

Working towards a perpetrator-focused approach to domestic abuse: Visibility and accountability in theory and practice

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Sociology

University of Essex

June 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Katerina Hadjimatheou and Katrin Hohl, for their support and guidance throughout this journey. Their insightful feedback and encouragement have been invaluable in helping me develop as a writer and a researcher.

I am profoundly thankful to SENSS for funding my studies. Without their financial support, completing this PhD would not have been possible. I also extend my sincere thanks to the local authority who participated in this study for their generous funding and for granting me access to a wealth of rich data. I am especially grateful to the VAWG team for their consistent cooperation and for the practitioners who took the time to participate in interviews, generously sharing their experiences and expertise.

Finally, I wish to thank my family and friends for their enduring encouragement throughout this process. Special thanks go to Pedra, Milo and Alia who patiently tolerated being around me as I focused on this work and provided support along the way.

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Acronyms

CJS	Criminal Justice System
CPV	Child to Parent Violence
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
DAC	Domestic Abuse Commissioner
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
MATAC	Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination
NFA	No Further Action
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

Organisations and Initiatives

College of Policing	<p>The College of Policing serves as a professional body for individuals engaged in various roles within policing. It operates as an operationally independent, non-departmental public body.</p> <p>https://www.college.police.uk/</p>
Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ)	<p>The CWJ seeks to improve access to legal remedies for women and girls who are subjected to male violence, with the aim of protecting and advancing their rights. It works towards holding the state accountable by challenging systemic discrimination within the justice system that perpetuates male violence against women and girls.</p> <p>https://www.centreforwomensjustice.org.uk/</p>

<p>Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales (DAC)</p>	<p>The Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales serves as an independent representative for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, advocating for their interests and ensuring their voices are included in policy and practice.</p> <p>https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/</p>
<p>Domestic Abuse Homicide Review (DHR) and Domestic Abuse Related Death Review (DARDR)</p>	<p>Reviews into domestic homicide constitute a multi-agency investigation into cases where violence, abuse or neglect is suspected to have contributed to the death of any person aged 16 and over. Formerly referred to as a Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR), these have recently been renamed Domestic Abuse Related Death Review (DARDR) to acknowledge and include cases involving suicides linked to domestic abuse.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fatal-domestic-abuse-reviews-renamed-to-better-recognise-suicide-cases</p>
<p>Drive Partnership / Project</p>	<p>The Drive Partnership, formed by Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance, seeks to transform the national response to perpetrators of domestic abuse.</p> <p>The Drive Project was piloted in three locations across England and Wales between 2016-2019 with the aim of disrupting and intervening with domestic abuse perpetrators.</p> <p>https://drivepartnership.org.uk/</p>
<p>HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI)</p>	<p>HMCPSI holds a statutory duty to inspect the operations of both the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).</p> <p>https://hmcpsi.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/</p>

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC)	<p>HMIC is responsible for independently assessing police forces and policing. It is now known as HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS).</p> <p>https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/</p>
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)	<p>HMICFRS conducts independent assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services, acting in the public interest.</p> <p>https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk</p>
HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)	<p>HMPPS is responsible for executing court-imposed sentences, both in custodial settings and within the community.</p> <p>https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/about-hmpps/</p>
Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)	<p>MARAC is a nationally implemented multi-agency forum designed to facilitate information sharing and the development of action plans for high-risk domestic abuse cases.</p> <p>https://safelives.org.uk/resources-for-professionals/marac-resources/</p>
Ministry of Justice (MoJ)	<p>MoJ is a central government department integral to the functioning of the justice system. Its mandate is to uphold and promote the principles of justice.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-justice</p>
National Audit Office (NAO)	<p>NAO serves as the UK's independent public spending watchdog. It supports Parliament in holding the government</p>

	<p>accountable and contributes to the improvement of public services through conducting rigorous audits.</p> <p>https://www.nao.org.uk/</p>
National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)	<p>NPCC unites UK police leaders to establish strategic direction in policing and advance initiatives that enhance public safety.</p> <p>https://www.npcc.police.uk/</p>
Office for National Statistics (ONS)	<p>The main responsibilities of the ONS involve collecting, analysing and disseminating statistics on the UK's economy, society and population.</p> <p>https://www.ons.gov.uk/</p>
Project Mirabal	<p>Project Mirabal is a research study that investigated the efficacy of perpetrator programmes in reducing violence and abuse and enhancing safety and freedom for women and children.</p> <p>https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research/centres-groups-and-units/child-and-woman-abuse-studies-unit/projects-and-partners/project-mirabal/</p>
Respect	<p>Respect is a UK-based charity dedicated to preventing domestic abuse through interventions targeting perpetrator behaviours. This focus remains the organisation's central priority, alongside its work with young people causing harm and male victims.</p> <p>https://www.respect.org.uk/</p>

Safe and Together Institute	<p>The Safe and Together Institute is a global leader in providing domestic abuse informed training, consultancy, and implementation support.</p> <p>https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/</p>
SafeLives	<p>SafeLives is a UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse and reforming agency responses to it. The organisation's approach integrates data analysis, survivor voices and evidence-based practice.</p> <p>https://safelives.org.uk/</p>

Abstract

This thesis examines domestic abuse agency responses amid recent shifts toward perpetrator-focused approaches. It develops the notions of visibility and accountability as key, measurable concepts through which perpetrator responses can be assessed. Visibility refers to how perpetrators are recognised and acknowledged, while accountability encompasses assigning responsibility and targeting interventions around their needs and risks. Grounded in feminist and power-based theories, the thesis emphasises the need to root perpetrator interventions in a deep understanding of gender, power and control.

The research stems from a three-year collaborative project with a London local authority, facilitating an in-depth analysis of practice responses. The study employs mixed methods, integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis of multi-agency processes and practitioner interviews, allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of practice. To my knowledge, this is the first study to combine multiple data sources in this manner with a sole focus on perpetrator efforts and outcomes.

The study generates new empirical evidence with key implications for theory, policy and practice, underscoring the need to systematically evaluate responses. It reveals persistent challenges that prevent agencies from enhancing perpetrator visibility and accountability. It depicts a practice landscape shaped by systemic and workforce-related challenges, with deficiencies in effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that perpetuate perpetrator invisibility and undermine accountability efforts. Gender dynamics further compound these issues, with female practitioners facing greater difficulties, male perpetrators more likely to

evade systems, and female victims more often blamed. Perpetrators' use of power and control intensifies challenges through the deployment of tactics aimed at reasserting dominance.

Despite growing calls to prioritise perpetrators, substantial obstacles persist. The findings outline pathways for advancing perpetrator-facing interventions, practitioner support, local processes, and national systems and data. Only such a coordinated, multi-faceted approach can result in meaningful changes that address the current fragmented and inconsistent state of perpetrator responses.

Introduction

Responses to domestic abuse within the statutory and voluntary sectors have evolved significantly over time, with a particularly notable shift in policy and discourse towards a recognition that systems must address perpetration rather than solely focusing on victims (Godfrey and Richardson, 2024). While the historic focus on protecting victims has contributed to deeper knowledge gained around victims' experiences and their support needs, it has also led to their responsibilisation, often holding them accountable for the actions of those who harm them. Therefore, a move towards focusing on perpetrators is a positive and necessary development.

This thesis focuses on exploring the practical implications of this shift contextualised in the practice of a local authority in London, which partially funded this project and provided access to data for analysis. It investigates the multi-agency processes and efforts within this local authority as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by practitioners and agencies as they adapt to an increased emphasis on perpetrator-focused practice and direct engagement. The research employs visibility and accountability as key measures used to evaluate progress in this area. Visibility pertains to how perpetrators are recognised and acknowledged. This can be assessed by examining the quality and consistency of information recorded on perpetrators, as well as the degree to which they are considered central to practice. Accountability relates to how responsibility for the abuse is attributed and the ways in which its associated risks are addressed through expectations and measures targeting the abuse. Assessing accountability requires an examination of whether planning for interventions, decision-making processes, and monitoring of outcomes are centred around perpetrators. Both concepts emerged naturally from the data and were selected to help make sense of the data collected without any preconceived

ideas or assumptions. The study's overarching research questions seek to generate findings that contribute to mapping and evaluating the outcomes of these efforts. Specifically, they seek to determine whether these efforts achieve visibility and accountability, and if so, what facilitates this. Conversely, if such outcomes are not achieved, the study explores the underlying reasons for this.

The study aims to address gaps in how current policy and practice conceptualise and approach visibility and accountability, as well as to explore their relationship to each other. Existing literature on the visibility of perpetrators remains limited, with a predominant focus on children's social care processes. Similarly, discussions on accountability remain largely confined to responses within the criminal justice system (CJS). There is a significant gap in knowledge around multi-agency responses to perpetrators and what perpetrator-specific outcomes they achieve. To date, analysis of multi-agency responses, such as the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), are heavily focused on victim data with limited information on what they accomplish around perpetrators. By providing conceptual clarity and examining the practical applications of visibility and accountability and their interconnectedness, the thesis argues against conflating these objectives, demonstrating why both are essential for enhancing responses to perpetrators.

The thesis moves beyond the common focus in the literature on the analysis of perpetrator programmes or a single agency's response with the aim of truly examining the multi-agency connectedness of perpetrator responses and gaining a better understanding of the various roles and responsibilities of the practitioners and agencies involved. Domestic abuse is a pervasive issue with significance extending far beyond traditional domains such as the CJS, social care, and violence against women and girls (VAWG) dedicated services; every agency is part of a

wider network of accountability that must address perpetration (Spencer, 2016). Incorporating an understanding of this, the study employs a multi-faceted approach by integrating findings from a literature review, multi-agency practitioner interviews, data analysis of a daily MARAC, and observations of case discussions and strategic meetings. Adopting this multi-agency perspective in data collection is essential as responses to domestic abuse rely on coordinated efforts by various agencies. This enables the study to investigate efforts to engage and intervene with perpetrators from multiple angles.

Overview of findings

The study finds that significant issues exist in relation to achieving perpetrator visibility and accountability. Specifically, it demonstrates that perpetrators are elusive and adept at evading accountability often facing minimal to no consequences for their actions. Substantial concerns exist among practitioners and agencies working to tackle domestic abuse. Challenges and inconsistencies persist in aligning practice with the policy and ideological shift towards perpetrator-focused approaches, highlighting significant systemic barriers. For instance, considerable gaps are highlighted in areas such as direct engagement with perpetrators, the availability, sharing and documentation of information, the resourcing of interventions for perpetrators and support for practitioners, and the provision of adequate training for the workforce. Moreover, the study highlights the limitations around agency accountability noting that processes that track outcomes around perpetrators are minimal and superficial. This suggests that even when processes are established to respond to perpetrators, there is a lack of follow-through to ensure agencies are delivering the intended outcomes. There remains a considerable gap in the ability to evaluate the impact of perpetrator-focused interventions on victim safety. A further critical finding highlighted consistently is the urgent need for the development of national perpetrator data. Such data can enhance the visibility of perpetrators

and provide a baseline for measuring accountability, extending beyond CJS responses. It can also inform funding decisions and resource allocation by clarifying who needs to be targeted (visibility) and what interventions are needed to address them (accountability).

The gaps highlighted in this study are symptomatic of broader systemic failures to implement a perpetrator-focused approach that consistently and effectively prioritises visibility and accountability. This is reflected in practitioners and agencies relying on systems and processes that are not fit for purpose and incapable of pursuing or measuring these goals. Despite expectations for practitioners and agencies within these sectors to adopt this shift, there is minimal national or local guidance and support to ensure this translates into a meaningful transformation. Consequently, this area of practice remains a significant concern, characterised by more obstacles and challenges than successes.

Overview of the theoretical frameworks and foundation of the study

The thesis draws on literature relevant to domestic abuse, VAWG, and intimate partner violence (IPV) practice, grounding its method and analysis in feminist and power-based theoretical frameworks. These theoretical perspectives serve as a critical lens through which the notions of visibility and accountability and their practical implications are examined. Focusing on feminist theory, the thesis adopts a gendered analysis in its understanding of domestic abuse. Power-based theories are also central to this study, underscoring the role of power and control in shaping the manifestations of the abuse and in hindering intervention efforts. Both theoretical frameworks, and the ways in which they align, were pivotal to the formulation of the research questions and the overall study design.

Early foundational work on domestic abuse, particularly regarding its identification and conceptualisation, is instrumental in shaping both the design of this research and the interpretation of its findings. Key contributions made by Lamb (1991), Lamb and Keon (1995), Stark (2007), Johnson (2008), Romito (2008), and Kelly and Westmarland (2016) are pivotal in informing the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study. Research evaluating practice around perpetrators provides critical insights into the complexities of intervention strategies and the effectiveness of current practice. This includes Kelly and Westmarland's (2015) influential Project Mirabal, Donovan and Griffiths' (2015) study on the challenges of direct engagement with perpetrators, Harvey et al's (2024) examination of attitudes towards perpetrator programmes across five European countries, and Davies et al's (2024) analysis of a perpetrator-focused adaptation of the MARAC.

Focusing on England and Wales, the study engages with a range of evaluations and reviews of domestic abuse practice, specifically examining their findings concerning perpetrators. It draws on learnings from these sources while aiming to provide additional empirical evidence to inform and enhance the effectiveness of perpetrator interventions. Various reports and inspections also guide this study, and key contributions include reports by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) in 2022 and 2025 which highlight significant gaps around responses to perpetrators and the National Audit Office (NAO) report in 2025 on VAWG spending and the government's progress against its strategies. Inspections by the HMIC (2015), HMICFRS (2021) and Ofsted et al (2017) also offer important insights that demonstrate where practice challenges exist regarding perpetrator responses. The Home Office's (2022) statutory guidance on domestic abuse plays an important role in supporting this study by clarifying duties and responsibilities of practitioners and agencies in addressing perpetrators. Finally, incorporating outcomes from practice and insights from the sector's response to perpetrators is essential. To

inform this, the study draws on information around initiatives and organisational work including that of the Drive Partnership, Respect, SafeLives, the College of Policing, and the Safe and Together Institute.

The study's contributions

For any field to develop and realise its potential, research and evaluation serve as the critical link that connects theory, policy and practice and breaks down the barriers between them (Bernard, 2006). As such, the study aims to use these research findings to feed into these three key areas.

The study contributes to feminist theory by providing further evidence of the gendered nature of this form of abuse and the disproportionate impact it has on women. Beyond this, the findings reveal patterns of victim blame experienced by female victims as well as a tendency for responsibility for the abuse to be attributed to them. Additionally, the findings align with literature on violent resistance and self-defence, emphasising the significant consequences suffered by female victims who respond to the abuse with acts of resistance (CWJ, 2022; Hester, 2012). The experiences of practitioners involved in this study further align with feminist theory and the need for a gendered approach. More significant emotional and physical safety impacts were reported as being experienced by female practitioners, a finding consistent with a vast body of literature on the subject (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Humphreys et al, 2024; Iliffe and Steed, 2000; Morran, 2008). Additionally, the study reveals insights into how male perpetrators use and manipulate practitioners' gender in their interactions with agencies. Overall, the study findings reinforce a core aspect of feminist theory - that domestic abuse and its consequences are inherently gendered, not just for victims but also for those who work to intervene with perpetrators.

Consistent with power-based theory, the study highlights the significant role that power and control patterns used by perpetrators play in shaping the delivery and effectiveness of interventions. When challenged, perpetrators often respond in ways that manipulate systems or attempt to reassert control, such as through false reports of abuse by victims or making complaints against practitioners. The study reveals that these responses, driven by a desire to regain power, cause challenges for agencies. Additionally, it demonstrates how systems inadvertently facilitate this control and manipulation when agencies fail to adopt a power-based framework in their response to perpetrators. This finding resonates with feminist theory as the study also illustrates that perpetrators' efforts to regain power and control are more acutely experienced by female practitioners compared to their male counterparts.

In addition to making empirically grounded theoretical claims, the thesis incorporates an in-depth analysis of policy and practice, employing an 'as-is' approach¹ to assess current responses to perpetrators. It advocates for substantial changes to be made in relation to how the area of perpetrator-focused work is approached. The thesis is unique in its approach of combining insights from existing literature with findings based on original empirical evidence to produce a practice guidance document as presented in Chapter 4. This chapter outlines what changes are needed along with recommendations around how these can be implemented. This guidance is grounded in the findings of this study and aims to create tangible outcomes for policymakers and those with strategic oversight over practice. This approach was intentionally chosen to bridge the gaps between theory, policy and practice. This guidance document is also

¹ An 'as-is' approach focuses on understanding the current state, taking into account any disconnect or gaps, prior to implementing changes (Rai and Mehta, 2012).

being utilised by the local authority to inform future practice and contribute to the development of their upcoming VAWG strategy.

A further novel contribution of the thesis is its demonstration, through empirical analysis, of the intricate interrelationship between visibility and accountability, illustrating how the presence or absence of one influences the other. This is an aspect that is currently largely missing in the literature. For instance, perpetrators who are invisible in practice are unlikely to face accountability, and those who evade accountability will persist in remaining hidden within systems. This connection is rarely explored in existing theoretical and empirical work, but it is a critical one for developing more effective, meaningful and sustainable responses to perpetrators.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, four chapters and a conclusion. This introductory chapter sets the scene for the thesis, highlighting the context of perpetrator engagement and interventions with a particular focus on England and Wales. The literature review outlines definitions of domestic abuse, theories and models of perpetration, the policy context in England and Wales, and an exploration of the role that agencies play in tackling perpetrators.

Chapter 1 presents a theoretical analysis of the literature on the concepts of visibility and accountability, specifically exploring their meanings, manifestations in practice and their interconnected nature. Additionally, the chapter outlines the influence of language through an

examination of the perpetrator identity and the implications of the ‘perpetrator’ label. The chapter outlines the critical role that language plays in shaping responses to domestic abuse perpetrators and in counteracting the narratives used by perpetrators to evade visibility and accountability, while also examining implications for practice, practitioners and victims. This chapter addresses the ‘**what**’ question of this thesis, analysing the core issue of what visibility and accountability look like in practice for perpetrators of domestic abuse and what role language plays in achieving or hindering this.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the daily MARAC in the local authority, focusing on how this process addresses perpetrators. Using a content analysis approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods, the chapter aims to understand the daily MARAC’s approach to tackling perpetrators examining their visibility within this process (for example, as evidenced by information held about them) and whether the daily MARAC plays a role in holding them accountable (for example, through action planning that is perpetrator-centred and evidences positive outcomes). Findings of this study highlight gaps in knowledge around perpetrators as well as limited and superficial action planning and case management around them. This chapter addresses the ‘**how**’ question of this thesis, exploring how a significant process within this local authority, the daily MARAC, contributes to achieving accountability and visibility for perpetrators.

Chapter 3 presents qualitative data derived from interviews conducted with practitioners working within the local authority across the multi-agency spectrum. Participants in this study took part in semi-structured interviews examining the effectiveness of the processes and systems they work within in promoting perpetrator visibility and accountability. While participants offered some examples of good practice, the predominant response indicated

significant challenges in working with perpetrators. These were primarily attributed to the limitations of current processes and systems as well as characteristics relating to the workforce itself. This chapter addresses the ‘**why**’ question of this thesis, exploring the reasons why this area of practice remains challenging as articulated by practitioners directly involved in the local authority’s efforts to tackle domestic abuse.

Chapter 4 adopts a different format and is presented as a practice guidance document which combines findings of the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ questions asked in the preceding chapters to provide a ‘**moving forward**’ document that can be used to guide practice and support practitioners and agencies in their efforts to respond to perpetrators. It also integrates relevant literature to complement and substantiate this document. The chapter is structured as a set of practice recommendations for the local authority to utilise in developing their upcoming VAWG strategy due for renewal in 2026. These recommendations are also relevant to a broader range of local authorities and systems.

Finally, the conclusion chapter draws together all the findings presented in previous chapters and provides a summary of the theoretical and empirical analysis of perpetrator visibility and accountability. It offers a final reflection on how processes and systems can be adapted to support a perpetrator-focused approach to addressing domestic abuse.

National context – England and Wales

This thesis primarily focuses on the UK context with a particular emphasis on England and Wales where legislation aligns and, at times, diverges from other regions of the UK. Responding to perpetrators and combating domestic abuse is a national priority.

