words, the DVDS is useful to PARs beyond early intervention, as it has historically been framed in South Australia. This has important implications for the way the DVDS is promoted to the public in the future.

The following table shows more clearly the distribution of responses to each question:⁹

Table 4. Helpfulness of DVDS in relation to decision-making around safety

Safety decision	Extremely helpful Very helpful Helpful	Partially helpful	Not helpful
Personal safety	98%	2%	0
Children's safety	96%	4%	0
Pets' safety	92.5%	7%	0.5%
Safety from former partner	95.5%	4%	0.5%
Safety from current partner	94%	6%	0.5%

⁹ Those who ticked 'not applicable' to the question were not counted in the distribution

It is evident that the overwhelming majority of clients are coming away from disclosure meetings better supported to make decisions about all these dimensions of safety.

How satisfied are clients with the service they receive?

269 or 100% of those clients who completed the survey responded to the questions on satisfaction. Clients reported very high satisfaction rates on all aspects of the service. Client responses are represented in tables below because the percentages of those less than fully satisfied were too low to be visible on a graph.

Table 5. Client satisfaction with DVDS processes and support

DVDS process/support	% Extremely/more than/very/satisfied	% Partially satisfied	% Not satisfied
Online application process	99	1	0
Application assistance	98	2	0
Information required on the application form	98	1	1
Third party application process	99	1	0
Disclosure meeting	99.5	0	0.5
Support provided by Police	99	0.5	0.5
Support provided by the Women's Service	99	1	0

Some clients chose to provide more detail in the free-text boxes.

This service was amazing. I walked out of there feeling so much support.

I will be forever grateful for how I was treated and the assistance given to me. It will help me move on and one day recover from the abuse I have sustained.

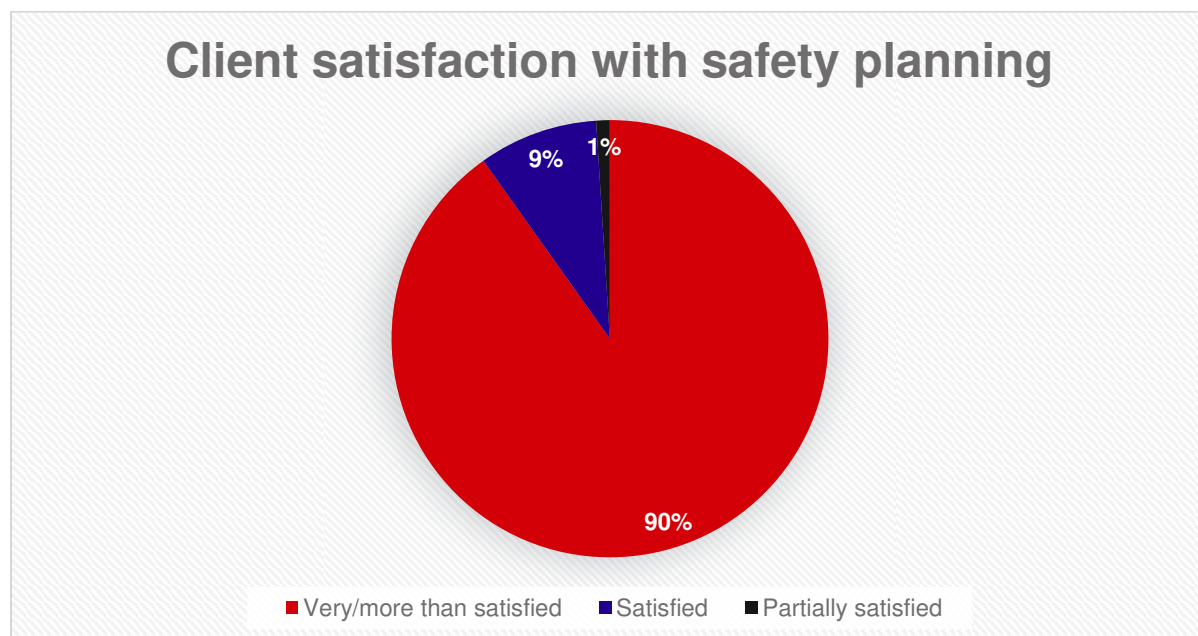
I've left feeling very hopeful and felt clarity with what I'm going through. A safe and compassionate space to be.