Political priority

Over the years, the UK government and many of its departments and agencies have made efforts to enhance responses to domestic abuse. These efforts range from advocating for domestic abuse to be recognised as being ‘everyone’s business’ (HMIC, 2014) to the release of important strategic and policy frameworks and, finally, implementation of the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Domestic abuse has been characterised by the government as “cruel and complex” (Home Office, 2022: 11). It has gained prominence in the public discourse, solidifying its status as a critical public policy issue (Peckover, 2014). It is also recognised as a significant public health issue (Macdonald, 2021) and an area of high priority for the criminal justice system (CPS, 2024). More recently, both the government and police chiefs have declared VAWG as a national emergency (Labour Party, 2024; NPCC, 2024). In response to this crisis, the government has committed to halving VAWG within the next decade (Labour Party, 2024). As part of this commitment, the government has pledged to utilise all available resources to target perpetrators, ensuring that the “most prolific and harmful perpetrators will be relentlessly targeted” (*ibid.*: 67). Close scrutiny is now on the government and its efforts to address and reduce domestic abuse.

Economic priority

The costs associated with responding to domestic abuse also make it an economic priority, being currently estimated at £78 billion annually (HM Government, 2023) - a figure that rises to £84 billion when adjusted for 2024-2025 pricing (NAO, 2025). In contrast, the Home Office's allocated budget for tackling VAWG (of which domestic abuse is one significant strand) in 2024-2025 is £57 million (*ibid.*). Respect have argued that “a problem that costs billions cannot be solved with millions” (Respect, 2024). A report by the NAO revealed that the government has historically underspent on its VAWG budget by an average of 15% further reducing the investment to address this pressing issue (NAO, 2025).

Priority in prevalence

Statistics on the prevalence of domestic abuse are extensively cited and easily accessible. Most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicate that, in the year ending March 2024, the police recorded 1,350,428 domestic abuse incidents and crimes in England and Wales with an estimated 2.3 million individuals experiencing abuse in the same period (ONS, 2024). Data suggests that domestic abuse causes over 100 deaths every year (DAC, 2022) with one in five homicides being domestic-related (Bates et al, 2022). VAWG also accounted for 20% of all crimes reported to the police in 2022-2023 (NAO, 2025). Additionally, figures suggest that the police receive a domestic abuse-related call every 30 seconds and respond to over 100 individuals seeking urgent support with domestic abuse every hour (Home Office et al, 2025). Globally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that one in three women will experience abuse at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2024). In comparison, the figure in England and Wales is one in four women with approximately one woman killed by a partner or ex-partner every five days (Refuge, n.d.).

Despite the magnitude of the issue that our society faces, there remains a significant gap around our understanding of its perpetration. Most available statistics focus on victim experiences and CJS data relating to domestic abuse incidents with little attention given to perpetrators (Godfrey and Richardson, 2024). The ONS provide detailed data on victim characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, employment, and even household structure. Additionally, they also report on statistics around support services for victims. Yet, similar data around perpetrator interventions is notably absent (Harvey et al, 2024). No comparable data or level of detail in reporting exists for perpetrators at a national level. For every victim each of these entities report on, there is a corresponding perpetrator, and in some cases, multiple perpetrators (Respect, 2024). Yet, the government collects minimal data around perpetrators, creating a significant gap that has implications for practice, policymaking and service delivery (*ibid.*). Without such data, there is a substantial lack of visibility. This, in turn, impedes efforts to fully and accurately measure the scope of this issue and determine effective responses. The absence of visibility in data creates gaps around accountability, enabling perpetrators and the systems designed to manage them to function without adequate oversight. These are challenges which are demonstrated in the findings of this research.

The current picture – perpetrator data

Most recent estimates, which are over a decade old, suggest that there are approximately 400,000 domestic abuse perpetrators causing ongoing harm in England and Wales (Respect, 2013). Estimates from 2009 indicate that there are approximately 25,000 serial perpetrators based on figures from Wiltshire extrapolated to a national scale (Home Office, 2011). Ultimately, there is no comprehensive data on perpetrators and certainly none published in the past decade or so. This issue persists despite calls for the collection of national data that could

provide insights into interventions with perpetrators, address urgent gaps in knowledge and improve efforts to reduce risks and prevent abuse (Drive Partnership, 2020).

Applying statistics to the world of policymaking can have profound implications. This gap in perpetrator data has significant consequences on fully comprehending “the true scale of domestic abuse perpetration, who perpetrators are and what works to stop them, to inform not just practice and service provision, but also commissioning, strategy and public policy” (Respect, 2024: 6). Some argue that numbers largely run our society (Fioramonti, 2014). The way in which data is collected and recorded can also be seen as a reflection of what society cares about and prioritises (Hadjimatheou and Hamid, 2024). Policymakers rely on an evidence base with statistics that are accurate, timely, relevant and available (Yung, 2021). However, this is not the case in relation to perpetrators of domestic abuse in the UK where the absence of data highlights the stark invisibility of perpetrators in national data and responses.

Another negative consequence of this data gap is the potential to focus on the wrong issues, particularly when it is problematic to measure what is actually important (Fioramonti, 2014). This is especially evident in the case of perpetrator data where the lack of measurable data may, in part, explain why practice has disproportionately focused on victims, who systems find easy to measure. It can be argued that this lack of perpetrator data itself facilitates the process of overlooking and disregarding them as actors. The collection of perpetrator data remains an area where no significant improvements or efforts have been made in recent years. This study aims to address this crucial gap, albeit at a local level, but with the intention of developing frameworks that can be embedded more widely.

Terminology

In the domestic abuse and VAWG sectors, a wide range of terminology is used reflecting some commonalities and differences across various agencies and in several contexts. For the purposes of this thesis, specific terminology was selected to ensure clarity and consistency in its analysis. The following outlines the terminology adopted throughout this study.

Domestic abuse

The terms domestic abuse and domestic violence are frequently used interchangeably. However, in the UK domestic abuse is more commonly used in practice to recognise that abuse can take many forms beyond physical violence. This aligns with the statutory definition introduced by the 2021 Act. For consistency and clarity, this thesis adopts the term domestic abuse throughout with occasional references to IPV or VAWG when pertinent to the specific literature being discussed. While domestic abuse serves as a broad and encompassing term, it is important to acknowledge that it does not fully capture the complexity of the issue at hand, a point that is explored in more detail. Definitions and criticisms of key terms are provided in the literature review, highlighting their varied and interchangeable use.

Perpetrator

The term perpetrator is used throughout to refer to those who inflict domestic abuse harms. There is considerable debate surrounding the use of this label and this is examined in greater depth in Chapter 1. Some caution that the term may create stigma (Harvey et al, 2024) and alienate these individuals from services (Tu and Penti, 2020). In contrast, others highlight how clarity and specificity around language can facilitate discussions in practice and create pathways to change (Kelly and Garner, 2023). The term is used here to align with much of the

literature, policy and governmental strategies and initiatives. While the term is not universally accepted, alternatives that effectively capture individuals causing such harm are limited, making this also a practical choice.

Victim

In both literature and practice, language alternates between victim and survivor. Some use victim to refer to individuals who are still in the abusive relationship and survivor to refer to those who have left and are in the process of recovery (Harvey et al, 2024). For the sake of consistency, the term victim is used to refer to both groups. This choice aligns with terminology used in UK legislation, government strategies and legal frameworks, all of which predominantly use the term victim. However, it is important to acknowledge that some individuals who experience domestic abuse may not wish to be referred to as victims and prefer the term survivor (Home Office, 2022).

Agencies and Practitioners

Throughout the study, frequent references are made to agencies. This specifically relates to those operating within the voluntary and statutory sectors. For example, police, probation, social care, housing, health, education, and specialist domestic abuse services such as those delivering behaviour change programmes. The term practitioner is used to refer to individuals working within these agencies. The focus is on agencies and practitioners that play a prominent role in domestic abuse responses.

Research approach

Aim of the study

This study seeks to examine perpetrator visibility and accountability through an investigation of how local authority and partner systems and processes have evolved to meet the demands of a shift towards more perpetrator-focused interventions. This shift arises from a growing recognition within the sector that responding to victims alone is no longer sufficient for effectively ending abuse and that interventions must address perpetrators more directly (SafeLives, 2016). This is a shift that this local authority has attempted to adopt, with investment in more robust approaches aimed at perpetrators including establishing their own in-house perpetrator programme that provides long-term, one-to-one interventions.

Local authority context

The empirical focus of this study is one local authority in London, which is used as a case study, employing a range of methods to evaluate practice and outcomes specifically related to perpetrators. Within this local authority, a VAWG team is responsible for overseeing all VAWG-related work in the area as well as running the in-house perpetrator programme. Services for victims are provided by various third sector organisations and are commissioned by the VAWG team. Training and workforce development on VAWG matters across the council are primarily delivered and coordinated by the VAWG team. A multi-agency VAWG Board convenes quarterly to provide strategic oversight of all VAWG-related initiatives and interventions to ensure that this issue is prioritised and effectively addressed across the local authority.

To evaluate responses within this local authority, the collected data is analysed to assess the extent to which practice achieves both visibility and accountability. The study uses daily

MARAC data to evaluate efforts to address perpetrators within this multi-agency process by considering various variables related to these two objectives and assessing whether outcomes are systematically measured and recorded. Additionally, the research aims to understand the challenges encountered in these efforts and to identify existing opportunities and challenges in practice as reported by practitioners working across the multi-agency spectrum. The goal is to determine whether the shift to a perpetrator-focused approach has been successfully implemented in practice. Where gaps are identified, guidance is developed to address shortcomings and to offer recommendations for strengthening practice.

Data access

Access to data was granted by the local authority through a remote desktop, allowing for full access to daily MARAC data which forms the basis of the analysis presented in Chapter 2. Additional access was provided for other systems including children's social care, early help, VAWG consultation records and data related to the council's own perpetrator programme. The local authority also supported with arranging the practitioner interviews analysed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, a variety of meetings including the daily MARAC, the perpetrator panel and the VAWG board were observed to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how processes and systems operate within this local authority. This extensive level of access was made possible due to the research being part of a collaborative project co-funded by the local authority and the South and East Network for Social Sciences (SENSS) Doctoral Training Partnership. Regular meetings were held with the VAWG team in the local authority to ensure ongoing communication, offer regular updates and seek their feedback where needed. Finally, the findings are being shared with the local authority who plan to use this study to inform their upcoming VAWG strategy due to be renewed in 2026. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to make a

direct contribution to practice with the aim of improving responses to perpetrators within this local authority.

Gendered approach

This thesis adopts a gendered approach which recognises that women are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse and that most abuse is perpetrated by men. While men can also experience abuse and women can be perpetrators, it is widely acknowledged that the dynamics of domestic abuse more commonly involve men acting abusively towards women (Dheensa et al, 2022; Hester, 2012). This gendered focus is vital as feminist theorists have long advocated for the need to view domestic abuse with a gendered lens due to the predominance of male perpetrators and female victims (Gilchrist, 2013). Research consistently indicates that when women engage in violent or abusive acts, this is often linked to patterns of self-defence and violent resistance (Johnson, 2008). Moreover, women's use of abuse tends to be sporadic and not reflective of "a systematic pattern of aggression" (Oddone, 2020: 245). In contrast, men's violence is linked to patterns of power and control that are more severe and occur more frequently (Hester 2012; Johnson, 2008; Oddone, 2020; Stark, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to understand violence experienced by women both as a cause and a consequence of gender inequality; a perspective developed by the United Nations and adopted by the UK government in various strategies to support their efforts across all government departments to tackle this issue (Home Office, 2022).

Adopting a gendered approach does not entail disregarding the experiences of victims who are not female. Nor does it mean dismissing perpetration by those who are not male. Rather, it acknowledges the high prevalence of male-on-female abuse and emphasises the gendered dynamics inherent in this form of abuse. My decision to adopt this standpoint in this study is

informed by the literature as well as my own observations in practice. Failing to embrace this standpoint can lead to practices that treat domestic abuse as a gender-neutral issue which fails to capture the true lived experiences of victims or the role that gendered expectations play in the dynamics of domestic abuse (Bishop, 2016). Overlooking the importance of gender can also facilitate the process of denying and minimising the abuse that women experience and enabling men to maintain their power (Edel, 2009). Finally, it is important to utilise this gendered perspective as both practice and literature point to two key facts: firstly, that when women experience abuse they are blamed for it (Halicki et al, 2023), and secondly, that when women abuse they face disproportionately harsher punishments compared to their male counterparts even when their actions signify a response to the abuse they are experiencing (CWJ, 2022; Hester, 2012). Therefore, effective analysis of domestic abuse and how systems respond to it cannot be achieved without addressing the gendered double standards that are deeply entrenched within processes and interventions.

Methodological approach

The research necessitated the use of mixed methods due to the complex interactions that perpetrators have with various processes and systems, both directly and indirectly. It involved reviewing quantitative and qualitative data relating to a daily MARAC, conducting qualitative interviews with practitioners across various agencies, reviewing data held on several databases and observing relevant meetings and panels. By integrating the findings from these diverse methods, the research provided a comprehensive range of insights which facilitated the development of recommendations and concluding remarks that address various practice areas.

The initial research plan sought to include perpetrator interviews but challenges related to time, access and participant suitability made this difficult. Literature on interviewing perpetrators

indicates several challenges, including perpetrators' use of narratives that rationalise their behaviours through tactics such as minimisation, denial or justification of their actions (Boonzaier, 2014; Dheensa et al, 2022). The aim of employing such tactics is to appear as 'non-violent' during the interview which in turn hinders the process of "collecting rich descriptive data" (Dheensa et al, 2022: 348). Furthermore, research suggests that perpetrators' accounts of attitudinal or behavioural changes are often unreliable as they may serve to further minimise, deny and justify their actions (Morran, 2013). As such, researchers studying men's violence against women must critically evaluate data collected from perpetrator interviews, looking within and beyond an interview setting to examine the influences that may shape the accounts they offer (Boonzaier, 2014). Given the logistical challenges in including perpetrator interviews and concerns regarding the reliability of perpetrator accounts, this research adopted an alternative approach to ensuring the inclusion of perpetrator perspectives by drawing on studies that have interviewed perpetrators. Additionally, feedback obtained from perpetrators who have completed the local authority's behaviour change programme is incorporated where relevant.

Ethical and safeguarding considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university prior to the commencement of any data collection. The ethics process involved detailing potential risks and safeguarding concerns as well as outlining the strategies to address any issues that might arise throughout the research. This included adhering to the local authority's guidelines on safeguarding vulnerable adults and children should any safeguarding concerns arise during meetings, interviews and within the data. To access the local authority's data, an enhanced DBS check was obtained, an information sharing agreement was established, and a risk assessment was conducted by the local authority

to facilitate access to its databases and systems. All data collated and analysed has been stored securely on the local authority's remote desktop system. Lastly, an important ethical factor to consider is the fact that the research was partially funded by the local authority whose data was used for the research. As such, it has been crucial to maintain my independence throughout this study to ensure that the results are not influenced by this funding arrangement and that the research is conducted with integrity.

Reflexivity

Positionality as a 'Pracademic'²

It is essential to recognise that my professional experience contributed valuable knowledge and expertise, while also introducing potential assumptions and challenges that required careful consideration during the research process. Throughout my professional experience, abuse and violence experienced by women and girls have been central themes in my work. Even when working in different sectors, such as mental health or with migrant communities, VAWG was a persistent concern commonly reported by the women and girls I encountered. Through this work, I observed how interventions often failed to engage with those responsible for perpetrating the harm that impacted and shaped the needs and experiences of victims. In other words, the lack of visibility and accountability of perpetrators was already apparent. Another observation was the evident disconnect between research and practice. Many practitioners struggle to stay informed on current research or legislative updates due to time constraints. This challenge is further compounded by the limited availability of relevant training for practitioners

² A Pracademic is an individual who is both an academic scholar and a practitioner, often bridging the gap between theory and practice (Panda, 2015).

who regularly engage with domestic abuse cases. Reflecting on my own experience as a social work student, I recall only one lecture addressing domestic abuse, which framed it as linked to mental health and substance use under the umbrella of the ‘toxic trio’ – a term that is not particularly useful for practice.

These concerns motivated this research. The study represented an opportunity to bridge the gap between research and practice, emphasising the importance of achieving visibility and accountability for perpetrators and considering how practitioners and agencies can be better supported to achieve this. My transition from working within the VAWG sector, where I focused primarily on victim advocacy, to academic research focusing on perpetrators presented both challenges and opportunities. From a feminist perspective, researching perpetrators can present inherent ethical challenges and tensions for researchers whilst also recognising the value findings can bring to ending violence against women and children (Chung and Zannettino, 2006). During my time in victim advocacy services, I held limited belief, if any, in perpetrators’ capacity to change and take responsibility for their behaviours. This view was partly shaped by the rarity of such outcomes in case practice. However, this perspective aligns with a broader experience of feminist researchers, who often bring with them their own expectations around perpetrator engagement (Boonzaier, 2014) or “a healthy scepticism about the extent to which men choose to change” (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015: 46).

Responses to domestic abuse have traditionally focused on one of three solutions – criminal justice sanctions for perpetrators, victims separating and leaving their homes, or removing perpetrators from the picture (Kelly and Garner, 2023). I had adhered to a similar mindset for some time. However, research consistently highlights the limitations of these approaches, demonstrating how measures focused on separating victims and perpetrators do not result in

safety whereby perpetrators often continue their abuse (Kelly et al, 2014) or move on to new victims (Oddone, 2020). Furthermore, as removing perpetrators proves to be challenging for agencies (Henderson, 2019; Scottish Women's Aid, 2015) and with criminal justice systems failing to adequately address perpetrators (DAC, 2025), the focus has been on victims, often compelling them to separate or leave their homes even when these options are unsafe. This has, whether intentionally or not, fostered victim-blaming practices with agencies scrutinising victims' actions and positioning them as the solution to the abuse. Ultimately, this leaves perpetrators hidden and facing no responsibility for their actions. Consequently, my perspective began to shift. Having worked in one local authority for over eight years, I became accustomed to hearing the same perpetrator names time and time again, either with the same victim or with new victims. It became evident that this invisibility of perpetrators and their lack of accountability were intertwined with the practice of blaming victims and holding them responsible for the abuse. This realisation, which is gaining traction in both research and practice, drives the shift towards tackling perpetrators more effectively to safeguard victims and children (Home Office, 2023).

My experience in the VAWG sector provided a deep understanding of key systems, eliminating the need for extensive training. I was familiar with the MARAC process, having attended these meetings regularly for seven years. My work with the first London local authority to implement the daily MARAC model was of great value to the analysis of the daily MARAC data within this research. My background in victim-centred work guided me to consistently consider victims' voices and safety throughout the design and implementation of the research. This perspective has informed the processes of collecting and analysing data, for example in making decisions around which daily MARAC variables to examine or how to formulate relevant questions for the practitioner interviews. This has allowed me to conduct perpetrator-focused

research while, at the same time, considering outcomes and implications for victims. Additionally, my experience within the sector cultivated a critical approach particularly in relation to taking information at face value. When analysing case data, I ensured a deeper examination of practice effectiveness and outcomes. For instance, while feedback from perpetrators who have completed the perpetrator programme was valuable to include, I remained aware of the fact that perpetrators may manipulate processes and systems and are known to use engagement in such programmes as evidence of 'change' to regain access to the family home or resume contact with their children (Mandel, 2020). Given that most of these perpetrators were referred to the programme by children's social care, I was aware of the need to approach their statements with caution, acknowledging the potential for their feedback to not be reflective of the reality.

My positionality as a pracademic also significantly influenced key aspects of this research. For instance, through ongoing discussions with other practitioners, the issue of the perpetrator label frequently emerged. This prompted a decision to examine this issue further within the scope of this research, particularly as it is a topic that generates uncertainty and anxiety among practitioners around its implications for practice. Moreover, the research has also had a notable impact on me as a practitioner. Initially holding strong views around the use of the term perpetrator and its role in holding individuals accountable, I now advocate for a more nuanced approach that considers the balance between what this language aims to achieve with implications on perpetrator engagement and practitioner safety.

Another key reflection in my role as a researcher pertains to the challenges of maintaining a purely observational stance without intervening, particularly when analysing case data and participating in meetings. In my professional practice, I regularly conducted case file audits to

evaluate practice and attended meetings, such as MARAC, where I represented the voice of the victim or acted in a quality assurance capacity. While this research involves comparable activities, it required me to adopt a strictly observational role, refraining from intervening or influencing outcomes.