I felt supported through the process and both the police and Women's Safety Services were very kind and approachable. I left the meeting feeling reassured.

Table.6 Client satisfaction with the information provided in the DVDS meeting

Satisfaction with information provided in the DVDS meeting*			
	Very/more than/ satisfied	Partially satisfied	Not satisfied
Relevance of information provided	99%	1%	0
Amount of information provided	97.5%	1.5%	1%
Explanation of information provided	99%	1%	0
Responses to queries about information provided	99%	1%	0

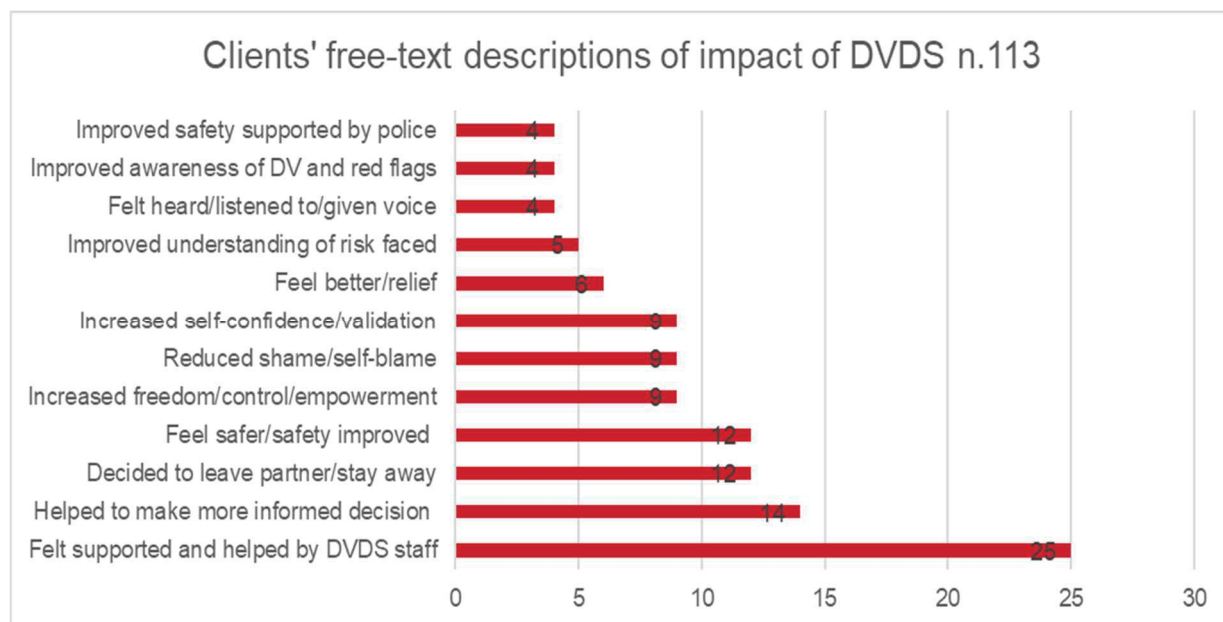
Fig.6 Client satisfaction with safety planning



How did clients describe the impact of the DVDS?

Clients used the free-text boxes in the survey to share impressions and feedback on their experiences. Their responses give a more qualitative insight into the granular ways in which disclosures affect and are experienced by victims. Fig.7 below provides an overview of the responses provided by clients in these boxes, using their words.¹⁰

Fig.7 Clients' descriptions of impact of DVDS



¹⁰ Questions asked were: Was the disclosure meeting helpful? Are there any improvements we could make?

These responses show that the support provided by the DFVS specialists is highly valued by clients. They also highlight the range of ways in which the DVDS contributes to key measures of empowerment and safety, confirming findings from existing research about the value of disclosure schemes.¹¹

Clients also used the free-text boxes to provide more detail.

I walked out of the disclosure with a sense of relief, it took a huge weight off my shoulders that it wasn't me, it was the same pattern of abuse to his prior girlfriends. It gave me a feeling of being shame and guilt free. I cannot articulate the freedom I feel now. This was the start of my recovery. It helped beyond words.

It helped me realise I can't change him. It gave me the strength to say I've had enough of being abused. It's helped me see it's not completely me. It's made me realise there is no life or future or change with a man like my ex.