Positionality - relationship with the local authority

A final positionality to consider is my role as a researcher utilising data provided by a local authority that partially funded this project and my studies. To mitigate potential biases or influences, I was granted access to all necessary systems and databases and independently selected the time period and sample for the daily MARAC data analysis. While the local authority provided some guidance and facilitated contacts for the practitioner interviews, the various sampling methods employed ensured a broad and diverse sample that was not influenced by my funded relationship to the local authority. Furthermore, my attendance at meetings where I observed processes may have impacted case discussions due to practitioners being aware of my presence as an observer and researcher. To mitigate any potential influence, I ensured that none of the cases discussed in the meetings observed are considered for inclusion in any part of the research.

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Literature Review

A substantial body of literature exists on domestic abuse, offering extensive analyses and discussions on the subject. As this chapter demonstrates, various theoretical frameworks provide insight into the underlying causes and motivations of domestic abuse perpetration, alongside recommendations for integrating this knowledge into interventions targeting perpetrators. In considering responses to perpetrators, it is crucial to complement these theoretical perspectives with an understanding of how policies and strategies are utilised to guide this work as well as the implications these have on practice. As such, the thesis reviews relevant literature focusing on the intersection between theory, policy and practice, which it views as interrelated pillars that inform and influence one another (Wang, 2018). Theory provides the concepts and frameworks that explain a phenomenon, policy translates these theoretical insights into actionable steps and strategic directives, and practice involves the implementation of policy into real-world settings.

Theoretical framework of the thesis

Domestic abuse is a subject of focus across a range of academic disciplines including, but not limited to, criminology, sociology, social policy, and gender studies (Walby et al, 2014). Historically, however, domestic abuse has been treated as a distinct field often isolated from mainstream disciplines relying on “its own theories, concepts and forms of measurement” (ibid.: 188). Theoretical perspectives on domestic abuse provide valuable insights into its gendered dimensions, its underlying foundation of power and control, the causes and consequences of abuse as well as efforts to understand why individuals perpetrate such abuse. Domestic abuse is inherently multidisciplinary with far-reaching implications in various practice areas such as criminal law (Youngs, 2015), human rights (Herring, 2020), healthcare

(Pitt, 2018), social care (Hester, 2011; Robbins et al, 2016) and immigration (Rights of Women, 2017). To establish a theoretical framework for this thesis, an analysis is presented of the key theories and models that offer explanations for this form of perpetration. This thesis is grounded in feminist and power-based theories which are central to the research design and analysis. Domestic abuse continues to be a pervasive issue predominantly affecting women and is rooted in power and control. These are concepts that are well-supported in prominent literature (e.g. Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007). These frameworks facilitate the process of adopting a gendered, power and control-based approach to analysing the current state of practice, and perhaps more importantly, identifying why responses to domestic abuse perpetrators remain ineffective.

Outline of the literature review

Focusing theory, policy and practice specifically on the concepts of visibility and accountability significantly narrows the scope of the relevant literature. As such, this thesis aims to place these concepts in the spotlight by providing a detailed theoretical and empirical analysis that can advance our understanding of them. First, theories surrounding domestic abuse perpetration are explored, providing insights into how they can support or impede efforts to achieve visibility and accountability. This is followed by an overview of the current legislative and strategic frameworks that shape responses in England and Wales, evaluating what they dictate or accomplish in relation to visibility and accountability. Finally, a detailed analysis of current practice responses is presented to offer insights into the role that agencies and practitioners can play in advancing these two objectives.

Prior to delving into the theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to examine relevant terminology used to define this form of abuse, including variations based on gender and

relationship dynamics. This provides essential context and helps establish clarity in language, ensuring precision and consistency in terminology relevant to this thesis.

Definitions

What we refer to as domestic abuse has been described using various terms, some of which are synonymous, while others reflect variations in the aspects they comprise. In the UK, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) introduced a statutory definition of domestic abuse which aims to ensure that it encompasses not just physical violence but also coercive control and emotional and economic abuse (Home Office, 2024a). The Act defines domestic abuse as either a single incident or a course of conduct that includes:

- “(a) physical or sexual abuse;
- (b) violent or threatening behaviour;
- (c) controlling or coercive behaviour;
- (d) economic abuse;
- (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse”

(Domestic Abuse Act, 2021).

For actions to qualify as domestic abuse under the law, both perpetrators and victims must be aged 16 or over and be personally connected either through an intimate relationship or by being relatives (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). It is important to note that variations in definitions may exist even within the UK. For instance, in Scotland familial abuse is not classified as domestic abuse as their definition specifically refers to abuse occurring between partners or ex-partners (Scotland Police, n.d.).

Domestic abuse rarely occurs in isolation but rather consists of a general pattern of controlling behaviours, something which differentiates it from most other types of crimes (Johnson, 2008). It is rooted in gendered power dynamics and societal structures that reflect them (Hearn, 2012). Here we must consider Stark (2007) who used the term coercive control to refer to the ways in which men entrap women through acts such as deprivation, exploitation and threats to dominate, control and force obedience. Stark describes this as a form of abuse that targets female gender identity and reinforces structures of male domination (Stark, 2009). In response to this understanding, UK legislation evolved in 2015 with Controlling or Coercive Behaviour becoming a criminal offence punishable by up to 5 years imprisonment (CPS, 2023). The inclusion of controlling or coercive behaviour within the 2021 Act reflects a deeper understanding of the patterns of control often associated with domestic abuse.

Definitions of violence and abuse targeted at women and girls can vary depending on the relationship and age dynamics of those involved. Some of the most common terms in research and practice are explored below.

Intimate partner violence (IPV)

A frequently used term is intimate partner violence (IPV) which refers to domestic abuse occurring between partners or ex-partners. The term was first proposed by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in 1999 to differentiate this form of abuse from other types that occur in domestic settings, such as child or elder abuse (Nicolaidis and Paranjape, 2009).

Teenage relationship abuse

In 2012, the definition of domestic abuse was revised to include young people aged 16 and 17 as research indicated that those aged 16–19 are the most likely age group to suffer abuse by a

partner (Home Office et al, 2012). This issue remains a concern with the ONS in 2020 identifying young women aged 16–19 as the age group at highest risk to experience abuse (Weir and Barrow-Grint, 2025). Additionally, tensions arise when addressing young people causing harm. Agencies are often reluctant to criminalise them but simultaneously fail to provide alternative interventions to challenge those behaviours even when significant harms have occurred (*ibid.*).

Violence against women and girls (VAWG)

Another term used is violence against women (VAW) or, more commonly in practice, violence against women and girls (VAWG) where the sector relies on the definition adopted by the United Nations in its 1993 declaration on the elimination of VAW. The declaration describes VAW as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations, 1993: 2). The declaration acknowledges the gendered nature of these acts, highlighting how the unequal power dynamics between men and women contribute to their existence (*ibid.*).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) published a general recommendation in 1992 for this form of abuse to be defined as violence that is directed at a woman because she is a woman, recognising that this issue affects women disproportionately (UN Women, n.d.). It is widely acknowledged that VAWG is “rooted in gender inequality and men’s sense of entitlement” (End VAW, n.d.). The UK government’s definition has evolved to encompass additional forms of abuse such as revenge porn, upskirting and stalking which have recently become acknowledged as significant concerns (NAO, 2025).

It is essential to recognise that men can also experience abuse and that women can be perpetrators. Abuse can occur in relationships irrespective of the gender identity of any individuals involved (Galop, n.d.). The recognition of the gendered dynamics of domestic abuse and IPV is not intended to disregard relationships that do not involve male-on-female violence. Rather, it seeks to reflect insights from theory, policy and practice concerning the gendered prevalence of this form of abuse and the deeply entrenched nature of its patterns.

Violent resistance

In alignment with the gendered approach of this thesis, it is important to examine how women's use of violence may vary and be indicative of different dynamics in intimate relationships. Johnson (2008) explores victims' use of violent resistance as a response to the abuse they endure. One form of this is 'self-protective violence' where victims react immediately to an assault, often as an automatic response, to safeguard themselves (Johnson, 2008). In an analysis of cases involving allegations of abuse made by both parties, Hester (2012) found that instances where female perpetrators had used weapons were frequently associated with self-defence. Another manifestation of violent resistance is what Johnson describes as 'frustration response behaviour' where victims resort to violence as an expression of the accumulated frustration arising from enduring prolonged abuse (Johnson, 2008).

The distinction in women's use of abuse is critical as research suggests that as many as 57% of women in prisons or under community supervision are victims of domestic abuse (CWJ, 2022). A substantial body of literature links women's offending to their experiences of domestic abuse, highlighting the unjust criminalisation of victims and the failure of the criminal justice system (CJS) to protect them (*ibid.*). Critics argue that the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) missed an opportunity to address violent resistance and recognise how victims are driven to offend,

particularly in cases of self-defence (Bettinson and Wake, 2023). Despite existing legal provisions, women who use violence in response to abuse are rarely acquitted on self-defence grounds with data highlighting the stark disparity in how their perpetrators never face prosecution (CWJ, 2022). This practice allows perpetrators to “manipulate the criminal justice system to extend their control over their victim” (ibid.: 9).

Failure to centre perpetration and implications for visibility and accountability

Much of the terminology presented above has faced some criticism for various reasons. The process of naming abusive relationships can clarify dynamics at play by helping identify who is doing what to whom (Boyle, 2018). However, most of the terminology commonly used fails to provide this level of specificity and tends to obscure the role of perpetrators.

Terms such as domestic abuse, domestic violence and VAWG have been criticised for their inability to centre around perpetrators, thereby eliding their existence and culpability. For instance, Lamb and Keon (1995) criticise the term domestic abuse for its passivity and its failure to position perpetrators at the centre of the discourse. Similarly, Penelope (1990) advocates for the importance of naming the individual causing the harm as this visibility ensures they are recognised as the agent of the act. Romito (2008) asserts that this issue should be referred to as ‘male violence’ to ensure perpetrators remain central to the discourse. This perspective is echoed by Jackson Katz who in his powerful TED talk “Violence Against Women: It’s a Men’s Issue” highlights a significant issue with how we talk about gender violence. Katz describes how we often speak of VAW leaving men and masculinity as invisible agents in the conversation (Keren, 2012). Katz argues that gender violence is often considered a women’s issue when in reality it is a men’s issue (Drew, 2016). In doing so, the focus shifts away from the men committing these acts onto the women and girls who experience them.

Finally, Katz suggests that using the term VAW is problematic as it suggests that this is something that happens to women with nobody doing it to them, neglecting the abuser's active role in causing harm (Keren, 2012).

Alternative terms such as gender-based violence or gendered violence have received similar criticism for being victim-focused and leaving those who commit the abuse less visible, allowing them to evade scrutiny (Applin et al, 2022). Frameworks that focus on victims' vulnerability rather than perpetrators' responsibility have been criticised for suggesting that this is an issue we expect women to experience and that our focus should solely be on supporting them (Boyle, 2018). Not naming the perpetrator in the terminology we use results in failure to hold them accountable and can imply that the violence is isolated, random and something that 'just happens' to women (CBE International, n.d.). Perpetuating these ideas, through terminology that obscures the role of perpetrators, is likely to maintain their invisibility and hinder efforts to hold them accountable.

Theories and models of perpetration – and their impact on visibility and accountability

Examining theories and models provides a framework for understanding and explaining phenomena as well as guiding research and evaluation around it (Bernard, 2006). The theoretical foundation of this thesis primarily draws on feminist and power-based frameworks, which have long influenced policy and practice. For example, in the development of perpetrator programmes rooted in feminist theory (Anderson and Umberson, 2001) and in practice that

frequently employs tools such as the Power and Control Wheel³ (Dutton and Starzomski, 1997). Feminist and power-based theories provide a solid foundation for understanding VAWG as they highlight the centrality of gendered dynamics and roles with power and control elements at the core.

Perpetrators exhibit significant variations in their presentation, behaviour and response to interventions, necessitating a flexible approach to understanding, intervening with and exploring the factors that drive their actions. Consequently, there are additional theories and models that offer valuable insights into the dynamics of perpetration and the circumstances surrounding perpetrators' needs. These include a range of family violence theories, social learning theory, and adopting an intersectionality framework. Each is explored here with a focus on their implications on achieving visibility and accountability. Additionally, a brief overview is presented of other theories such as strain theory, neighbourhood theory, and individual psychological theories. The goal of this is to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature. Where these theories diverge from the foundational approach of this thesis, this is distinctly explained. For instance, highlighting where there is a need to be cautious of theories that rely exclusively on external factors as the explanation for the abuse and how these can negatively impact on visibility and accountability. Solely relying on theories that emphasise external factors, such as resource or strain theories, risks reinforcing narratives perpetrators use to justify their actions and deny responsibility. In practice, these often represent a significant obstacle to achieving visibility and accountability for perpetrators. These factors should be considered as contributing or exacerbating elements rather than primary explanations.

³ <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/>

This section explores the most common theories used to offer an understanding of domestic abuse, focusing mostly on how they explain perpetration and how they relate to the concepts of visibility and accountability.

Feminist theory

Perhaps the most widely explored and cited theory in relation to domestic abuse is feminist theory which highlights how the patriarchy and gender inequality underpin abusive behaviours (Anderson, 2007) with gendered expectations and societal norms playing a key role in the normalisation of this form of abuse (Lawson, 2012). Feminist theory suggests that these elements play a pivotal role in facilitating the existence of gendered abuse perpetrated by men towards women to assert and reinforce their power and authority (Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Lenton, 2007). In this sense, feminist theory closely aligns with power-based explanations which are explored in the following section. It frames domestic abuse as a manifestation of male dominance which is deeply rooted in structures that normalise power imbalances between men and women in our society (Anderson, 2007; Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012; Meyer et al, 2023). Furthermore, it highlights how socialisation processes that teach men to be dominant and women to be submissive contribute to the perpetuation of violence which is further minimised or dismissed due to inadequate social and legal systems shaped by patriarchal values (Lawson, 2012).

Feminist theory has been valuable in shaping and influencing the domestic abuse discourse through the lens of social justice by highlighting the importance of challenging gender inequality and incorporating systemic changes into any intervention strategies (McPhail et al, 2007). A notable example of this is the development of many behaviour change programmes across the world which implement a gendered understanding of domestic abuse in line with

feminist theory (Anderson and Umberson, 2001). Linked to feminist frameworks is the role that masculinity plays in how perpetrators experience interventions. Male perpetrators may exhibit resistance in their response to interventions that challenge gender norms (Schrock and Padavic, 2007). A study by Morran (2022) found that a contributing factor to this is how perpetrators perceive their masculinity, with one perpetrator expressing apprehension that participation in a programme would make him 'less of a man'.

Domestic abuse remains a persistent concern for society, with a central challenge being the lack of an effective response to perpetrators. Feminist theory provides a framework for understanding the roots of this issue, while an exploration of masculinity further highlights potential barriers to improving responses to perpetrators. Many argue that the abuse men perpetrate towards women is disregarded and minimised (Lawson, 2012), which fosters perpetrator invisibility. When such an issue is consistently dismissed, how can those who perpetrate it to be acknowledged? This invisibility is further perpetuated by practices that neglect to name the person committing the harm, when they are male, further excluding their existence from the discourse (Romito, 2008). Domestic abuse is also deeply entrenched (Anderson, 2007) and the systems used to respond to it are not equipped to do so effectively (Lawson, 2012). Furthermore, responsibility is often assigned to the female victims who experience it as opposed to the male perpetrators committing these acts (Lamb and Keon, 1995), creating an environment where perpetrators are not held accountable. One may argue that if this form of abuse predominantly affected men, a solution could have been found long ago.

Power-based theories

As early as 1964, Murray Straus explored how power imbalances within a family unit can perpetuate inequality and influence the development of attitudes towards authority, gender

roles, and relationships (Straus, 1964). Power-based theories revolve around an understanding of the systemic nature of power relations and how abuse serves to maintain male dominance in intimate relationships (Lenton, 2007). Here, the prevalence of abusive behaviours is seen as being influenced by societal structures that normalise gender inequality (*ibid.*). As such, power-based theories closely overlap with feminist approaches in their shared emphasis on the role of gender and its expression in domestic abuse. A good understanding of power and control dynamics has been pivotal in understanding domestic abuse and has served as a framework for shaping many perpetrator interventions (Wagers et al, 2019).

One of the most widely embedded tools in domestic abuse practice is the Minnesota Power and Control Wheel which was developed in 1984 and remains widely used today on a global scale (DAIP, n.d.). The Wheel was developed in recognition of domestic abuse involving tactics that seek to maintain power (Dutton and Starzomski, 1997). The tool takes on a gendered approach by listing ‘male privilege’ as one of the tactics used by perpetrators to gain and assert power and control. Within the context of intervening with perpetrators, the Wheel has been embedded as a tool to educate them around their actions and how these align with the behaviours of other perpetrators as well as to explore opportunities to change (DAIP, n.d.). Therefore, it has proved as a useful tool for achieving visibility (identifying behaviours) and accountability (self-acknowledgment of behaviours and exploring the need to change).

Relying on this framework can facilitate a deeper understanding of the role of power relations and dynamics that are frequently observed in domestic abuse cases. Adopting a gendered lens further underscores how structural gender inequalities can normalise these dynamics and make them more difficult to address. This approach has also been useful in practice by providing a solid foundation for responding to perpetrators. Examples of this can be observed in perpetrator

programmes adopting this approach and the use of tools, such as the Wheel, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the use of power and control.

Family violence theories

Family violence theories focus on emphasising the role of family dynamics, communication patterns, and relational conflict in the perpetuation of abuse (Anderson, 2007). These include social control theory (also known as social bond theory), family systems theory, the ecological model, and resource theory. The focus of these theories is on explaining abusive behaviour as arising from socialisation processes, societal stressors or dysfunctional family structures (ibid.).

Social control / Social bond theory

This theory focuses on the significance of social bonds in preventing or facilitating abusive behaviours (Lawson, 2012). It argues that individuals with strong, stable attachments to social institutions are less likely to engage in abusive actions, whereas those with weak social bonds are more likely to perpetrate acts of abuse (Meyer et al, 2023). Examples of social institutions can be connections to family, education or employment establishments (Lawson, 2012). Developed by Travis Hirschi in 1969, it argues that domestic abuse can be prevented by reinforcing adherence to social norms and reducing the ‘impulse for violence’ (Meyer et al, 2023).

This theory provides useful insights into the role of environments that normalise abuse, which can further enable it. However, it can have negative implications for accountability. For instance, framing perpetrators as having an ‘impulse for violence’ risks equating the issue with anger which is not a helpful framework. While anger may present as a feature in domestic

abuse cases, it is not the cause of it (Respect, 2020). Additionally, interventions designed to address anger are “inappropriate and dangerous as they permit the abuser the opportunity to continue exerting control” (Myhill, 2018: 36). Therefore, this theory can be useful when applied specifically to understanding the broader context in which perpetrators operate, rather than as an explanation for the abuse which appears to hinder accountability through an overemphasis on societal circumstances.

Family systems theory

Family systems theory explores domestic abuse as the outcome of complex interactions within the family dynamics and larger societal systems, suggesting that acts of abuse are not solely the result of the individual’s actions (Lawson, 2012). Factors such as dysfunctional patterns of communication and behaviours perpetuated over time within the family system can be seen as resulting in domestic abuse (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012; Lawson, 2012). This theory emphasises the importance of addressing domestic abuse by understanding and changing these maladaptive family dynamics and patterns rather than focusing solely on individual perpetrators (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012; Meyer et al, 2023).

It is useful to consider the role of maladaptive or harmful family dynamics in domestic abuse as they can provide insights into perpetrators’ circumstances. For example, if perpetrators are attempting to change but continue to reside in households that permit or encourage the abuse or collude with their actions, effectiveness of interventions may be limited. However, framing the abuse as not within the power of individual perpetrators can be dangerous for how we conceptualise accountability. Such an approach risks aligning with perpetrator narratives that justify their actions. Therefore, as with social bond theory, this framework is helpful for

considering factors that may facilitate or hinder interventions but should not be used in ways that diffuse responsibility or deflect attention away from perpetrators' intentional acts of abuse.