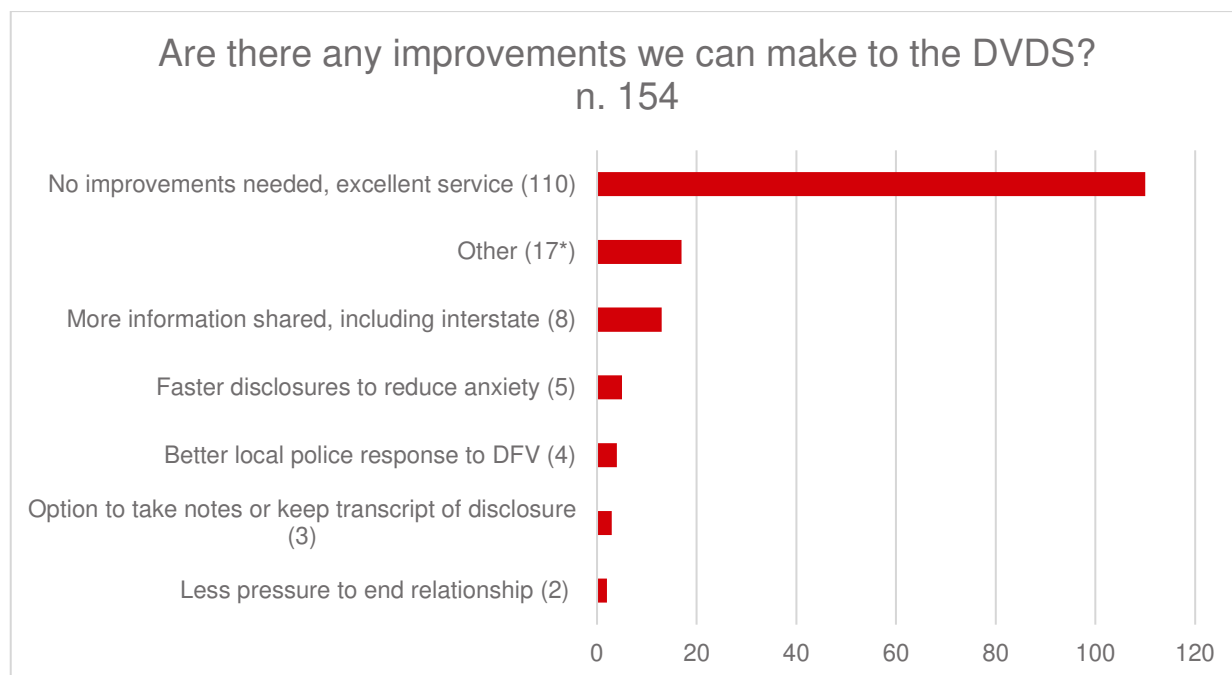
This has more than likely prevented me a world of pain and suffering given the heinous acts my ex-partner has been capable of in his past relationships. I am so very grateful for this scheme.

¹¹ For an analysis of how a DVDS can empower victims and survivors in a UK context, see Hadjimatheou, K. (2023). Using criminal histories to empower victim-survivors of domestic abuse. *European Journal of Criminology*, 20(3), 1106-1122. See also a recent report on disclosure schemes in Australia and New Zealand which involved interviews with 8 applicants who expressed similar responses. Fitzgibbon et al. (2024) Informed and safe, or blamed and at risk? Examining the merits and limits of domestic violence disclosure schemes in Australia and New Zealand. Online at: [file:///C:/Users/kdhadj/Downloads/DVDS%20Report%20Final%20April24%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/kdhadj/Downloads/DVDS%20Report%20Final%20April24%20(2).pdf)

What did clients think could be improved?

Clients were asked if there were any improvements that could be made to the service. 43% of respondents answered this question.

Fig.8. Client suggestions for improvement of DVDS process and service



*Other desired improvements included: request for more information on the decision-making process (1); request a disclosure to be offered on Zoom (1) and in person (1); request for written material with safety information to be shared (1); request for tissues in disclosure room (1); to be given the opportunity to make an intervention order in the disclosure meeting (1).

The majority of respondents to this free-text question (71%) said no improvements to the service were needed. Many of those respondents also took the opportunity to express their support for the service and praise the staff who supported them. Small numbers of people (<5%) asked for specific improvements including for more information to be shared and for disclosures to be made more quickly in order to reduce anxiety. The message from clients is clear that the DVDS is working well for them.