Ecological model

The ecological model can be applied to the context of domestic abuse through a consideration of the complex interactions between individual, relational, community and societal factors (Lawson, 2012). In this theory, environmental contexts which include cultural norms and community structures can contribute to the prevalence and perpetuation of abuse (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012). This model offers a broader, more holistic view of domestic abuse which considers the complex interactions between multiple factors such as an individual's personal, cultural and societal experiences as well as the community norms they are exposed to (Meyer et al, 2023).

This model accounts for multiple contributing factors and recognises the complexity of domestic abuse, emphasising that it cannot be explained or addressed by focusing on one element only. By considering a broader range of influences, this approach can enhance visibility of perpetrators who may have been overlooked using an approach that attributes abuse to a singular cause. While this model can provide a useful framework for responding to perpetrators and the various needs they may present with, it is beyond the scope of this study as the analysis does not provide sufficient in-depth information related to these factors. Such an approach is likely to be more relevant for research which involves interviewing perpetrators or in-depth case studies, offering a detailed consideration of their circumstances and how they interact and intersect. Furthermore, this model does not explicitly focus on accountability or visibility which limits its relevance to the key themes of this thesis.

Resource theory

Resource theory highlights the role of power imbalances and resource inequalities, suggesting that those who lack resources or feel powerless in relationships are more likely to abuse (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012). The abuse itself is used as a tactic to assert control or compensate for their powerlessness (Meyer et al, 2023). In cases where individuals using abuse have greater access to resources, this theory suggests that abuse serves to reinforce power and control if these have been threatened (Lawson, 2012). Ultimately, it provides an explanation that relies on resource disparities as contributing to the development of abusive behaviours, particularly as they relate to power and control dynamics within a relationship (ibid.).

While resource theory perceives control as central to domestic abuse, it oversimplifies the issue by attributing power dynamics primarily to access to resources. While resources may play a role, they should not be identified as the sole or primary determining factor. Focusing excessively on them can also be detrimental as doing so aligns with perpetrator narratives where actions are justified through narratives of financial loss or stress. Consequently, this theory is not advanced in this study as it fails to capture the complexity of domestic abuse and risks diffusing accountability. Moreover, it also has the potential to leave perpetrators who do not fit into this narrative invisible.

Social learning theory and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Bandura's social learning theory can offer key insights into understanding the dynamics of domestic abuse. It suggests that abusive behaviours are learnt through the process of socialisation and then reinforced through environmental contexts (Anderson and Kras, 2005). Here, domestic abuse is viewed as learnt behaviour often resulting from experiences of domestic abuse as a child that normalise it as a way of resolving conflict (Hyde-Nolan and

Juliao, 2012). These children then become adults who are more likely to replicate and model these abusive behaviours in their own relationships (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012; Meyer et al, 2023). In a study where male perpetrators were asked about their childhood experiences, many reported directly experiencing abuse and growing up in households with domestic abuse, highlighting this as contributing to their use of abuse in their own adult relationships (Worley et al, 2010). Early life experiences of trauma, such as neglect or abuse, have also been associated with maladaptive coping mechanisms including the need to exert control over others (Maldonado and Murphy, 2020) and increased likelihood of IPV (Verbruggen et al, 2019).

While childhood trauma and ACEs do not excuse abuse, they can be seen as a possible underlying motivation for the abusive behaviours (Maldonado and Murphy, 2020) or as causing an exacerbation of abusive behaviours (Semiatin et al, 2017). Anderson and Kras (2005) argue that social learning theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the prevalence of abusive behaviours, emphasising the role that societal norms and media representations play in reinforcing such learning. They argue that this theory can be implemented to develop and design more effective interventions that aim to disrupt these learnt patterns of abuse whilst promoting healthier, non-violent ones (Anderson and Kras, 2005). While trauma-informed interventions are encouraged in the literature, there is a need to ensure that this is not pursued at the expense of meaningful accountability for perpetrators (Maldonado and Murphy, 2020; Semiatin et al, 2017). It is important that trauma-informed approaches are not used to dilute responsibility.

Applying social learning theory allows for better visibility and understanding of the experiences of children growing up in homes with domestic abuse, shedding light on the long-term impacts of such experiences. However, as some of the literature suggests, it is crucial to

ensure that this focus does not detract from accountability. Not all perpetrators have a history of childhood trauma and not all those with a history of childhood trauma become perpetrators. Therefore, it is important to consider what additional factors may be relevant here. An understanding of ACEs provides useful background information for this thesis but is only superficially included in the analysis, highlighting the necessity for systems to address these needs to become more preventive than reactive. Additionally, this topic raises important questions around accountability and labelling of young people who commit domestic abuse harm, which are explored in Chapter 1.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality explores how an individual's multiple identities intersect and interact, leading to an impact on their behaviours and motivations for using abuse (Lawson, 2012). The term was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) whose work has been highly influential in demonstrating how multiple intersecting identities can compound experiences of discrimination and oppression. Many argue for integrating intersectionality into our understanding of domestic abuse to better inform policy and practice (Walby et al, 2014). Social categories such as gender, class, race, religion, sexuality, and structural inequalities influence both perpetration of abuse as well as exacerbate its consequences (*ibid.*). Lawson (2012) argues that this intersectional approach should inform interventions to address the complex social and psychological factors that contribute to abuse. For example, understanding the interactions between perpetrators' experiences of systemic oppression and societal norms around masculinity (Lawson, 2012). However, research shows that many interventions fail to consider intersectional factors with practitioners lacking training on how to incorporate this perspective into their practice (Turhan, 2020). Discrimination and mistrust of systems and institutions further hinder support-seeking among perpetrators from marginalised communities (*ibid.*).

Thus, interventions must account for intersectional factors for these communities in particular (Guru, 2006; Turhan, 2020). Specialist services are also needed to address the needs of perpetrators whose first language is not English, whilst considering issues such as racism and discrimination (Hester et al, 2006). Ultimately, interventions for perpetrators should be designed with cultural sensitivity in mind whilst ensuring that this is balanced with a focus on accountability (Guru, 2006).

This framework aids in understanding how intersectional factors can hinder engagement and accountability (e.g. through mistrust of services or experiencing discrimination) or leave some individuals invisible (e.g. through overlooking the experiences of marginalised communities). It also raises an important point as to whether certain intersectional factors could lead to more accountability for some groups while making others less visible. While this approach does not specifically address accountability and visibility, it is instrumental in allowing the study to incorporate an understanding of what intersectional factors can act as a barrier to both concepts, particularly in relation to gender and masculinity.

Further theories

Many more theories highlight different approaches to understanding and intervening with domestic abuse perpetrators. For example, strain theory views abusive behaviours as an expression of a perpetrator's sense of strain or frustration resulting from stressors and pressures (Meyer et al, 2023). This theory emphasises the role of external factors, such as financial challenges or relationship difficulties, as causing the abuse (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012). A further theory known as neighbourhood theory views an individual's neighbourhood as a macro-level social structure that can either mitigate or exacerbate abusive behaviours (Meyer et al, 2023). These factors can include crime rates, poverty, access to resources, social cohesion

and how women's roles are viewed (ibid.). Finally, there are many psychological and clinical theories that mostly focus on the individual psychological factors that can contribute to abuse being perpetrated (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012). For example, some theories suggest that mental health concerns or unresolved psychological issues can manifest themselves as abusive actions seen within family contexts (ibid.). These theories are not carried forward in this thesis as many focus on external factors as the key cause of the abuse. This approach is not a helpful framework for improving responses to perpetrators. Emphasising visibility and accountability requires an approach that centres perpetrators, focusing on their agency and choice, as the root cause of the abuse.

Multiple contributing factors

Much of the literature explores the complexities of domestic abuse, emphasising the importance of understanding it through social, cultural, and gendered lenses rather than merely focusing on individual factors. For instance, feminist theory criticises individualistic explanations of abuse, underscoring the significant role that systemic structures play instead (Anderson, 2007). Critiques of feminist theory, however, point out that a gendered understanding of abuse on its own does not fully account for other elements that can have an influence on perpetration of abuse such as family dynamics and social status (ibid.). Family violence theories offer insights into the role of family dynamics and social factors but often fail to include a gendered perspective that addresses unequal power relations, as highlighted by feminist theory (Anderson, 2007). Many sociological approaches have been criticised for neglecting gender, power dynamics, and the entrenched inequalities that contribute to abuse (Hearn, 2012). While these theories focus on broader contextual factors, they lack a gendered framework and fail to adequately address patterns of power and control, which are central to understanding domestic abuse (Anderson, 2007). Equally, feminist and power-based theories

have been criticised for oversimplifying complex dynamics, such as social structures and inequalities, which can contribute to the perpetration and perpetuation of domestic abuse (Lenton, 2007).

Many agree that one theory alone cannot provide a comprehensive understanding and that different aspects of various theories can be combined to create a much clearer picture of why some individuals perpetrate abuse as we continue to live in a society that normalises and perpetuates this form of abuse. Anderson (2007) suggests that using an integrated approach that combines feminist insights with family violence frameworks can offer a more comprehensive understanding of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse needs to be seen as a complex issue that is better understood by combining deeper understandings of gender, power and societal structures (Hearn, 2014).

Theorising ‘change’

An essential consideration when intervening with perpetrators is the potential for change. The effectiveness of behaviour change interventions in improving safety outcomes for victims and children and reducing abusive behaviours has long been a topic of debate (Hester et al, 2019). Research and evaluation of such programmes show that change is possible. For instance, evaluation of the Drive Project showed a reduction ranging between 73% to 88% in various abusive behaviours (*ibid.*). However, while perpetrator change is indeed possible some argue that this is the exception and not the norm with change being an ‘elusive goal’ that is difficult to achieve (McGinn et al, 2019). On one hand, some perpetrators may still show no signs of changing their behaviours even after completing behaviour change programmes, while others report benefitting from learning techniques such as conflict interruption as well as enhanced communication skills (McGinn et al, 2017).

Aspects such as motivation and resistance can play a key role in influencing whether interventions offered will be successful or meaningful (Mahon et al, 2009). While motivation can indicate readiness to change and acceptance of some form of accountability, resistance can hinder change. Scott and King (2007) explore psychological factors that can influence perpetrator engagement, highlighting resistance, reluctance and readiness as key constructs. Resistance can often manifest as the expression of denial, defensiveness and rationalisations for abusive behaviours (Scott and King, 2007). Meanwhile, reluctance is described as uncertainty or lack of belief around the effectiveness of interventions (ibid.). Finally, readiness is the stage at which perpetrators express a willingness to change which could be influenced by internal or external motivations (ibid.).

Scott and King (2007) and Mahon et al (2009) advocate for the development of interventions that are responsive to the varying levels of and attitudes towards change, a prominent example of which is motivational interviewing techniques. The process of change for perpetrators is complex and can be hindered by many factors including deeply entrenched beliefs around masculinity and control (Seymour et al, 2021) as well as normalisation of the abuse and a lack of a support system (Wagner et al, 2019). As such, effective interventions must address underlying societal and psychological barriers to change whilst maintaining a focus on perpetrator accountability (Seymour et al, 2021).

What triggers change

Research conducted by Hester et al (2006) indicate the existence of certain moments that act as ‘triggers to change’ for perpetrators which often occur when expected or normative experiences fail to materialise. When dynamics such as having a partner or having a leadership

role in the household were disrupted, these created opportunities for change for perpetrators in this study (Hester et al, 2006). However, such disruptions also led to instances where abuse escalated as perpetrators attempted to re-assert their power and control (*ibid.*). Examples of moments where motivation to change was experienced included when victims left or stated they would leave the relationship, when police became involved, and when contact with their children became a concern (*ibid.*). Hester et al (2006) determine that it was the feeling of loss or the anticipation of it, as well as recognition that this loss was self-inflicted, that led to perpetrators taking actions towards changing their behaviours. In Kelly and Westmarland (2015), the accounts of perpetrators accessing behaviour change programmes differed. While some programmes suggest that perpetrators experience ‘light bulb’ moments, their findings indicate that this was not the case for those interviewed. They highlight that change is more accurately understood as a series of distinct moments or ‘sparks’ which also vary for each individual (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015).

The aforementioned theories and concepts underscore the importance of understanding both the causes of perpetration and the potential for fostering change. By integrating this understanding into the design and delivery of interventions, practice can be enhanced through a focus on making perpetrators more visible and enabling systems to hold them accountable. Achieving this requires translating these concepts into both policy and practice.

Policy – the strategic framework for visibility and accountability

Understanding policy and its implications is important for domestic abuse. There are two primary interpretations of policy. A more traditional approach sees policy as a problem-solving

tool, essentially presented as a document or guide created to provide solutions to a recognised problem (Nudzor, 2009). The alternative approach views policy as a dynamic and complex process rather than a final product (*ibid.*). Policy is a critical component for evaluating practice. It connects theory to practice and shapes the legislative and political landscape for domestic abuse practice.

This study utilises data from a London local authority to gain deeper insights into the outcomes they achieve in relation to perpetrator visibility and accountability. Local authorities across England and Wales are guided by relevant legislative frameworks that inform their practices. Moreover, policy decisions significantly influence funding allocations, which in turn determines the resources available to each local authority for their VAWG response. As such, understanding the policy landscape is important for this study, particularly as pertaining to the context of work in this local authority and assessing practice outcomes in alignment with the established policy frameworks and ambitions.

Since 2010, the Home Office has produced three VAWG strategies – the ‘Call to end violence against women and girls’ in 2010, the ‘Ending violence against women and girls strategy’ in 2016, and the ‘Tackling violence against women and girls Strategy (the VAWG Strategy)’ in 2021. The forthcoming strategy update by the Labour government is anticipated in 2025. In addition, the government’s approach to domestic abuse specifically was further articulated in the ‘Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan’ (2022) which complements these VAWG strategies. The most significant legislative response to domestic abuse in the UK was the enactment of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. As part of this Act, the government introduced the statutory definition of domestic abuse outlined above and the Home Office (2022) produced a statutory

guidance document to help ensure the Act feeds into practice through the work of all relevant agencies.

To understand both the current and historical landscape, it is important to examine relevant legislation and government strategies. Emphasis is placed on how these frameworks address perpetrators with a primary focus on their implications for visibility and accountability.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

Following a consultation on domestic abuse responses, the government introduced the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 which aims to transform how the UK tackles domestic abuse (Home Office, 2024a). Most of the provisions within the Act apply to England and Wales (*ibid.*). In relation to perpetrators, the Act aims to provide a more effective response to perpetrators with measures such as prohibiting perpetrators from cross-examining their victims in civil and family courts, enabling the use of polygraph testing as a licence condition upon release from custody, and mandating the development of a statutory domestic abuse perpetrator strategy (*ibid.*). One of the primary objectives of the provisions outlined in the Act is to “hold perpetrators to account” (Home Office, 2022a: 16), underscoring accountability as a central goal for policy and legislation. It was anticipated that the Act would foster positive changes around this, but outcomes are yet to be seen. While the Act specifies accountability as a goal, not much is stated around efforts to make perpetrators more visible within systems.

Despite its groundbreaking nature, the Act has not been without criticism. It adopts a gender-neutral approach to domestic abuse, offering a definition that does not recognise the gendered aspects of this form of abuse and the dynamics involved in male violence perpetrated against women. Critics argue that this oversight impedes efforts to address the root causes of domestic

abuse (Bishop, 2021). Three years after its implementation, some believe that more still needs to be done to address the structural causes of domestic abuse (Women's Aid, 2024).

Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance (2022)

Developed in accordance with the Act, this guidance introduces the statutory definition for domestic abuse and outlines the roles and responsibilities of all key agencies responding to this issue. These duties are explored in greater detail in the subsequent section. Regarding perpetrators, the document strongly advocates for accountability, asserting that “all perpetrators are responsible for their behaviour and should be held accountable for it” (Home Office, 2022a: 44). However, the concept of visibility is neither clearly defined nor explicitly addressed within this guidance. Overall, the statutory guidance has been invaluable to this study as it provides a comprehensive overview of the responsibilities of relevant agencies, thereby offering a solid framework against which the findings of this study can be measured.

VAWG Strategies – 2010, 2016, 2021

In 2010, the government’s VAWG strategy made a commitment to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice and that legal provisions will be strengthened to improve how they are responded to (Home Office, 2010). A further Home Office document offering an update on this strategy, reiterated this commitment stating the government would “get tougher with perpetrators” with an emphasis on improving criminal justice outcomes and rehabilitating more offenders (Home Office, 2012: 18). The subsequent strategy, covering the period of 2016-2020, makes similar commitments aiming to bring more perpetrators to justice, rehabilitate more offenders and prevent perpetrators from re-offending (Home Office, 2016). It outlines a vision for 2020 where we will see “a lower level of offending through an improved criminal justice response and a greater focus on changing the behaviour of perpetrators through a combination

of disruption and support" (ibid.: 15). The 2021 VAWG Strategy further reinforces the commitment to pursue perpetrators by suggesting the government would focus on transforming how the CJS responds to them, ensuring they are brought to justice (Home Office, 2021a). It suggests that the Domestic Abuse Act will ensure that "perpetrators feel the full force of the law" (ibid.: 3).

All these strategies place a strong emphasis on achieving legal accountability for perpetrators. Notably, only since the 2016 strategy has there been mention of efforts to work towards changing the attitudes and behaviours of perpetrators beyond the CJS as well as highlighting the need to support the development of an evidence base for perpetrator programmes (Home Office, 2016). While these policies remain primarily focused on legal accountability, it is important to consider that accountability can be achieved in other ways. Additionally, despite the implementation of these strategies, there has been no improvement in conviction rates, in fact the situation has worsened in recent years (DAC, 2025a). Yet, this focus remains unchanged.

Once again, visibility appears to be a missing element across all strategies. This is indicative of two significant issues - 1) a possible assumption that the CJS automatically ensures visibility, and 2) the lack of guidance for systems on how to achieve visibility for all perpetrators. The issue becomes even more pressing given that research indicates that most victims do not report to the police (Davies et al, 2024) and most perpetrators who commit homicide are not known to CJS agencies (Hoeger et al, 2024). This raises an important question as to why there is a lack of government-led efforts to ensure the visibility of these perpetrators who are causing the highest level of harm. The overemphasis on CJS processes, both in terms of visibility and

accountability and the CJS's failure to achieve these objectives, is an important aspect of this study.

Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan (2022)

The Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan states that the government will be “robust and relentless” in how it responds to perpetrators through avenues such as innovative behaviour change interventions and tougher criminal justice sentencing” (Home Office, 2022b: 3). The plan further states that the government will bring more perpetrators to justice and reduce reoffending by being “unrelenting in the pursuit of perpetrators and unequivocal in insisting it is they who need to change their behaviour” (ibid.: 8). To achieve this, the government has pledged to better understand the decreasing numbers of charges, prosecutions, and convictions within the CJS, improve risk assessments, and implement interventions that offer opportunities for long-term behavioural changes (ibid.). To assess the effectiveness of this plan, the Home Office will monitor increases in the number of charges for domestic abuse related crimes, reductions in the number of victims and declines in domestic homicide rates (ibid.). However, this approach remains heavily focused on criminal justice data and victim numbers with limited emphasis on gathering and reporting on perpetrator data. This is concerning given that criminal justice responses are inherently reactive and incident-based with domestic abuse being significantly under-reported, rendering measures that rely on them insufficient for capturing perpetrator accountability (Davies, 2018). As such, an overreliance on these indicators as measures of success is inadequate. It also results in perpetrators who do not enter the CJS remaining unaccounted for and essentially hidden.

These strategies and frameworks make similar commitments year after year. Yet, the

NAO report suggests that the Home Office has failed to incorporate any lessons learnt from one strategy to the next (NAO, 2025). The report ultimately concludes that due to this, the Home Office “cannot be confident that the government is doing the best it can to keep women and girls safe” (NAO, 2025: 9). Despite these repeated commitments, there has been little tangible progress in achieving any outcomes. Returning to the focus of this study of examining one London local authority, this research aims to address the gaps highlighted here, albeit on a small scale. It hopes to explore whether the Act and the strategies outlined here have led to outcomes around perpetrators that can give an indication as to whether victims are safer as a result. Central to any work with perpetrators is the idea of enhancing safety and freedom for victims (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015; Respect, 2022). Therefore, it is important to incorporate this strategic goal into the framework of this study.

The purpose of these strategies and frameworks is to inform and shape practice. To assess the current response of the sector, it is essential to examine expectations and responsibilities placed on agencies, while identifying gaps and challenges as evidenced in numerous studies, inspections and evaluations.