5. Challenges to service provision

Challenges to the delivery of the DVDS were explored by reviewing the 43 in-depth Case Studies compiled by WSSSA and partners, as well as through qualitative interviews with SAPOL and DFVS specialists.

PAR reluctance to deal with police

The challenge documented most frequently in the Case Studies was the PAR's reluctance to engage with SAPOL due to mistrust or previous bad experiences. For example, one case study notes that PAR had an 'initial opposition in participating in disclosure meeting due to feeling not listened to and intimidated by previous interactions with Police'. Others note that 'PAR's previous drug use made her fearful of contact with police' and that 'PAR lacked trust because local police knew her and were friends with the SOR'.

In all these cases a disclosure meeting was achieved through the DFVS working in close partnership with SAPOL to provide PAR with a safe and non-judgemental encounter with a specialist officer. This built bridges between victim/survivors and SAPOL by establishing a point of trusted contact for them. For example, in one case in which the PAR had been very reluctant to have any contact with SAPOL, the DFVS discussed the case with the attending officer in advance. The DFVS then reported that the officer approached the PAR in a 'trauma informed approach' in the disclosure meeting reassuring the client and restored her confidence in reporting future incidents to police'.

Difficulties in contacting victims safely

Safe contact with the DFV specialist was challenging for PARs whose partners coercively controlled and surveilled them. In a small number of cases SOR control and surveillance acted as a barrier for any follow up with the PAR by the DFVS. In a couple of cases it also meant the PAR was not able to make use of a safety app for their phone that would have allowed them to receive an expedited police response in case of crisis. In some cases disclosures were achieved through good working relationships with third party applicants who could act as a go-between. In others careful planning enabled DFVS to make contact in safe places despite the surveillance, such as at a PAR's place of work.

Challenges coordinating multiple people and agencies

Coordination was also a challenge when PARs needed to be referred to multiple services, either because of complex risk or because they had never received support before, or both. In some cases differences in understanding of eligibility for a disclosure between local police and DVDS police needed resolving. Coordinating meetings when a TPA or other support person also needed to be present were also sometimes a

challenge However, in all these kinds of cases, negotiation and hard work resolved the issue.

Difficulties in organising face-to-face disclosure meetings

In-depth interviews with DFVS workers revealed a strong consensus that in-person disclosure meetings were more effective than teleconferencing meetings in terms of safety and empowerment of PARs. In-person meetings were valued because they allowed the support worker to observe the client's response to the disclosure in terms of facial expressions and body language. They could then unpack some of the moments that appeared distressing, and in general be more sensitive and responsive to a client's emotions and responses. While none of the workers felt it would be right to compel clients to attend an in-person meeting, most did feel strongly that this should be something they could offer, should a client want it. However, in-person meetings are not always possible, even when PARs request them, due to resource constraints and geographical distances. There is no dedicated budget for travel to disclosure meetings.

Rising demand without a rise in resources

Applications to the DVDS have risen more than 200% in 6 years, from 256 in 2018-19, to 662 in 2023-4. Yet SAPOL have received no budget to manage the scheme and the annual budget for the DVDS has remained flat. This is contributing to greater delays on the processing of police applications. It is also creating pressure on DFVS specialists to process disclosures faster, which almost all practitioners interviewed for this study flagged as a challenge to their ability to maintain the quality of service they provide. This poses a potential risk to a model which is delivering improved safety and support successfully and which is clearly of great value to people at risk of domestic violence. If pressure on resources leads disclosures to be made over the phone rather than in person, this would risk decentering victim preferences and undermining the quality of support provided in the disclosure meeting.

6. How does South Australia's DVDS compare to other disclosure schemes?

Disclosure schemes currently operate in 10 jurisdictions worldwide:

- England and Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland
- 4 Canadian provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador)
- New Zealand
- Malta
- Spain¹²

South Australia's DVDS is unique globally in four distinct ways:

A victim-centred, trauma-informed approach

- The DVDS is coordinated by a specialist Domestic and Family Violence Service rather than police. It is delivered in partnership between the DFVS and specialist police. No other DVDS guarantees either support or the presence of a DFVS or equivalent specialist at a disclosure meeting.
- Applicants do not need to have any personal contact with police or government authorities until the point of disclosure, beyond filling in an online application. This increases the accessibility of the DVDS to populations who may have concerns about police contact.
- Police officers delivering disclosures are mostly not in uniform. This reduces the risk that the encounter is experienced as intimidating or disempowering for PARs. No other DVDS operates this.
- PARs receive the disclosure in a safe place agreed with the DFVS. They do not need to attend a police station.
- PARs are able to bring a trusted support person of their choice with them to the disclosure meeting, and/or to share the disclosure with a person who is supporting them with their abuse, reducing isolation and fear. No other DVDS incorporates this provision for PARs.
- The confidentiality agreement PARs must sign is not phrased as a legal threat (as it is in all other DVDS) but rather emphasises the importance of

¹² At the time this report is being written it is not clear if the Spanish scheme is yet operational.

confidentiality for the PAR's own safety and the safety of those victims and children involved in the incidents disclosed.

Specialist support for every case

- All applicants to the DVDS receive contact from a DFVS and are offered confidential trauma-informed support, irrespective of whether a disclosure is made. For most other schemes, referral to support is either opt-in (e.g. Alberta) or contingent on eligibility for a disclosure.
- All clients who attend a disclosure meeting receive confidential pre- and post-disclosure support from the DFVS including DV education, safety planning, onward referrals, and psychological support.

A coordinated partnership approach grounded in law

- As described in the introduction, the roles of the police and of the DFVS in implementing the DVDS are carefully divided based on:
 - expertise
 - legal powers
 - the rights, safety, and support needs of PARs.
- No other DVDS is delivered in partnership. In no other jurisdiction is eligibility re-considered by police following a specialist DFV assessment.
- The DVDS is also underpinned by Information Sharing Guidelines which provide a sound legal basis for sharing of information both between agencies and with the PAR to prevent harm.

Systematic monitoring of the process and impact of the DVDS to enable ongoing review and improvement to the service.

- Detailed monitoring data on applicant demographics, decision-making, time spent on disclosures, and support offered is collected and analysed to identify trends and gaps.
- Challenges to delivery are recorded in detailed case-studies compiled on an ongoing basis.
- Feedback from all recipients of a disclosure is sought by DFVS and received independently and anonymously by Office for Women.
- WSSSA works closely with regional providers to ensure quality and consistency of service.

No other DVDS monitors in such detail or collects ongoing feedback from clients.

Direct comparisons between the SA DVDS and other disclosure schemes are difficult to make for a number of reasons. First, the SA DVDS only has a 'Right to Ask' pathway to disclosure, meaning disclosures only occur if requested by members of the public. Most other schemes also operate a parallel 'Right to Know' pathway, whereby police or other practitioners can apply for a disclosure themselves, to offer proactively to a person they have identified as being at risk. Not all jurisdictions publish statistics distinguishing between the Right to Ask and the Right to Know.

Second, the length of time for which disclosure schemes have been in operation varies. The longer a scheme has been in operation, the more awareness of its availability and eligibility criteria there is likely to be amongst the public and practitioners, implying a rise in the rate of applications.

Third, privacy constraints in some countries (e.g. Malta, New Zealand, Scotland) mean police can only make disclosures about records relating to convictions or even only unspent convictions. This is likely to reduce considerably the rate at which applications for disclosure result in information being shared. Only a small percentage of recorded incidents of domestic violence ever result in a conviction.¹⁴

Uptake of the DVDS

Annual application rates for the South Australian DVDS are presented on p.10 above. **Fig. 9** below shows the comparative uptake of disclosure schemes as a percentage of the local (jurisdictional) population¹⁵ in the last available calendar year, which for most schemes is 2023.¹⁶