Practice – how agencies pursue visibility and accountability

To examine responses to domestic abuse perpetrators, it is necessary to consider the agencies and practitioners that hold responsibilities for responding to domestic abuse. This helps build a foundational understanding of the mechanisms and provisions that are used to intervene with perpetrators within local authorities and provide insights into the actual practices implemented on the ground, identifying where gaps and opportunities exist. Additionally, it helps establish

a framework for roles and expectations to measure against, allowing for a better understanding of the empirical evidence presented in subsequent chapters.

In the UK, responding to domestic abuse involves efforts by 13 departments and bodies across the government (NAO, 2025). Many of these hold significant strategic roles including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Ministry of Housing, the Department of Education, NHS England and the Home Office who leads the government's response on VAWG (*ibid.*). However, the government's approach to the resourcing and prioritisation of perpetrator work has historically fostered tensions between victim and perpetrator services.

Tensions between victim and perpetrator services

Domestic abuse practice has long focused on supporting and protecting victims and children with minimal attention given to perpetrators (Hilder and Freeman, 2016). The development of perpetrator programmes in the late 1970s (Lila and Gilchrist, 2023) created some tensions for feminist advocates who expressed several concerns around this (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). A prominent concern was around resources being diverted away from victims and children to fund perpetrator programmes (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Those working in victim advocacy services express concerns around having to share the scarce resources available to victims with perpetrator services emphasising that funding such work is important but should not detract from victim services (Morrison et al, 2019). Further concerns surrounding interventions with perpetrators include the potential for such work to exacerbate the harm experienced by victims and children (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Within multi-agency settings, tensions arise in balancing victim safety with perpetrator-focused interventions highlighting how increasing accountability for perpetrators can impact on safeguarding and risk matters (Davies, 2018). For instance, practitioners expressed apprehensions around victim

safety when a new approach was implemented that involved sending warning letters to perpetrators (Davies and Biddle, 2017). Additionally, concerns may exist around the potential for perpetrator interventions to give victims false expectations around their capacity for change as well the possibility that perpetrators may shift their behaviours to more subtle forms of abuse that are less likely to be identified by agencies (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015).

The agencies

In examining the response of local authorities to perpetrators, the study focuses on agencies that engage with domestic abuse in their day-to-day operations as well as those that play a role in multi-agency systems designed to respond to domestic abuse. This section incorporates analysis of prevalence data where available, as well as relevant guidance used to inform practice, while also identifying gaps or challenges that impede effective responses. The primary focus is on England and Wales, which often share similar legislation, guidance and processes. However, references are made to practices in other jurisdictions to provide comparative insights and address potential gaps in existing UK literature. The Home Office's (2022) statutory guidance is extensively referenced as it provides critical information regarding the duties placed on the various agencies involved in addressing this complex issue. This guidance emphasises the need for agencies to work in ways that hold perpetrators accountable (Home Office, 2022). Many of the agencies outlined in this guidance play a key role in both single and multi-agency efforts. Where possible, agency duties are analysed in relation to the goals of visibility and accountability.

Police

The police play a critical role in responding to domestic abuse and holding perpetrators accountable within the CJS. Despite fewer than one in five victims reporting incidents to law

enforcement (DAC, 2025a), the volume of domestic abuse-related offences remains substantial. In the year ending March 2023, the police recorded 5.5 million offences, with 889,918 flagged as domestic abuse-related (Home Office, 2023a; ONS, 2023). This represents 16.2% of all recorded crimes. Additionally, approximately 24% of reported violent crimes are linked to domestic abuse (HMICFRS, 2019). Within multi-agency settings, the police often contribute more referrals to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) than most other agencies (Steel et al, 2011) as well as undertake a large proportion of actions (Robinson, 2006).

When responding to domestic abuse incidents, the police are guided by a positive action duty which frequently requires the arrest of the perpetrator when such action is deemed necessary and proportionate (College of Policing, 2018). Officers must assess reasonable grounds for suspicion to carry out an arrest, while non-arrests must be justified (LSCP, n.d.). Challenges can arise when the identity of the victim and perpetrator are unclear or when both parties make allegations against one another (College of Policing, 2018; Hester, 2012). Guidance available to the police around this emphasises the importance of conducting a comprehensive assessment to identify the primary perpetrator, rather than relying solely on visible injuries (College of Policing, 2018; Home Office, 2022). Ultimately, officers are advised to contextualise any incident within the known history and the relevant patterns of behaviours to form a more holistic picture (HMICFRS, 2019).

Beyond arrests, the police may impose bail conditions, remove perpetrators to prevent breaches of peace or seek notices and orders to restrict perpetrator actions (College of Policing, 2018). Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the police will implement new Domestic Abuse Protection Notices (DAPNs) and Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) to replace

existing Domestic Violence Protection Notices (DVPNs) and Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs). These new measures will be piloted in select areas to evaluate their effectiveness (Home Office, 2024b). DAPNs will provide immediate victim protection for 48 hours, while DAPOs will allow greater flexibility in duration and applications can be made by the police, victims, and specified third parties (ibid.). Prohibitions and requirements, such as participation in behaviour change programmes, electronic monitoring or mental health assessments can also be imposed on perpetrators under these orders (ibid.).

The measures highlighted here outline the critical role that the police play in addressing perpetrators, carrying numerous responsibilities and duties while also having access to sanctions that can aid in achieving legal accountability.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

The CPS plays an important role in holding perpetrators accountable. It is actively involved in domestic abuse cases at various stages, beginning with advising the police during early investigations, followed by case preparation and courtroom presentation (Home Office, 2022). Data for April to June 2024 shows that the CPS received 56,423 police referrals, with 19,044 - approximately one third - related to domestic abuse (CPS, 2024a). The CPS makes critical decisions regarding whether to charge perpetrators and whether cases proceed to court (LSCP, n.d.). Although the CPS does not determine guilt, it is responsible for bringing cases before a judge, magistrates, or jury (Home Office, 2022). In court, a CPS prosecutor will prosecute these criminal cases on behalf of the state against the defendant, meaning they argue cases brought forward against perpetrators (ibid.). Collaborating closely with the police, the CPS aims to present strong cases to ensure accountability through criminal justice processes. Their mandate is to “inform, support, and serve victims and witnesses to help secure and deliver justice”

(Home Office, 2022: 112). Guidance is available for CPS prosecutors on handling domestic abuse cases, which are designated as a top priority within the CJS (CPS, 2024b).

Although the CPS may not operate directly within other multi-agency systems outside of the CJS framework, their work influences how well these systems function. Decisions made by the CPS can either facilitate or hinder the visibility and accountability of perpetrators, not only within the CJS but also beyond as this study demonstrates.

Prison and Probation

Remaining within the framework of criminal justice responses, it is important to consider the role of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). An important aspect of their role is supervising court-issued sentences in both community and custodial settings as well as supporting offenders to comply with conditions and requirements, including those related to domestic abuse (Home Office, 2022). A report by the MoJ and HMPPS (2023) indicated that 42% of those on prison and probation caseloads are domestic abuse offenders, though separate prevalence figures for each setting are lacking.

HMPPS has published a Domestic Abuse Policy Framework to guide practitioners in managing domestic abuse cases. This framework provides protocols for identification, assessment, risk management, and rehabilitation of perpetrators (HMPPS and MoJ, 2020). The aim of this guidance is to support practitioners around reducing domestic abuse reoffending rates, reducing risks of serious harm caused by perpetrators and offering interventions that can support rehabilitation such as behaviour change programmes (Home Office, 2022). As such, following this guidance can support practitioners in working towards effective accountability for perpetrators. Accredited programmes that HMPPS can refer perpetrators to include the

Building Better Relationships (BBR) programme which is designed for men who have committed domestic abuse within heterosexual intimate relationships (HMPPS and MoJ, 2020). Additionally, the guidance encourages practitioners to be curious, inquisitive, and analyse risk using a multitude of sources (*ibid.*). Such guidance can help increase the visibility of perpetrators' actions by ensuring that practitioners ask the right questions and produce more comprehensive and accurate assessments as a result.

Perpetrators can be managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) which facilitate collaboration between police, probation and prison services to assess and manage high-risk offenders (MoJ, 2022). MAPPA's aim is to facilitate information sharing between agencies to risk assess and manage the most serious sexual and violent offenders (Taylor and Yakeley, 2019). As of March 2023, the cohort of individuals managed under all MAPPA categories⁴ is 91,040 individuals (MoJ, 2023). However, it is not possible to determine how many of these are domestic abuse perpetrators as such data does not appear to be collected or recorded. Guidance on MAPPA issued in 2018 emphasises the need to consider domestic abuse perpetrators under Category 3 if they are not already managed under Categories 1 or 2 (MoJ, 2023). MAPPA numbers increased in recent years which some attribute to implementation of this new guidance (*ibid.*). However, without the availability of specific data on domestic abuse offenders, it is not possible to confirm this. This has direct implications for

- Category 1 - sexual offenders subject to notification requirements.
- Category 2 - violent offenders who have been sentenced to twelve months or more in custody or a hospital or guardianship order.
- Category 3 - other dangerous offenders who have been cautioned for or convicted of an offence which indicates they are capable of causing serious harm and the case requires multi-agency management.
- Category 4 - terrorist or terrorist-risk offender.

visibility of perpetrators within MAPPA processes and makes it more challenging to assess the effectiveness of MAPPA in achieving accountability.

Despite this recent guidance, gaps remain in relation to managing domestic abuse perpetrators under MAPPA with various reviews, studies, and inspections suggesting MAPPA processes remain underused in cases of domestic abuse (Hadjimatheou and Hamid, 2024). A 2021 HMICFRS inspection asked police forces to identify their five highest risk perpetrators and of the 40 named, only three were managed under MAPPA. Similarly, a 2022 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (CJJI) found that 71% of domestic abuse cases that probation practitioners identified as high or very high-risk were not registered under MAPPA. The 2023 National MAPPA Research raises additional concerns, noting that 52% of offenders deemed suitable for MAPPA but who had been declined by probation were domestic abuse perpetrators (Mann and Lundrigan, 2023). This is indicative of an overrepresentation of domestic abuse offenders in the subgroup of those rejected for MAPPA, signifying a minimisation of risks and reinforcing their invisibility. Finally, a report on domestic homicides and suspected victim suicides between 2020-2023 found that only 10% of suspects had been managed by the police or probation at any point (Hoeger et al, 2024).

These studies consistently reveal the persistent invisibility of perpetrators, particularly those who pose the greatest levels of risk and harm. Despite these findings and their considerable implications for practice, the issues remain largely unaddressed with limited accountability placed on these agencies to deliver on the recommendations made in these reports (Respect, 2024). Although intervention frameworks exist within HMPPS, many high harm perpetrators remain outside of their scope, limiting the system's capacity to hold these individuals accountable.

Courts – criminal, civil and family

Domestic abuse cases can be addressed under both criminal and civil law, with hearings occurring in various courts. Criminal cases are typically heard in Magistrates' or Crown Courts, depending on the severity of the offence (CPS, 2011). Despite the existence of legislation and processes that can hold perpetrators legally accountable, data indicates alarmingly low conviction rates, currently standing at 5% (DAC, 2025a). Moreover, with fewer than one in five victims reporting abuse to the police (Davies et al, 2024), many perpetrators remain invisible from these systems.

Civil law matters are dealt with at civil and family courts (Home Office, 2022). These also play an important role in tackling domestic abuse as applications for protective orders are discussed at these courts (IDAS, n.d.). Orders are typically imposed on perpetrators to prohibit certain actions and can be key in holding perpetrators accountable for their behaviours. However, it appears that such orders often carry little weight with breaches not sufficiently acted upon by the police (Speed and Richardson, 2022). Moreover, in instances where the police respond appropriately, cases may not be pursued by the CPS (Hester et al, 2008). As a result, it is evident that these three layers of the system - the police, CPS, and the courts, do not function effectively in a manner that can lead to meaningful accountability for perpetrators.

Family courts hear both public and private law proceedings which normally involve disputes over child arrangements (Home Office, 2022). As such, these courts play a pivotal role in tackling domestic abuse, particularly in relation to reducing harm and impacts on children. An MoJ report identified systemic minimisation of domestic abuse in private law children's cases, linking this to a 'pro-contact culture' that prioritises perpetrators' contact with children

(Barnett, 2020). Courts were found to place the burden on victims and children to comply, while having “minimal expectations on perpetrators of abuse to change their behaviour” (ibid.: 8). These minimal expectations of perpetrators, coupled with burdens placed on victims, are common symptoms of a lack of visibility and accountability for perpetrators. In such contexts, practice focuses on what victims are required to do while perpetrators remain absent and unseen with very little expected of them, signifying no accountability.

Overall, the three court systems - criminal, civil and family - demonstrate practices that remain heavily focused on victims while leaving perpetrators invisible and with insufficient accountability imposed on them. These courts do not actively engage in multi-agency processes but the outcomes they produce have a significant impact on how other agencies can work towards visibility and accountability.

Children’s Social Care

When exploring domestic abuse, one cannot neglect the experiences of children raised in these environments or the ways in which children’s social care intervenes. It is estimated that one in five children are exposed to domestic abuse in the UK (NSPCC, n.d.). Social workers report domestic abuse as the most common risk factor present in their casework (Home Office, 2022). The proportion of children’s social care cases where domestic abuse is a factor is high, but figures vary. While one study estimated this to be 64% (Wickers, 2019), other reports indicate figures as high as 90% (Collinson and Kendall, 2024). Despite the high prevalence of domestic abuse in their caseloads, training for social workers on this issue is often insufficient. An issue that has been repeatedly highlighted by those working within the sector (Hester, 2011; DAC, 2024; DAC 2025b).

Children's social care practitioners play a vital role within the multi-agency systems that tackle domestic abuse and a fundamental element of their work involves partnership working with other agencies such as the police, education, and health (Home Office, 2022). These responsibilities are more imperative now than ever as children have been recognised as victims in their own rights under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (*ibid.*). Guidance around intervening in cases of children living with domestic abuse suggests key responsibilities for practitioners - protect children, support victims in safeguarding themselves and children from abuse, hold perpetrators accountable and provide them with opportunities to change (LSCP, n.d.). Home Office guidance for this agency stresses the need to ensure perpetrator accountability as well as recognise how perpetrators can manipulate practitioners and systems (Home Office, 2022). Furthermore, the guidance highlights the importance of ensuring that accountability for the harm is not placed on victims (*ibid.*). Practice also needs to shift the focus onto perpetrators, ensuring they remain visible and are held accountable (Ofsted et al, 2017). Issues around this area of practice have been highlighted time and time again. In fact, much of the literature on the invisibility of perpetrators, although very limited, focuses on children's social care responses and on perpetrators who are fathers (Fish et al, 2009; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013).

Children's social care responses to domestic abuse are critical, not only because social workers can support and protect children, but also because they can play an important role in directly addressing perpetrators. However, it is evident that a significant gap remains in their ability to make perpetrators visible and hold them accountable in meaningful ways. Moreover, repeated national calls for improved training for social workers underscores this as a systemic issue requiring more than simply enhancing the practice of one social worker at a time.

Adult Social Care

Adult social care focuses on supporting vulnerable adults and responding to safeguarding concerns related to them. Guidance on domestic abuse responses within adult social care predominantly addresses victims, with limited information on managing perpetrators or holding them accountable. Likewise, resources are directed towards the care and support needs of victims whose additional needs heighten their vulnerability to abuse (Home Office, 2022). Responding to domestic abuse is considered a central component of adult social care practice, but research reveals a gap in social workers' understanding of the role they can play in such cases and a lack of suitable training that prepares them for this work (Robbins et al, 2016).

A relevant document from the Local Government Association (LGA) and Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) emphasises the need to conduct thorough risk assessments in domestic abuse cases and the role that specialist perpetrator programmes can play in mitigating risks and providing opportunities for behavioural change (LGA and ADASS, 2015). Furthermore, the guidance highlights the importance of practitioners clearly communicating the unacceptability of abuse and perpetrators' accountability for their actions as well as the need to undergo specialist training prior to assessing or intervening with perpetrators (ibid.).

While adult social care can play an important role in addressing additional needs and safeguarding concerns in relation to perpetrators, research shows that the application of this in practice is limited. This study offers further evidence as to the invisibility and lack of accountability of perpetrators within this agency, highlighting a gap that remains overwhelmingly unaddressed in how guidance and policy are structured to inform this work.

Housing

Housing providers play an important role in addressing domestic abuse. Many resources and strategies exist to address the housing needs of perpetrators, guiding practitioners to act against them due to their behaviours (Home Office, 2022). However, Housing's role is often mostly acknowledged in relation to their responses to victims with housing needs. Data from 2020-2021 indicates that domestic abuse was the primary cause of homelessness or the threat of homelessness in 12% of cases (ibid.). Housing providers are positioned in a unique role that enables them to recognise and respond to domestic abuse, particularly as concerns may come to their attention in the earlier stages of the abuse (ibid.). Nonetheless, a report by SafeLives shows that there is a tendency for housing providers to misidentify domestic abuse as issues of anti-social behaviour (ibid.). Guidance for housing practitioners encourages the use of professional curiosity, even when domestic abuse is not immediately apparent (ibid.).

Henderson (2019) developed a 'Perpetrator Management Toolkit' to guide housing practitioners in effectively engaging with perpetrators and holding them accountable. This toolkit emphasises strategies such as reviewing tenancy agreements that permit eviction on the grounds of domestic abuse, issuing injunctions with requirements to attend perpetrator programmes, and adhering to the Housing Act 1988's provisions on discretionary grounds for possession (Henderson, 2019). Despite the availability of this suite of tools, research indicates that many housing practitioners are unaware of or do not implement them (ibid.). One study, which involved conducting surveys with practitioners and surveys and interviews with victims, found significant gaps in relation to addressing perpetrators, including 70% of practitioners being unaware they can act against perpetrators, 35% feeling that this was not part of their role, and an overall limited understanding of perpetrators' use of fear and intimidation as tactics (Scottish Women's Aid, 2017).

While guidance and frameworks are available to housing agencies to intervene with perpetrators, significant gaps persist. With practitioners feeling unable to respond as well as believing this to be outside of their role, it is clear why housing responses continue to reveal issues in achieving visibility and accountability.

Health

Health practitioners are deemed to be well-placed to respond to domestic abuse. In many cases, they are more likely to interact regularly with every member of the household, often hold positions of trust and their support is likely to be accessed at times of vulnerability (Home Office, 2022). In several reports investigating domestic homicides, health practitioners have been highlighted as holding a significant role and as having the best chance to take action (*ibid.*). Guidance from the Home Office assigns the responsibility of addressing and preventing domestic abuse to all health practitioners (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) established a Quality Standard for Domestic Abuse, highlighting the need for health practitioners to identify and support victims while referring perpetrators to specialised services (NICE, 2016).

Despite the availability of such guidance for health practitioners, practice often falls short of these aspirations. Reviews frequently reveal inadequate recording and information sharing among health providers, attributing this to factors such as insufficient training, time constraints, and concerns over perpetrators having access to recorded information (Home Office, 2022). Further studies also highlight gaps in how health practitioners respond to domestic abuse perpetrators. Calcia et al (2021) conducted a review examining the experiences of perpetrators accessing health services. Their findings indicate that several barriers exist in relation to

facilitating disclosures from perpetrators, including lack of trust in health practitioners' ability to address the abuse and fear of consequences generated by engaging with agencies (Calcic et al, 2021). Conversely, factors that facilitate disclosure included feeling listened to as well as receiving offers of emotional and practical support from health practitioners (*ibid.*). A literature review by Schalk and Fernandes (2024) highlights significant gaps in the ability of hospital practitioners to effectively identify and respond to perpetrators. The focus in hospital settings often centres on screening victims, while perpetrators remain "absent from the conversation" (Schalk and Fernandes, 2024: 3406). This review found no formal processes for addressing perpetrators, leading to inconsistent practices dependent on individual practitioners' motivation and capability. This results in numerous missed opportunities for engagement with perpetrators and reveals challenges such as intentional inaction and overlooking abuse indicators (*ibid.*).

While health providers and practitioners hold a pivotal role in working with families and responding to their needs, practice shows that responses to perpetrators are limited. Several factors contribute to these issues, including poor documentation practices and a lack of appropriate training. More work is needed to ensure that these agencies remain actively engaged in responding to perpetrators in ways that achieve visibility and accountability.