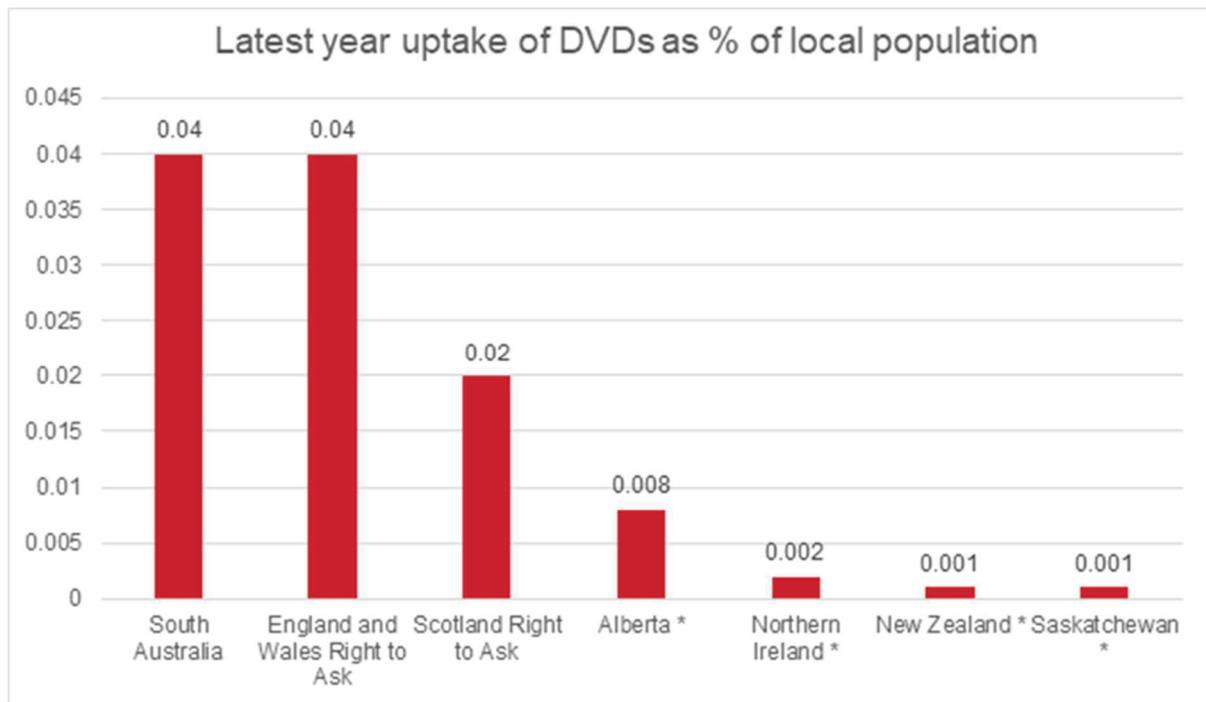
¹³ Sources for the data are a mix of official statistics, police/government reports, and responses to Freedom of Information or Open Information Access requests. Sources are as follows: England and Wales: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/domesticabuseandtheriminaljusticesystemappendixtables>; Scotland: <https://www.scotland.police.uk/spa-media/m2sp4wf4/23-0716-dl-response.docx>; Alberta: [https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/domestic-abuse-clares-law-alberta-1.6330387#:~:text=In%20making%20a%20Clare's%20Law,people%2C%20or%2042%20per%20cent](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/domestic-abuse-clares-law-alberta-1.6330387#:~:text=In%20making%20a%20Clare's%20Law,people%2C%20or%2042%20per%20cent;); New Zealand: <https://www.thepost.co.nz/society/350240563/very-few-kiwis-asking-about-their-partners-pasts-despite-law-change>; Saskatchewan: <https://pathssk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Clares-Law-Annual-Report-2023.pdf>; Northern Ireland: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/fewer-than-20-of-requests-for-information-granted-under-early-warning-domestic-abuse-scheme-OTY3Z63Y35AQDDZBQXEMJVPYEA/>

¹⁴ For example, in England and Wales only 4.4% of domestic abuse incidents reported to police ever result in a conviction.

¹⁵ We used population as the comparator rather than rate of reported incidents of domestic abuse due to significant divergences between jurisdictions in how domestic abuse is legally defined and recorded.

¹⁶ For Northern Ireland and Alberta they are total figures. For Alberta this is 2021-2022, and for Northern Ireland it is 2016-2022.

Fig.9 Uptake of DVDS in international comparison



* Uptake for these jurisdictions appears higher in this chart than the true like-for-like rate. This is because there are no available statistics distinguishing uptake for the Right to Ask from uptake for the Right to Know pathway to disclosure.

The uptake of the SA DVDS is equal to that of England and Wales as the highest for any jurisdiction as a proportion of the population. This is especially noteworthy given that the SA DVDS has been in operation for 4 fewer years than the England and Wales DVDS. As disclosures in nearly all jurisdictions rise year-on-year with expanding public awareness of these schemes, this suggests that uptake in South Australia is higher relative to its period of operation than for any other jurisdiction.

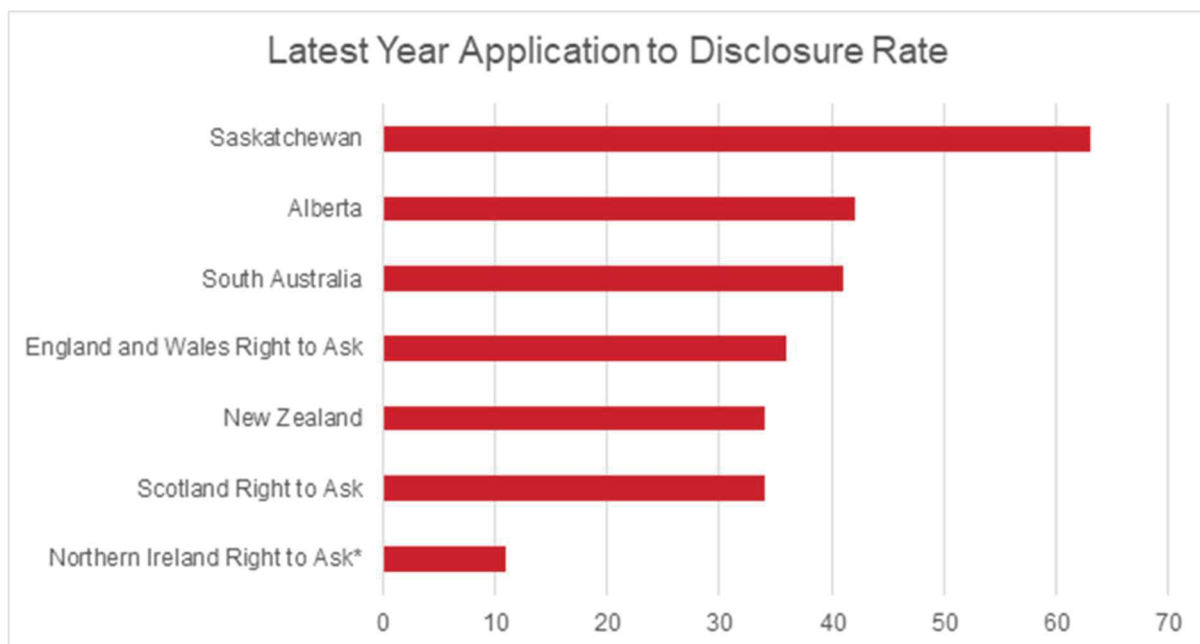
South Australia's high rate of uptake is most plausibly explained by the fact that applicants are not required to have personal contact with police apart from completing the online form and meeting them at the disclosure meeting itself, and so are more confident in accessing the scheme. It cannot be explained by reference to more effective public awareness campaigns in SA than in England and Wales, where the DVDS is regularly in the national and local news and promoted widely on social media.¹⁷

¹⁷ Promotion in SA is predominantly through presentations by the workers to various networks, services, community groups, and a paid-for Facebook promotion twice a year.

Application to disclosure rates in the latest available year

The figure below compares the rates at which applications for disclosure result in a disclosure in different jurisdictions.

Fig.10 Comparative application to disclosure rates in 2022/2023



* Application to disclosure rates for the Right to Ask pathway were available for Northern Ireland, even though the available figures for uptake of their disclosure scheme (above) do not distinguish between the two pathways.

South Australia is one of the few jurisdictions to have a very high uptake and a relatively high application-to-disclosure rate. From this we can conclude that the implementation of the DVDS has been comparatively successful at reaching people at risk and at engaging with them.

It is difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the relative disclosure rate in comparison to Saskatchewan for two reasons. First, that jurisdiction does not disaggregate between applications under the Right to Know and those under the Right to Ask. The numbers therefore incorporate both kinds of application. Second, the total number of disclosures is very low indeed (only 14 in 2023).