Education

Educational institutions, such as schools and colleges, occupy a crucial role in the early identification of concerns related to domestic abuse and in providing necessary support (Home Office, 2022). Practitioners in these settings are mandated to make immediate referrals to children's social care upon learning of a child who has experienced harm or is at risk of harm (*ibid.*). School and colleges are required to have a designated safeguarding lead responsible for

coordinating with external agencies, including children's social care and the police, as well as fulfilling safeguarding duties (*ibid.*).

Guidance on working with perpetrators within education settings is minimal and difficult to locate. Much of the resources focus on supporting children and young people and understanding the impact that domestic abuse can have on them. However, it is important to note that the gap in guidance on responding to perpetrators is substantial, particularly as schools and colleges can serve as venues which perpetrators may use as part of the abuse. Many cases show patterns of behaviour where perpetrators cause significant disruptions to a child's education and their social and support networks (DAC, 2025b). Additionally, education settings can be spaces where abuse is taking place between young people (Home Office, 2022). The existing literature does not adequately outline what specific guidance is available to education practitioners to address these concerns. A recent report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) highlights the importance of education responses to children and young people who experience domestic abuse (DAC, 2025b). It further emphasises the need to intervene with perpetrators and points to gaps in the availability of sufficient training for all teachers and education staff to respond to domestic abuse.

Responses to perpetrators are difficult to examine due to limited guidance, frameworks and evaluations in this area. This may be seen as evidence of perpetrators' invisibility within this sector as well as the fact that education practitioners have access to minimal support and guidance on how to hold perpetrators accountable.

Specialist services

Responses to perpetrators are often further complicated by the additional needs they may present with. Domestic abuse is rarely a phenomenon observed alone with much of the literature indicating that other factors such as mental health and substance use are often seen in conjunction, further exacerbating the presenting concerns (Dia et al, 2009). Several risk factors have been associated with male perpetration of IPV, including depression, personality disorders, anti-social behaviour, and use of alcohol and drugs (Guedes et al, 2016). High rates of mental health concerns such as depression and PTSD as well as substance use were noted among perpetrators of IPV (Shorey et al, 2012). A Home Office review into domestic homicides between 2019-2020 found that 71% of perpetrators had a need around mental health or substance use (Home Office, 2021b). Furthermore, the co-occurrence of depression and substance use have been linked to an increase in risk factors related to committing domestic homicide as well as higher number of interactions with service providers (Oliver and Jaffe, 2018). It is crucial to ensure that these issues are taken seriously as these additional needs are often associated with an increased likelihood of use of weapons by perpetrators and an escalation in the frequency and severity of abuse (Robinson, 2006).

Despite the significant data highlighting these areas of need and the clear necessity for intervention, many responses fail to address them effectively. In particular, the areas of mental health and substance use have been identified by practitioners as presenting a significant challenge and as lacking an adequate response (Davies et al, 2024).

Mental health

Several studies have indicated a high level of access to mental health services among perpetrators of domestic abuse. The Home Office review of domestic homicides for 2019-2020

found that 30% of perpetrators had mental health issues, including significant rates of depression and suicidal thoughts (Home Office, 2021b). Another review revealed that two thirds of perpetrators who had committed domestic homicides in the 186 cases sampled had accessed mental health services before the homicide (MacInnes et al, 2023). There is a notable gap in how mental health practitioners respond to perpetrators, with research suggesting that such services signpost ‘very few’ perpetrators to programmes specialising in behaviour change (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). A meta-analysis examining 207 studies on mental health and IPV argued that offering mental health support to those who perpetrate abuse is vital and that failing to address these concerns is considered a “missed opportunity to decrease potential recidivism of IPV perpetration and save lives” (Spencer et al, 2019: 7).

Research into barriers that perpetrators face in accessing mental health services is limited as most studies on access to such services focus on victims’ experiences. However, studies examining the overall responses of mental health practitioners to domestic abuse can provide some insight. In various studies, challenges in delivering effective responses have been attributed to factors such as lack of training and confidence, a perceived lack of expertise required to investigate domestic abuse, and time constraints preventing enquiry around this (Trevillion et al, 2016).

It is clear that mental health concerns are a significant issue for perpetrators. Yet, their visibility within these services is minimal. Moreover, limited interventions offered to perpetrators for these needs along with practitioners lacking the training and confidence needed to respond are indicative of inadequate efforts to achieve accountability. Given the high prevalence of these issues among perpetrators, it is crucial that services across the sector receive appropriate

training around these support needs and collaborate effectively to tackle both the domestic abuse and mental health concerns (Oliver and Jaffe, 2018).

Substance use

Substance use issues also represent a significant concern for perpetrators. Data suggests that use of substances among perpetrators is high (Oliver and Jaffe, 2018). The domestic homicide review indicated above showed alcohol and drug use by perpetrators in one third of cases (Home Office, 2021b). Research indicates that solely addressing the substance use does not effectively reduce or eliminate domestic abuse. Interventions targeting perpetrators must adopt an integrated approach that concurrently addresses substance use and the abusive behaviours themselves, ensuring both are informed by the power and control dynamics that perpetrators employ (Home Office, 2022).

Although use of alcohol and drugs coexists with IPV perpetration, there is no evidence to suggest a causal relationship (Home Office, 2022). There is no support for the idea that intoxication can cause a loss in control leading to violence as research strongly demonstrates that perpetrators exercise significant power and control in their actions, regardless of any intoxication (LSCP, n.d.). This is important to acknowledge as perpetrators have been known to use their own substance use as a justification despite an indication that they are likely to abuse at times when they are both sober and under the influence (*ibid.*). The use of substances can be considered a disinhibitory factor rather than a cause for abuse with perpetrators using this disinhibiting effect to justify their behaviour (Home Office, 2022). The notion that substance use causes domestic abuse constitutes a pervasive myth that is crucial to challenge as it remains a widely held belief by many people and, as such, is often easily used as an excuse by perpetrators (*ibid.*).

In considering substance use issues, a clear link appears in relation to accountability. Perpetrators may use substance use as an excuse for their actions and it is important that agencies do not reinforce this message as doing so risks colluding with them. Therefore, a strong understanding of power and control must be at the foundation of any substance use responses along with a recognition of how perpetrators respond with justifications that enable them to evade accountability for the abuse.

Voluntary perpetrator programmes

Many specialist services tackling domestic abuse are provided by the voluntary sector and it is essential to consider those specifically designed to target perpetrators. The most prominent example of such interventions is behaviour change programmes (Home Office, 2022). These programmes address perpetrators through group sessions that utilise cognitive behavioural and psycho-educational strategies, with an increasing emphasis in recent years on individual one-to-one work (Hilder and Freeman, 2016). Many programmes form part of a coordinated community response that involves collaborating with victim services to ensure victims receive support while perpetrators engage in behaviour change work (Oddone, 2020).

Supply and demand

In the UK, data regarding perpetrator service provision is limited. The last definitive figure on the number of perpetrator programmes in the UK dates back to 2000 and indicates that there are 30 programmes in total (Mullender and Burton, 2000). Mapping conducted by the DAC (2022) involved surveying over 500 organisations, of which 36% indicated they offer some form of behaviour change interventions – suggesting a figure of approximately 180 organisations. The report concludes that despite national strategies underscoring the

importance of behaviour change interventions, the reality of funding and provision of services does not align with this (DAC, 2022).

Data around the demand for interventions and service provision for perpetrators is also lacking. The absence of national perpetrator data makes it impossible to accurately determine the level of service provision required which has significant implications on commissioning interventions (Respect, 2024). While agencies acknowledge that more funding for perpetrator services is needed, they are unable to make a more accurate assessment around the demand as they often rely on ONS victim data which does not offer a reliable measure (*ibid.*). This is exacerbated by the fact that no data can be obtained from statutory agencies as they also do not collect data around their engagement and interventions with perpetrators (*ibid.*). It is evident that the limitations in data create gaps in our understanding of both the supply and demand for perpetrator programmes. Without such data, it is difficult to measure the availability of interventions and their effectiveness in terms of perpetrator visibility and accountability.

Access and resourcing

Data indicates that a very small proportion of perpetrators access these programmes. A 2020 report estimated that out of approximately 400,000 medium and high-risk perpetrators in England and Wales, less than 1% accessed specialist behaviour change interventions (Drive Partnership, 2020). The DAC (2022) report found that only 7% of perpetrators whose victims wanted them to engage in behaviour change services were able to access this. The report described current provision as ‘patchy’ and made a recommendation for scaling up funding of behaviour change interventions (DAC, 2022). In response to the DAC’s report, the government asserted that efforts were already underway with initial funding for perpetrator interventions set at £7 million in 2020 and subsequently increased to £75 million over a three-year period

starting in 2021-2022 dedicated to interventions, evaluation and research (HM Government, 2023). However, a further report by the DAC still indicates that concerns around interventions for perpetrators within the community remain, describing these as inconsistent and indicative of a ‘postcode lottery’ (DAC, 2025a).

Evaluating their effectiveness

Despite perpetrator programmes being an option for several decades now, evidence around ‘what works’ remains an area characterised by “perplexity and contention” (Hilder and Freeman, 2016: 273). Up until the last decade or so, much of the research on perpetrator programmes had been carried out in North America and information on how to apply these findings to different cultures and within different legal systems was lacking (Hamilton et al, 2012). The Project Mirabal evaluation argues that research often has a narrow focus on what constitutes change and is often focused on *whether* perpetrators change as opposed to *how* and *why* change is achieved (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). Overall, the body of literature examining perpetrator interventions and the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes is still limited (Lila and Gilchrist, 2023; Morran, 2013) and it is clear that “we do not yet know what works best, for whom, and under what circumstances” (Akoensi et al, 2012: 1220).

Guidance for perpetrator programmes

A recent effort to improve practice around the delivery of perpetrator programmes is evident in the development of practice guidelines to support the commissioning and implementation of such programmes. These guidelines established seven key standards to enhance effectiveness:

1. Prioritising the safety of victims and children in all interventions.
2. Integrating interventions within a coordinated community response.

3. Holding perpetrators accountable while treating them with respect and offering opportunities for change.
4. Providing appropriate interventions tailored to individuals at the right time.
5. Ensuring equitable interventions that consider intersecting protected characteristics.
6. Supporting and training staff involved in delivering interventions.
7. Monitoring and evaluating interventions to enhance practice and knowledge.

(Home Office, 2023b)

Behaviour change programmes can play an important role in making perpetrators visible and accountable. However, issues remain regarding a significant lack of data that makes it challenging to measure supply and demand. Funding for these services remains limited and there are issues in terms of their accessibility, with most perpetrators never engaging with a programme. This raises the question of how visible they are to such programmes. Evidence around their effectiveness at achieving accountability and changes in behaviour is also limited. Nevertheless, recent efforts to establish practice standards for programmes can help build a more robust evidence base to rely on for the design and delivery of these programmes.

Conclusion

Despite the significant efforts noted in theory, policy and practice within this field, it is evident that substantial gaps remain in interventions aimed at perpetrators and what they can achieve in relation to visibility and accountability. This review has illustrated how theoretical frameworks explaining perpetration can either aid or hinder visibility and accountability. Moreover, it has shown how policy has gradually shifted towards prioritising accountability, although still largely focused on legal accountability with other forms of accountability only

addressed in more recent strategies. Regarding practice, accountability is clearly defined as a central goal for all agencies. However, research consistently highlights this to be a gap characterised by limited engagement with perpetrators and a lack of efforts dedicated towards changing behaviours and reducing harm. Visibility presents a greater challenge, with minimal guidance available and no clear evidence of systemic efforts towards improving the visibility of perpetrators.

The disconnect

It appears that challenges exist and persist in bridging the gap between theory, policy and effective practice. What the existing literature tells us about visibility and accountability is at times limited, leaving much to be desired in terms of a better understanding of what needs to happen with perpetrators and how to achieve it. The disconnect between these three areas is evident in many ways.

Despite the presence of wide-ranging theories and policies, practice remains fraught with challenges and obstacles. Theories that should serve as a foundation for understanding and addressing domestic abuse are not always reflected in practice. For instance, feminist theory, though widely accepted, is not fully integrated into policy and practice as evidenced by the gender neutrality of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and in critiques of the CJS's patriarchal nature. Furthermore, theories that highlight the importance of prevention and early intervention, as indicated in social learning theory and our understanding of ACEs, are largely overlooked as practice continues to be reactive rather than proactive.

Government policies and frameworks are frequently produced but rarely subjected to rigorous evaluation. Such evaluations are critical for assessing the impact of these policies and strategies on practice, yet measurable and tangible outcomes remain limited. This gap is a key focus of the research questions that this study explores and addresses. The recent NAO report states that the Home Office has failed to lead an effective whole-systems approach to fulfilling its commitments and notes the absence of evidence that suggests that learning from one strategy is being applied to the next (NAO, 2025).

Where processes and policies exist for certain agencies, they are frequently not adhered to. This is evident in gaps noted around police responses to cases of counter-allegations and the significant underutilisation of MAPPA processes to support the identification and management of domestic abuse offenders. Within systems such as the courts and children's social care, practice remains overly focus on victims and reflects victim-blaming attitudes with a lack of training being a consistent contributing factor. Other agencies such as education, housing, health and adult social care can play a valuable role in addressing perpetrators but remain largely absent with evidence of a lack of guidance or frameworks that are not adhered to. Both theory and policy consistently highlight the importance of addressing additional needs such as mental health and substance use linking these to homicides and significant exacerbations in harm. However, practice often shows minimal action is taken to address these needs.

Exacerbating these issues is the lack of perpetrator data. There is still no comprehensive local or national data on the number of perpetrators, their level of risk, how many are repeat or serial⁵ offenders, their re-offending rates, or their engagement in behaviour change programmes (both

⁵ Much debate surrounds the definitions of repeat and serial perpetrators. Some definitions describe serial perpetrators as those who offend against two or more victims, while repeat perpetrators are those who repeatedly offend against the same victim (Godfrey and Richardson, 2024).

court-mandated programmes and voluntary ones). This further signifies the difficulties in attempting to measure the realities of practice around perpetrators. This lack of data facilitates their invisibility – without knowing their numbers, it is easier to overlook them and minimise the scale of the issue. It is important to question why the lack of perpetrator data continues to be an issue despite calls within the sector to rectify this. Additionally, when data measures are proposed, they frequently rely on CJS outcomes despite evidence suggesting that most victims do not report to the police (Davies et al, 2024), demonstrating a lack of visibility for most perpetrators within these processes. Furthermore, for those who do report, the bleak reality is that only 5% of perpetrators receive a conviction (DAC, 2025a), evidencing a serious lack of legal accountability for the majority of those visible to the CJS, who, to begin with, already represent a minority.

Examining theory, policy and practice as outlined above offers insights into the gaps and challenges faced when responding to perpetrators of domestic abuse. It also helps identify what should be measured around this, although it more clearly underscores what is not being measured. This review demonstrates the importance of visibility and accountability, exploring the areas of practice where these concepts are not effectively addressed. Linking back to this study, the gaps around visibility and accountability are explored to demonstrate what they mean in practice and for practitioners, processes and systems. While some efforts to improve accountability for perpetrators can be seen in theory and policy, outcomes in practice remain elusive. Visibility is less emphasised in theory, policy and practice, leaving much more to be explored in this area. The link between these two concepts is often neglected with both terms used interchangeably and without clear distinction. With limited guidance and direction in theory, policy and practice around how to achieve visibility, what outcomes can be expected in

this regard? Additionally, does this lack of focus on visibility hinder efforts to achieve accountability, and if so, how can these challenges be addressed?

To address these questions, the thesis closely examines efforts using one London local authority as an example to trace this disconnect on the ground. The aim is to identify what prevents visibility and accountability from being at the forefront of practice despite the frameworks provided by both theory and policy. This study seeks to shed light on these issues, exploring the practical implications of perpetrator-focused practice and what this approach means for those working towards improved visibility and accountability.

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Chapter 1: Examining perpetrator visibility and accountability and the role of language through a gendered lens

Introduction

Globally, it is estimated that one in three women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime (WHO, 2021), with the figure across England and Wales reported to be one in four (Drive Partnership, 2020). For each of these women, there is a perpetrator causing this harm. Yet, statistics around perpetrators of domestic abuse are often limited or lacking from the public discourse. Perpetrators remain hidden beneath the surface of our society invisible from significant conversations, including those in the media or at practitioner discussions within the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector. In recent years, significant efforts have been made to improve the protection of victims of domestic abuse, but perpetrator interventions and efforts to hold them accountable remain neglected and overlooked (Robinson and Clancy, 2021). Data produced by Respect suggests that there are approximately 400,000 perpetrators responsible for the medium and high-risk cases across England and Wales with a quarter of high-harm perpetrators known to be serial offenders (Drive Partnership, 2020). However, less than 1% of these individuals receive any form of specialist intervention to address their behaviours (*ibid.*). The lack of data and focus on perpetrators coupled with minimal interventions targeting their behaviours, reflects a significant gap in both the visibility and accountability of perpetrators.

Efforts to address domestic abuse, whether through governmental strategies or in relation to services provided by the statutory or voluntary sectors, have often focused on victims. This focus is evident not only in relation to interventions offered to tackle the abuse but also in the

framing of responsibility and accountability for the abuse. A government inspection of agencies responding to domestic abuse, including children's social care, health, police and probation, found that practitioners placed too much focus on the victim as the only solution rather than attempting to engage with perpetrators to stop the abuse from occurring (Ofsted et al, 2017). The report warned that this imposes high costs on victims and children, as well as to the public purse, suggesting that "change must start with a more systematic focus on perpetrators' behaviour" (ibid.: 8). Furthermore, a victim-focused approach hinders the ability to hold perpetrators accountable or to deter them from continuing their abuse towards current and future victims (Drive Partnership, 2020). Lacking a focus on perpetrators has also presented the sector with serious challenges in relation to engaging with them and tracking them across agencies and systems. To address domestic abuse effectively, systems need to focus on those who perpetrate this type of abuse, otherwise we "fail to go to the heart of the problem" (Feresin et al, 2018: 512).

This chapter examines the concepts of visibility and accountability in relation to perpetrators of domestic abuse, alongside the challenges that impede progress towards these objectives. The analysis centres on the network of agencies routinely engaged in responding to domestic abuse. These include, but are not limited to, police, probation, social care, housing, health, education, and specialist domestic abuse services such as those delivering behaviour change programmes. The focus is specifically on the functioning of these systems within the context of England and Wales. In this examination, the chapter adopts a gendered lens to understanding the challenges in responding to perpetrators, particularly how they contribute to victim-blaming attitudes and practices that disproportionately impact female victims. It also explores the pivotal role that language plays in facilitating or obstructing efforts to achieve visibility and accountability. Central to this discussion is an analysis of the term 'perpetrator', considering arguments for

and against the use of this label and its practice implications. This analysis considers longstanding feminist debates that address this issue, and the tensions, uncertainties and ethical considerations practitioners often face in their efforts to use appropriate language while striving to make perpetrators visible and work in ways that hold them accountable.

Despite its conceptual importance, the notion of visibility remains underexplored both in academic literature and in agency responses. In practice, visibility pertains to whether perpetrators are seen and acknowledged as central, with a consideration for how their behaviours are documented. A review of the existing literature reveals a clear gap in this area of practice which this chapter seeks to address. While there is more substantial literature on accountability, the focus is often on legal accountability. Accountability is associated with assigning responsibility which is typically reflected within practice in decision-making processes, interventions offered, and steps taken to address the abuse. Statutory guidance on domestic abuse identifies accountability as a shared responsibility across all agencies (Home Office, 2022). Notably, the guidance highlights that one of the objectives of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is to “hold perpetrators to account” (*ibid.*: 16). However, there is limited guidance around how to achieve this, particularly beyond the criminal justice system (CJS).

The interrelationship between visibility and accountability is frequently overlooked. Both terms are at times used interchangeably or conflated with insufficient critical engagement regarding their distinct meanings and implications for practice. This oversight is critical, as both objectives need to be equally and actively sought to enhance practice around perpetrators. Literature and practice fail to articulate how shortcomings in one outcome can directly impact the achievement of the other – a relationship that this chapter seeks to demonstrate. Finally, existing research on language as it links to visibility and accountability is relatively dated,

consisting primarily of works such as Penelope (1990), Lamb (1991), Lamb and Keon (1995), and Romito (2008). There remains a notable lack of recent literature examining the interconnectedness of these concepts, particularly in regard to their relationship with language and victim-blaming attitudes.