Practitioner and client perceptions of DVDS in international perspective

There is a strong consensus internationally amongst those who work with DVDS that it is beneficial and complements existing provision to safeguard people at risk and render serial perpetrators visible. Previous research with police practitioners delivering DVDS in England and Wales found very strong support amongst them for the scheme.¹⁸ Similarly strong

¹⁸ Hadjimatheou, K. (2023). Using criminal histories to empower victim-survivors of domestic abuse. *European Journal of Criminology*, 20(3), 1106-1122

support was also expressed in more recent interviews with New Zealand police, from Canadian government officials coordinating Alberta's disclosure scheme and from the specialist DFV services in Alberta and Saskatchewan.¹⁹ These findings are echoed by the SAPOL and South Australia DFVS interviewed for this study.

Concerns and challenges with the DVDS in international comparison

In South Australia practitioners' concerns were limited to the issue of resources and a desire to be able to offer in-person meetings for all. Clients' desires for improvements were minor but related primarily to the lack of interstate information sharing, and the anxiety of waiting weeks for a disclosure, amongst other things.

In contrast, practitioners working with the DVDS in England and Wales have broader and more serious worries about their own scheme. These include in particular:

- a concern that PARs are being given terrifying information by police and then left isolated and vulnerable without support due to strict confidentiality requirements.
- insufficient specialist DFV support for recipients of a disclosure.
- and women being pressured into seeking a disclosure by child protection workers using the scheme as a test of mothers' capability to protect their children.²⁰

None of these issues were mentioned in South Australia, likely due to the coordinated partnership approach, the fact that PARs can share information with those supporting them, and the strong information sharing protocols providing practitioners with a sound and tested legal grounding for disclosures.

In New Zealand, practitioners expressed concern that disclosures were being truncated or not delivered at all due to excessive risk aversion amongst police legal teams, lengthy bureaucratic processes for application, and overly restrictive privacy and freedom of information laws. Instead, PARs are being instructed to search online for information about their partners. There are also concerns that there is very little awareness of the New Zealand Family Violence Information Disclosure Scheme amongst police, family violence practitioners, and the public, leading to confusion and poor uptake. Finally, the fact that

¹⁹ Dr Hadjimatheou's British Academy-funded study involved 7 interviews conducted in Alberta: 2 with government officials coordinating their disclosure scheme -known as Clare's Law- and screening applicants, and 5 with Sagesse, a specialist domestic violence support service coordinating referrals and providing support to PARs; 1 interview with a specialist support practitioner who is a member of the multi-agency panel making decisions about disclosures in Saskatchewan; 5 qualitative interviews with NZ police, 4 with specialist NZ Family Violence support workers with experience of the Family Violence Information Disclosure Scheme, and 1 with a survivor of domestic abuse who had applied for a disclosure.

²⁰ Katerina Hadjimatheou, 'Social Care Told me I Had to': Empowerment and Responsibilization in The Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme, *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 62, Issue 2, March 2022

applicants must enter a police station or call a police officer to apply for a disclosure has been identified as a barrier to access.

Client satisfaction in international comparison

Client satisfaction with South Australia's DVDS is far higher than in England and Wales (the only other jurisdiction in which feedback has been gathered and analysed). An anonymous survey for people who have applied for or received a disclosure in England and Wales (345 responses, 2024) found that 64% were 'satisfied' (32%) or 'very satisfied' (32%) with the service they received from police, compared to 99% in South Australia. Additionally, 20% of respondents in England and Wales reported being 'very unsatisfied' with the service they received from police officers, compared to zero in South Australia.²¹

It is also notable that satisfaction with both the DFVS specialists and SAPOL reported in the DVDS client feedback survey far outstrips that reported for domestic abuse specialist services in general in England and Wales. In 2022 national research reported that 85% of clients of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA) in England and Wales were satisfied with the service they received, compared to over 99% of South Australian DVDS clients. This suggests that the South Australian DVDS service is supporting people at risk to a higher standard than generalist IDVA services elsewhere.

There are therefore strong grounds on which to explore the South Australian DVDS as a model of good practice for other jurisdictions reviewing existing schemes or indeed introducing new ones.

²¹ A portion of this strong dissatisfaction may be explained by the fact that 41% of respondents to the survey in England and Wales did not receive a disclosure, compared to only 10% of clients surveyed in South Australia. But free-text responses to the survey in England and Wales also show that clients were unhappy with the way they were treated by police including not being protected, not being taken seriously, being humiliated or dismissed.

Acknowledgements

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