These aspects are important to examine given the persistent challenges observed in relation to achieving visibility and accountability in practice (Neale, 2017). There is a pressing need to revitalise our approach to these two notions, both as concepts and objectives, perhaps following the example of Australia where this debate has continued (e.g. Heward-Belle and Hughes, 2025; Vlais et al, 2017; Wood, 2023). A robust evidence base is needed to better understand why limited progress has been achieved in the area of perpetrator-focused work. Research continues to highlight the ongoing lack of visibility and accountability decade after decade, with little improvement indicated. A revived engagement with these objectives is needed, particularly examining why visibility and accountability are not consistently pursued or achieved and how practice can begin to address these longstanding challenges.

In conclusion, the chapter argues for the critical importance of understanding visibility and accountability within agency responses to domestic abuse. It emphasises the need to adopt a gendered approach that carefully considers the use of language to help advance these goals.

Visibility

To better understand visibility, it is useful to consider the meaning of the word. Visibility is defined as “the degree to which something is seen or known about” (Cambridge Dictionary,

n.d., a). Applying this meaning to this area of practice, it would refer to the extent to which processes and systems ‘know about’ perpetrators. This may include knowledge of their patterns of behaviours, the risks they pose and to whom, as well as their individual needs. This is crucial for domestic abuse responses as being able to see an issue clearly enables a more effective response to it, as is shown throughout this chapter.

The existing literature offers limited in-depth analysis of the concept of visibility as it pertains to perpetrators. Much of the focus on visibility centres instead on victims’ experiences, for example the visibility of male victims (e.g. Hine et al, 2020), children experiencing domestic abuse (e.g. Callaghan, 2015) or victims with certain protected characteristics (e.g. Donovan and Barnes, 2019; Wydall, 2023). Where perpetrator visibility is addressed, the literature tends to focus predominantly on the context of children’s social care with studies highlighting the persistent invisibility of perpetrators within the work of this agency (Fish et al, 2009; Neale, 2017; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013).

The invisibility of perpetrators is further evidenced in the academic literature itself. A review of 177 articles related to children’s experiences of domestic abuse revealed an interesting finding around this. Callaghan (2015) found that the word ‘mother’ was the 5th most frequently mentioned word and ‘maternal’ ranked 38th. Meanwhile, ‘father’ ranked 147th and ‘paternal’ was entirely absent (Callaghan, 2015). These findings highlight a persistent emphasis on the role and experiences of victims, alongside an absence of perpetrators. This is reflective of a broader trend, in both academic research and in professional practice, where victims remain “frequently targeted” leaving perpetrators “almost absent” (*ibid.*: 14).

Turning to the CJS, an area of practice where one might reasonably expect perpetrators to be most present, it is evident that invisibility remains a concern. Despite the CJS's critical role in addressing domestic abuse, visibility is constricted to a very small proportion of perpetrators, those deemed most dangerous and those who use physical violence (Neale, 2017). This results in the remaining perpetrators, who are the majority, being overlooked by this system that should serve to hold perpetrators accountable and prevent further harm. Several inspections in recent years have highlighted gaps in probation's response to domestic abuse, indicating systemic failures in identifying and managing high-risk perpetrators. Notably, concerns have been raised around individuals remaining hidden from this agency with the abuse they perpetrate being minimised or overlooked within their interventions (CJJI, 2022; HMICFRS, 2021; Mann and Lundrigan, 2023). More concerning is the finding that only 10% of individuals suspected of committing domestic homicide had been managed by the police or probation (Hoeger et al, 2024). These findings underscore a critical gap in the visibility of perpetrators within CJS agencies.

There is comparatively little attention given to the work of other agencies and practitioners in relation to visibility. This is noted within both the literature and in practice guidance for agencies. Having conducted a review, it appears much of the recent guidance highlighting the importance of visibility emerges from Australia. For example, Vlais et al (2017) underscore the need for all agencies to enhance perpetrator visibility, both in case analysis and management, advocating for how this approach can improve interventions for all family members and foster stronger alliances with victims. Similarly, Wood (2023) explores how perpetrators remain unseen in practice and calls for systems to keep perpetrators 'in view' to tackle this, stressing that many agencies have contact with perpetrators and can contribute to identifying them and

intervening with them at earlier stages of the abuse. Comparable calls for changes to happen in the UK context are needed.

Visibility in data and documentation

The role of documentation and the availability of information is a critical aspect to consider within visibility. One of the most effective ways that agencies can tackle manipulation and control by perpetrators is by ensuring their actions are thoroughly recorded and acknowledged in documentation (Mandel et al, 2020). However, in practice information is held and shared on victims, while perpetrators remain unseen (Davies et al, 2024). It is therefore essential to consider the practice implications of this and the need to reorient documentation practices to reflect a greater understanding of and emphasis on perpetrators in order to enhance their visibility.

Practice consequences of invisibility

This continued invisibility of perpetrators within practice carries significant consequences both for victims and frontline responses aimed at perpetrators. It enables perpetrators to manipulate victims, children, and others in their networks (Neale, 2017). Crucially, it also facilitates their manipulation of agencies and practitioners with the lack of comprehensive information around their behaviours leaving systems vulnerable to this (Mandel et al, 2020). If systems fail to recognise perpetrators and their actions, they become more susceptible to false claims of harm they make against victims (*ibid.*). Examples of this practice are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, presenting data which illustrates the impact of such failures in recasting victims as perpetrators without efforts to rectify or correct these misrepresentations. Ultimately, systems fail to see such actions as abuse tactics which then exacerbates the tendency of agencies to frame their interventions in ways that focus solely on victims.

Achieving visibility

Enhancing perpetrator visibility is essential for a range of reasons. Visibility is crucial in disrupting patterns of abuse and enabling systems to focus on their actions rather than disproportionately focusing on victims (Kelly and Garner, 2023). It can ensure that policy and practice are better aligned with feminist goals, working to challenge practices that perpetuate domestic abuse towards women (Heward-Belle et al, 2019). Furthermore, it can serve to “magnify the previously invisible and amplify the previously inaudible” as well as shift the focus onto assessing their risks and presenting them with opportunities for change (*ibid.*: 380). This means adopting a stronger focus on ensuring perpetrators remain central in agency responses, with their actions and the harm they cause at the forefront. This approach offers more effective means for enhancing visibility which, in turn, can foster greater accountability.

Accountability

Many attempts have been made to define what accountability means. Rasmussen (2023) provides an overview of some of the most common definitions used including Braithwaite's (2006) definition of accountability as the public acknowledgment of harm caused, and Zehr's (2015), Title et al's (2002) and Umbreit and Bradshaw's (2002) definitions which include making amends and repairing harm caused. O'Mahony and Doak (2017) describe accountability as a process in which individuals acknowledge their behaviours, express remorse and engage in steps towards reconciliation. Sered (2017) proposes a similar view of what accountability is, adding a requirement for the individual to display a commitment to no longer commit similar acts in the future. When applying these definitions to practice, each

carries distinct implications. Sered's definition stands out by extending beyond the others as it explicitly considers a commitment towards behaviour change, incorporating the idea that perpetrators will cease to repeat harmful behaviours. To achieve true accountability, this definition is likely to be the most effective as one of the primary objectives of practice is to reduce future harm. Therefore, the extent to which interventions can ensure harmful actions do not recur is a crucial indicator of success in achieving accountability.

Returning to the Australian context, a recent study examining perpetrator accountability through interviews with practitioners, found that accountability remains an underdeveloped area of practice that is inconsistently defined and poorly understood (Heward-Belle and Hughes, 2025). Notably, half of those interviewed reported lacking access to policies that could guide practice aimed at achieving accountability (*ibid.*). Additionally, the study highlighted an overreliance on accountability within the CJS and perpetrator programmes, despite the fact that many perpetrators never enter these systems. This situation mirrors the current situation in the UK. Such findings underscore the critical need for a deeper understanding of accountability and to guide and inform practitioners in how to pursue it. To better understand accountability, it is important to examine two key ways in which it can be achieved or undermined - legal and moral accountability.

Legal accountability

Despite recent improvements in how the CJS responds to domestic abuse, various research suggests persistent concerns around legal accountability, especially with respect to low conviction rates. In the year 2023-2024, 851,062 domestic abuse-related incidents were recorded by the police in England and Wales, yet only 38,776 offenders - around 4.5% - received a conviction (ONS, 2024). A recent report also suggests that the current conviction

rate for domestic abuse offenders is 5% (DAC, 2025). In a review of 869 reports of intimate partner violence cases, Hester (2006) found that only 31 of the suspects received a conviction, with only four receiving a custodial sentence. These figures are evidence of the challenges that systems face in achieving legal accountability. What is more concerning is that it is widely acknowledged and accepted that the number of recorded crimes is in itself low compared to the actual prevalence of domestic abuse.

One possible explanation for the low conviction rates could be that CJS responses tend to rely on an incident-based approach which does not align with the pattern-based tactics that domestic abuse perpetrators employ (Bishop, 2016; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). Domestic abuse is best understood as a pattern of ongoing, relationship-based behaviours, in contrast to many other forms of crime which are typically characterised as isolated, single-incident events. This pattern of abusive behaviours typically unfolds over time and rarely transpires as an individual act. An important fact that legislation used to address domestic abuse fails to consider. The existing CJS legislation was developed over 150 years ago for the purpose of addressing physical violence occurring among strangers, making it unfit for the purpose of holding today's perpetrators accountable (Bishop, 2016).

Even for perpetrators who go through the CJS, there is a concern that the legislation available does not reflect the gravity or severity of their actions and does not allow for their actions to be differentiated from similar offences carried out in non-domestic settings. Within the legal system in England and Wales, there is no specific criminal offence for domestic abuse. Legislation such as Offences Against the Person Act 1861, Public Order Act 1986 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 are used for arrests, charges and convictions for perpetrators based on the offence they have committed (Hester, 2013). For example, a

perpetrator who assaults a victim could be arrested for common assault, actual bodily harm or grievous bodily harm based on the severity of the assault. This means that actions of a domestic abuse perpetrator assaulting a victim are equated with those of another individual assaulting a stranger on the streets. This fails to acknowledge repeat victimisation and power and control dynamics. The one exception to this categorisation of offences is the offence of Controlling or Coercive Behaviour which was introduced in 2015.

These constraints and difficulties that our systems face in achieving legal accountability make it even more crucial for systems to attempt to achieve accountability in other ways. One way in which this can be done is through an emphasis on moral accountability.

Moral accountability

Certain conditions must be met to determine that someone is morally accountable for their actions. One such condition is whether the individual had an obligation to refrain from engaging in an act that is morally blameworthy (Mellema, 2016). Another condition is whether the agent carrying out the action had been exercising their autonomy in doing so and had the capacity to act in this way (Talbert, 2019). When we consider the elements of power and control that are often found in domestic abuse and coercive control, it is easy for us to observe that these conditions have been met and to consider perpetrators to be morally accountable for the abuse they inflict. We know that perpetrators employ actions and threats of actions with the intention of gaining and exerting power and control over someone (United Nations, n.d.). Therefore, their actions can be viewed as deliberate and intentional. One can also argue that perpetrators ought to be expected to have acted differently and in a non-abusive way. Not doing so poses the risk of blaming other factors for their behaviour, including the victim, and assuming that the abuse was inevitable.

Several factors can play a role in hindering our ability to achieve moral accountability in relation to perpetrators of domestic abuse. Sykes and Matza (1957) explore techniques of neutralisation suggesting that offenders use these to rationalise their actions. These techniques include denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and denial of the victim which allow offenders to continue to engage in delinquent actions by alleviating moral and societal constraints (Sykes and Matza, 1957). A further technique used is the condemnation of the condemners, whereby offenders shift the focus away from their behaviours by focusing on the motivations of those who disapprove of them (ibid.). Applying this to the context of agency interventions, perpetrators may use different strategies to redirect blame and scrutiny towards agencies attempting to hold them accountable. One such tactic is evident in perpetrators' use of complaints to divert attention away from themselves and onto practitioners. For example, threatening to make complaints to agencies regarding professional conduct (Humphreys et al, 2024).

Bandura et al (1996) explore the notion of moral disengagement in relation to observing abusive and harmful acts. They propose various methods that can be used to achieve moral disengagement such as diffusing and displacing responsibility for the harm, dehumanising and blaming the victim, using euphemistic labelling and moral justification (Bandura et al, 1996). This process of 'cognitive transformation' can result in harmful actions being perceived as good actions and allow perpetrators to view themselves as faultless victims whose actions were justified, placing the blame on the victim (ibid.). This phenomenon was observed in a study examining accounts provided by perpetrators engaging in domestic abuse counselling groups which found that the men often talked about the victim as "having breached the normative moral order" (LeCouteur and Oxlard, 2010: 5). Such responses were equally evidenced during

conversations with men who had denied the abuse and those who had fully acknowledged it (ibid.).

Romito (2008) further applies Bandura et al's cognitive strategies to demonstrate how these can be employed by the public to reformulate their perception of the abusive behaviours when presented with an awareness of these acts. Romito identifies denial and legitimisation as two main strategies which are used to hide and deny the abuse, allowing individuals to reduce the moral dilemma and the dissonance that knowledge of the abuse can create (Edel, 2009). To adhere to these strategies, individuals use tools such as euphemising, dehumanising, blaming the victim, psychologising, naturalising, and separating (ibid.).

Lack of accountability and gendered victim blame

The failure to achieve accountability results in victim-blaming practices, with research suggesting that victims of crime often suffer twice, first by experiencing the criminal act itself and then by being held responsible for it (Halicki et al, 2023). In the context of domestic abuse, this is evidenced by the fact that we live in a society that responds to domestic abuse by blaming victims for the actions of perpetrators and by viewing most abuse as deserved (Lamb, 1996).

Within the CJS, legislation we rely on to achieve justice has been described as "fundamentally patriarchal" and as displaying "a deep gender bias in the way it performs such basic tasks as judging credibility and defining narrative coherence" (Conley et al, 2019: 4). This is demonstrated in research that highlights the discrepancies found in criminal justice responses towards male and female perpetrators of domestic abuse with data indicating that women are three times more likely to be arrested for domestic abuse offences than men (Hester, 2012). In the context of children's social care, mother-blaming attitudes expressed by perpetrators can

be seen as being perpetuated by agencies who similarly place responsibility on victims (Fish et al, 2009).

Several studies examining victim blame have demonstrated how female victims often bear the accountability burden. In a review of 23 studies across 61 countries analysing attitudes towards hypothetical domestic abuse scenarios, it was found that most explanations given by participants implied that the female victim was to blame (Waltermaurer, 2012). Such attitudes indicated a lack of sympathy towards victims, allowing incidents to be trivialised and to be seen as warranted which in turn enabled perpetrators to be excused and absolved from responsibility (*ibid.*). Another study examining differences in how participants assigned punishment for acts of domestic abuse found that participants were more lenient towards men when reading scenarios of cases where the abuse had been described as the shared responsibility of both the man and the woman in that relationship (Lamb and Keon, 1995). In Valor-Segura et al's (2013) review of participants' responses to domestic abuse scenarios, they found that blame was assigned based on whether a reason was given for the domestic abuse incident. Findings of this study suggest that participants were more likely to blame the female victim and exonerate the male perpetrator when no reason was provided for the incident (Valor-Segura et al, 2013). This indicates that when presented with a scenario that generates any doubt or uncertainty, people are more likely to be suspicious of women whilst allowing men the benefit of the doubt or assuming that there would have been a justifiable cause for the incident (*ibid.*). These are but a few studies amongst a vast body of literature that draws attention to the tremendous extent with which misogyny and gender double standards influence how society views blame and accountability in the context of domestic abuse.

The relationship between visibility and accountability

While the terms visibility and accountability are often used together or even interchangeably, they are distinct concepts that have different manifestations in practice. As outlined above, visibility refers to the extent to which perpetrators are seen and recognised which includes a consideration for how their actions are documented. On the other hand, accountability relates more closely to attitudes around responsibility and, by extension, blame. It is reflected in how decisions are made, the objectives of interventions and who is expected to do what in response to the abuse.

Typically, the absence of one objective, either visibility or accountability, correlates with the absence of the other. In practice, a lack of accountability often stems from a foundational lack of visibility. When perpetrators are neither identified nor acknowledged, implementing interventions that target their behaviours becomes significantly more difficult as systems fail to recognise them in the first place. For example, Kelly and Westmarland (2015) find that gaps in information gathering and a lack of relevant data, which is evidence of invisibility, hinders efforts by behaviour change programmes to provide tailored responses to perpetrators. Similarly, Davies et al (2024) highlight concerns around inadequate data recording and incomplete perpetrator histories, hindering effective collaboration across agencies and efforts to engage with perpetrators. Heward-Belle and Hughes (2025) note that when practitioners work in agencies with policies prohibiting engagement with perpetrators, perpetrators become invisible within practice which then undermines accountability efforts.

The context of children's social care further highlights the extent to which this invisibility can lead to dangerous practices. Heward-Belle et al (2019) provide examples in which practitioners

rely on victims to act as intermediaries, being tasked with passing information on behaviour change programs to perpetrators. In such cases, practitioners stated they simply do not work with perpetrators, justifying this practice of placing the burden of perpetrators engaging with services onto victims (Heward-Belle et al, 2019). This illustrates how, even when visibility is attained through agencies' awareness of these individuals as perpetrators, the inability to approach accountability effectively and safely ultimately results in practice failing to be effective.

Invisibility of perpetrators undermines accountability, with this negative consequence disproportionately affecting female victims. Ultimately, the persistent invisibility of male perpetrators contributes to agencies viewing female victims as blameworthy and focusing intervention efforts on them. Such practice can include placing expectations around what female victims should or should not do (Hamid, 2024) alongside a questioning of their decision-making, for example why they entered or remained in the relationship or how they allegedly failed to protect their children (Neale, 2017). While these victim-blaming narratives have been consistently challenged by feminist scholars, their critiques have yet to be fully integrated into professional practice (*ibid.*).

Visibility plays a critical role in ensuring accountability, a relationship that agencies must acknowledge. Achieving visibility, which can be aided by developing and maintaining accurate records, enhances decision-making processes within systems (Mandel et al, 2020). A systemic approach to visibility in which comprehensive recording and mapping of perpetrators' actions is a consistent feature can serve as a catalyst for holding perpetrators accountable for the harm they inflict (Vlais, 2024).

A lack of accountability can also perpetuate the absence of visibility. Penelope (1990) argues that “suppressing agency surrounds us with hosts of secret agents hovering invisibly at the periphery of consciousness” (Penelope, 1990: 145). This suggests that failing to hold perpetrators responsible as active agents allows them to remain unseen. Penelope further highlights this complex and crucial relationship between both goals, noting that neglecting to name the agent when describing the abuse diminishes their responsibility and hinders efforts to achieve accountability. Thereby, also evidencing how visibility impacts accountability.

Instances where accountability exists without visibility are less common and mostly occur in relation to gaps around documentation. For example, one study found that even in cases where direct engagement with perpetrators had taken place, there are issues with recording this work accurately which rendered such interventions unacknowledged (Heward-Belle et al, 2019). Despite some efforts towards accountability noted here, the lack of thorough documentation that ensures the visibility of perpetrators’ behaviours can leave systems susceptible to their exploitation and manipulation (Mandel et al, 2020). Additionally, it can leave practitioners vulnerable to complaints made by perpetrators and result in safety concerns being inadequately recorded (Humphreys et al, 2024).

For practice to be truly effective, pursuing both visibility and accountability is critical. The above examples within the literature demonstrate how achieving one without the other still reflects ineffective approaches to addressing perpetrators. It is also crucial to not conflate these two concepts and to acknowledge their distinct roles and meanings. Further research and analysis are needed to explore their differences and interconnectedness, particularly in determining whether visibility potentially serves as a precursor to accountability. Strengthening

the evidence base in this area could help shape and refine practice in ways that are more targeted, enabling a more effective approach to addressing both objectives.

One area where the connection between visibility and accountability becomes particularly evident is in the impact of language on practice. Language is a powerful tool that can tackle domestic abuse more effectively and counteract some of the challenges outlined above in relation to pursuing visibility and accountability.

The language of visibility and accountability

When considering visibility and accountability in the context of domestic abuse, it is important to reflect on their association with language. This connection becomes evident when a deeper understanding is developed of how language can hide and minimise the abuse which, in turn, facilitates “a free pass for perpetrators” resulting in a lack of accountability (Boyle, 2018: 31). In contrast, language can also serve as a powerful tool to promote both visibility and accountability.

Why language matters

Developing a good understanding of the importance of language is essential for any discipline that addresses any societal problems (Conley et al, 2019). Feminist theorists argue that language is “shaped by and shapes our world view” (Lamb and Keon, 1995: 209). Dworkin (1981) argues that men hold the power of naming in our society which allows them to define experiences and control perceptions through the use of language that reinforces male supremacy. Acts of violence can be used to enforce this power, thereby restricting women’s

ability to use language to name their own experiences while perpetuating male definitions of them (Dworkin, 1981). Moreover, language can enact and reinforce harmful norms and practices, and an awareness of this link can support our ability to prevent and diminish these harms and restructure the social world we live in (McGowan, 2019). This association is pertinent in the context of domestic abuse where we know that norms, practices and structures remain a significant challenge for how we view accountability. One example of such a challenge can be observed in the use of linguistic avoidance.

Linguistic avoidance - passivity

Lamb (1991) and Romito (2008) both explore the concept of linguistic avoidance when referring to men's abuse towards women, demonstrating how this approach is linked to the lack of perpetrator visibility and accountability. Romito's description of linguistic avoidance focuses on failure to refer to the issue as 'male violence' which serves to support patriarchal structures that enable this form of abuse and make it difficult for systems to challenge (Romito, 2008). In a study reviewing articles that refer to men's abuse towards women, Lamb (1991) found various issues with the language used to describe women's experiences which consequently led to diffusion of responsibility and difficulty in assigning accountability for the abuse. Issues identified were indicative of concerns around both visibility and accountability and included using a passive voice, describing 'the couple' as the agent, normalising the abusive act and obscuring gender aspects (Lamb, 1991).

Using a passive voice when describing the abuse often emphasises victims instead of perpetrators which can conceal perpetrators' agency and responsibility and shift blame onto victims (Halicki et al, 2023). This dynamic is reflective of how invisibility contributes to both a lack of accountability for perpetrators and responsibility being assigned to victims. In

practice, an example of this would be to say that ‘the victim was abused’ as opposed to ‘the perpetrator abused the victim’. Such vague and indirect language can mask or justify actions that would otherwise be considered inexcusable (Bandura et al, 1996). It can also serve to support society’s ability to escape from being confronted with the “brutal reality” of men’s abuse towards women, rendering these issues invisible from the discourse (Romito, 2008: 5). Research has long suggested that using this passive language allows us to reflect on “the harm that has been done, but not on the perpetrator who has caused such harm” (Lamb and Keon, 1995: 210). Moreover, a passive voice and language that obscures the role of perpetrators can suggest neutrality, “try to imply grander forces at work” and sidestep “the issue of who will be or is responsible for some action” (Penelope, 1990: 144). Further emphasising the gendered aspect of this passive approach, a study reviewing published news stories on domestic abuse found that a passive voice was more likely to be used when describing male perpetrators than female perpetrators (Frazer and Miller, 2008).

Perpetrators’ use of linguistic avoidance

This linguistic avoidance is mirrored by perpetrators in relation to how they talk about the abuse they have perpetrated. When exploring their behaviours, perpetrators use language that demonstrates denial, minimisation of the abuse, blame of the victim or justifications for their behaviours (Brandl, 2000). In a study where men were asked to speak about the abuse they perpetrated, many claimed they were unable to remember, blamed the victim for their actions or used ‘we’ statements instead of ‘I’ statements to dilute the role they played during incidents (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). This use of language as a tactic by perpetrators to evade accountability underscores the importance of counteracting their efforts and reflecting on the potential implications of practicing in ways that, inadvertently, may support these avoidance strategies.

Naming the agent - the ‘perpetrator’ label

Using an active voice to name the perpetrator of the abuse as the agent causing the harm can support efforts to overcome linguistic avoidance and improve how visibility and accountability are pursued. This can help reflect the reality that when discussing abusive behaviours committed in a domestic context, the focus should be on discussing men’s violence against women (Lamb, 1991). Lamb argues that writing actively “names the agent of the act and encourages assignment of responsibility for harm done” (ibid.: 257). Making a choice around the terminology used to refer to those who commit acts of domestic abuse is an important aspect of how naming the agent can support accountability. This can be seen by exploring the term ‘perpetrator’.

In the UK, the term perpetrator is commonly used within the VAWG sector, academic literature, and in local government strategies and responses to domestic abuse. The origin of the word can be traced back to the 1560s when it was coined to describe “one who commits or has committed” or “the one who did it” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.), with ‘it’ being “a violent or harmful act” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., b). While the term perpetrator may appear to be morally loaded, it is important to consider whether its use can support the ability to indicate moral wrongdoing and avoid neutrality. This, in turn, can play a role in supporting efforts to achieve visibility and accountability which is fundamental given the challenges outlined above. Many arguments for and against the use of the term can be found in the literature and observed in various practice settings. I critically reflect on some of these here whilst highlighting the complexities of both sides of the argument.

Differentiating domestic abuse from other types of crime

One of the advantages of using the term perpetrator is that it allows for a clear and important distinction between domestic abuse and other types of crime. In domestic abuse, the relationship between victim and perpetrator is close and complicated and similar dynamics are often not found in other types of crime (Vartabedian, 2007), a fact which should play a role in how these acts are addressed and recognised. Our understanding of how to define individuals who commit such acts should reflect what we know about coercive control, namely that it is a pattern of abuse which is rarely found in other types of offences. Conflating domestic abuse with other crimes and using the same term to describe those who commit them could hinder efforts to tackle domestic abuse effectively. For example, a theft between strangers would not involve the same dynamics as a theft between partners, where one is acting abusively towards another. Using other terms such as 'offender' to refer to the two individuals in both scenarios would risk minimising the experiences of the domestic abuse victim and would neglect to capture the pattern of power and control that can be found in the domestic abuse scenario. This, in turn, can impede the ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics and how they are used and exploited by perpetrators.

Capturing those outside of the criminal justice system

Another benefit to the use of the term perpetrator is its ability to apportion moral responsibility where legal accountability is lacking. In relation to domestic abuse, it is known that a large proportion of incidents go unreported and so when only considering reported cases, we are looking at a small fraction of the reality (Gracia, 2004). The term perpetrator allows systems to capture those who are not known to the CJS where terms such as 'criminal', 'offender' and 'suspect' are more commonly used. Additionally, many of those who become known to the police as 'suspects' never graduate onto 'offenders' or 'criminals' if cases are not progressed

through the CJS which can occur for a variety of reasons. Yet, practitioners and agencies still require a term to refer to those who are known for perpetrating abuse.

Labelling in the context of domestic abuse

In contrast to the arguments above, some may object to the use of the term perpetrator. For example, by pointing to the impact that labelling can have on reinforcing negative self-perceptions and behaviours (McNeill et al, 2012). Labelling theory explores the consequences of social labelling and suggests that when an individual is labelled as a ‘deviant’ they experience stigma associated with this label which in turn increases the likelihood of them engaging in further deviant and criminal behaviours (Bernburg, 2009). Applying this to the context of domestic abuse would suggest that by labelling someone as a perpetrator, we are inadvertently contributing to the continuation of their abusive behaviours. However, this view is too simplistic. In attempting to understand why an individual may commit a crime or a harmful act, one cannot possibly consider labelling to be the sole or, indeed, even the primary explanation for such behaviour (Becker, 2018). In the context of domestic abuse, such thinking would remove the perpetrator’s agency within the actions they are using as well as contradict the power and control dynamics that often underpin domestic abuse. It is essential that perpetrators are not excused and that they acknowledge responsibility for their actions (Lamb, 1996). Whilst labelling theory suggests that labelling may bring about “embarrassment, shame, or humiliation” (Scheff, 2019: 2), it is important to recognise the role labelling can play here in emphasising a perpetrator’s visibility, agency and accountability while also improving how society talks and thinks about domestic abuse as well those who perpetrate it.

The impact that labelling may have on perpetrators’ engagement with services designed to facilitate positive, meaningful behavioural changes needs to be considered. A recent study

found that perpetrators reported that being labelled as a perpetrator acted as a barrier to their engagement with behaviour change services, primarily due to the shame, stigma and guilt associated with the term (Harvey et al, 2024). However, the study also suggests that these concerns could be interpreted as a form of denial of their actions, further illustrating the tensions between stigma and achieving accountability. Similar concerns have been raised around the potential that the perpetrator label may have on alienating those who might otherwise be open to exploring their behaviours (Tu and Penti, 2020). Interviews with practitioners working to enhance accountability and visibility of perpetrators reveal a spectrum of perspectives on the use of the label (Kelly and Garner, 2023). While some practitioners expressed concerns around the term shutting down opportunities for engagement, others argued it opened up a space for discussions around change. Those supportive of the label also emphasised its capacity to promote clarity in language and to offer perpetrators with an invitation to take responsibility.

Labelling and young people

Specific consideration needs to be given when deliberating the impact of the perpetrator label on young people using domestic abuse and how this links to accountability. Much has been debated around the age at which a young person can be held criminally responsible for their actions (Firmin, 2017). Arguments against labelling young people focus on the long-term negative consequences that a label can have, with these often continuing into their adult lives even if the young person has already desisted from this behaviour (Vizard, 2007). Young people who are labelled based on the offences they have committed can experience stigmatisation and continuously be viewed in a negative light (Creaney, 2012). Additionally, such stigma can reduce life chances, limit opportunities and inhibit the young person from engaging positively in wider society (Deakin et al, 2020). Such concerns were echoed in interviews with

practitioners who work with young people in cases of Adolescent to Parent Violence (APV) with some expressing that the use of such labels can be more judgemental than supportive and that labelling a young person as a violent offender can restrict their potential for positive change (Miles and Condry, 2015).

In contrast, some argue that such labels can support in the early identification of these individuals which in turn could facilitate their access to services and avoid further escalation in their offending behaviour (Vizard, 2007). Failure to label effectively could hinder efforts to act appropriately to protect victims and to address a young person who poses a risk and potentially has a level of need themselves (ibid.). In addition, a study which examined the link between labelling young people and potential engagement in criminal behaviours in adult years found that labelling used within legal systems had no impact (Lee et al, 2017). Interestingly, it was the young person's perception of how their parents viewed them which was found to be associated with adult engagement in criminal behaviours.

Practice implications

The debates surrounding the use of the label, as well as alternative terminology, are further examined in Chapter 3 through the accounts of practitioners interviewed for this study. While some practitioners express views around the term perpetrator being helpful in emphasising wrongdoing and acknowledging the issue at hand, others are reluctant to use such direct or morally loaded terminology preferring the use of other terms such as 'alleged perpetrator', 'a person who has been abusive' or 'a person who has used abuse'. For many, this may seem a more comfortable choice as it avoids the risk of labelling someone as a perpetrator and the negative connotations this carries. However, this lack of clarity and definitiveness in naming the agent could be considered as depicting passivity and invisibility which, as outlined above,

could have consequences for how responsibility for the abuse is assigned. Moreover, using less active language may result in victims feeling they are not believed if their experiences are referred to as ‘alleged’.

An important element to consider is how perpetrators may make complaints to agencies when they are labelled as perpetrators or when their behaviours are named, particularly if they have not been convicted. While these complaints may prompt hesitation in practitioners and agencies in using such labels, it is important to recognise that complaints can be a tactic employed by perpetrators. These complaints can be a strategic response to practitioners who are “disrupting the status quo of invisibility and lack of accountability” (Kelly and Garner, 2023: 57). Understanding these complaints as part of perpetrators’ broader patterns of abuse can help practitioners to assess risk more effectively, prevent manipulation, and resist yielding to the pressure of such complaints.

Taking into consideration the context in which labels or terms are used can help address some of these challenges. For example, distinguishing between language used in direct work with perpetrators as opposed to language used in communication with other practitioners only can guide appropriate terminology. Assessing context can support agencies responding to domestic abuse, particularly those who intervene directly with perpetrators, to determine what terminology may be more appropriate based on potential implications for perpetrator engagement and any ramifications for the safety of the victim, worker and any others. Systems need to be cognisant of possible risks of using the term indiscriminately whenever an allegation is made. This is especially pertinent given the prevalence of false counter-allegations made by perpetrators and cases where victims have used forms of self-defence or violent resistance in response to the abuse they are experiencing. Research into female perpetration has long

suggested that women's use of violence is more likely to be attributed to violent resistance or self-defence as opposed to abuse characterised by power and control (Bouffard et al, 2008; Henning et al, 2006; Miller, 2001). Mislabelling these women as perpetrators can have severe consequences such as being referred to behaviour change programmes, losing access to victim services, and facing child custody challenges (CWJ, 2022; Henning et al, 2006). These challenges are substantiated by the findings of this study and are explored in Chapters 2 and 3. As such, we should be able to advocate for the use of the term perpetrator in some contexts without endorsing its use in all contexts, guided by our professional drive to reduce harm whilst preventing the incorrect identification of female victims as perpetrators, a process which can have grave and, at times, irreversible consequences for these victims.

Conclusion

An emphasis on greater visibility and accountability can play a critical role in improving responses to domestic abuse and confronting the victim blaming attitudes commonly found in society. It can allow practice to become centred around perpetrators, thereby making them more visible. It can also achieve some level of 'justice' particularly due to the limited legal accountability achieved through the CJS and the impunity with which men abuse women evidencing a lack of moral accountability. The language used to talk about men's violence against women and how those who perpetrate it are defined can facilitate the process of enhancing their visibility as well as assigning accountability. It is crucial for systems to find a balance between the fear of the unintended consequences of labelling and the implications that using a passive voice and not naming the agent can have on perpetrators continuing to evade our systems. Achieving this balance is undoubtedly challenging.

In practice, we see how a reluctance to respond to perpetrators can result in agencies placing too much emphasis and responsibility on victims to compensate for perpetrators' invisibility or their inability to hold them accountable. This underscores the importance of adopting approaches that prioritise perpetrator visibility and accountability, irrespective of what terms or labels agencies choose to use. Taking into consideration how men talk about their abuse in a manner that avoids taking responsibility, it is critically important to ensure that language, policies, and systems tackle this through a clear emphasis on their actions, the impacts they cause, and expectations around behaviour change. Only in doing so, can systems truly work towards making perpetrators more visible and tipping the accountability scales in favour of victims.

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Chapter 2: Perpetrator visibility and accountability in coordinated, multi-agency responses to domestic abuse

Introduction

The responses of the statutory and voluntary sectors to domestic abuse have evolved considerably over time. Earlier responses were often led by a single agency only, with minimal information sharing and collaboration between agencies (Davies, 2018). This began to shift to a more multi-agency approach which emphasised the need for a greater collaborative and integrated way of working between all the relevant agencies and sectors (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). For the UK, this was mostly observed in the 1980s when systems started to embed more coordinated responses that rely on multiple agencies to work together (Davies, 2018). Such coordination was essential for making domestic abuse practice more “comprehensive and holistic” (Davies and Biddle, 2017: 471). A key example of such processes is the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) - a forum implemented nationally to share information and create action plans for domestic abuse cases identified as high risk (Robinson, 2006). MARAC was established in response to identified gaps in the existing systems responding to domestic abuse, with the aim of effectively managing and addressing risks and needs associated with cases involving serious levels of abuse (Robinson and Tregidga, 2007).

Historically, the focus of many domestic abuse initiatives and interventions appeared to be on what support can be offered to victims and what victims needed to do to respond to the abuse (SafeLives, 2016). It was generally assumed that engaging with perpetrators directly was neither a priority nor a desirable approach. There was little confidence in the potential for this

work to have any impact on perpetrators' ability to change (Hilder and Freeman, 2016). Feminist research and activism in recent decades have challenged these ideas, highlighting the importance of targeting and engaging with perpetrators as part of a holistic strategy towards tackling domestic abuse (Davies and Biddle, 2017). However, this shift represented a significant cultural change within feminist movements and was not universally accepted. Valid concerns were raised regarding the potential risks of perpetrator-focused interventions, including fears around their safety and effectiveness (Phillips et al, 2013). Additional apprehensions centred on the possibility that funding such interventions could divert resources away from vital victim support services (*ibid.*). This shift resulted in significant changes in practice in the late 1970s which saw the emergence of direct interventions for perpetrators through the development of perpetrator programmes (Lila and Gilchrist, 2023). This was in response to a recognition within the sector that supporting victims alone was no longer sufficient. Perpetrators were left unchallenged, often continuing their abuse towards the same victim or redirecting their attention towards new ones (Hilder and Freeman, 2016; Mullender and Burton 2001; Oddone, 2020; SafeLives, 2016). Consequently, systems needed to be open to exploring how processes can intervene with perpetrators to change their behaviours and access opportunities for rehabilitation (Hilder and Freeman, 2016) while also ensuring appropriate investment and resourcing for such interventions (Renahan, 2021).

These two complementary shifts towards multi-agency responses and an enhanced focus on perpetrators led to the establishment of various panels, processes, and intervention programmes to improve how agencies respond to domestic abuse. Operating within the framework of a coordinated response, working with perpetrators can play a role in increasing safety for victims and children (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). Despite this realisation and the various initiatives, projects and programmes introduced, major challenges still exist around the effectiveness of

interventions designed to address perpetrators (Lila and Gilchrist, 2023). Intervening with perpetrators as part of multi-agency systems and processes remains an area with many complexities and challenges (Renahan, 2021). Ultimately, agencies responsible for addressing domestic abuse still fail to address perpetrators consistently and, at times, fail to respond altogether (SafeLives, 2016).

Although the MARAC is the most widely implemented coordinated, multi-agency response to domestic abuse, evaluations of its effectiveness remain limited. Existing reviews and evaluations of the MARAC have also largely neglected to examine its outcomes in relation to perpetrators, despite managing perpetrators being one of the four core objectives of the MARAC process. More than two decades since its inception, there remains a lack of empirical evidence regarding the MARAC's focus and impact on perpetrators. A significant portion of the literature references evaluations conducted in 2004 and 2006 which assessed outcomes of the first MARAC implemented in Cardiff. These evaluations focused solely on revictimization rates as self-reported by victims and as evidenced within police data. Further reviews into the MARAC process and its effectiveness include those carried out by the Home Office (2011), Steel et al (2011) and HMIC (2015). Many of these evaluations primarily focus on stakeholder feedback around processes as well as victim engagement. While some evaluations consider practitioners' perspectives on perpetrators within the MARAC process, none have comprehensively examined perpetrator data, action planning around them or specific outcomes related to perpetrators. Davies et al (2024) is one study that maintains a perpetrator focus but does so primarily by gathering practitioner views, without presenting perpetrator data or measuring outcomes around them. This current study complements such work by contributing empirical data directly related to perpetrators, thereby advancing knowledge in perpetrator-focused practice. Finally, there is a lack of data evaluating outcomes of daily (as opposed to

monthly) MARACs, a process now embedded in seven areas in the UK. Walklate et al (2021) examine changes to the MARAC process during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight some of the potential benefits of the daily approach. However, their research does not focus on responses to perpetrators within this process.

While the nature of domestic abuse and responses to it have evolved significantly over time, the MARAC process itself has largely remained unchanged since its establishment in 2003. Furthermore, there is a notable gap in perpetrator data within the MARAC process. National data available through SafeLives is centred around case and victim information, reporting annually on case information (number of cases, repeat information, number of children), source of the referral (which agency made a referral), and demographic information relating to the victim (gender, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+) (SafeLives, 2024). However, there is no data available on perpetrators discussed at the MARAC to determine their numbers, demographic information, patterns of offending or any other factors. This represents a significant gap that this study aims to address.

To evaluate multi-agency, coordinated responses as they pertain to perpetrators, this study focuses on the example of a daily MARAC. The objective is to address gaps in current research and knowledge around how multi-agency processes, particularly those adhering to the MARAC model, respond to perpetrators. Specifically, this study examines what they achieve in relation to perpetrator visibility and accountability, positioning these two objectives as fundamental indicators for assessing and improving practice. Furthermore, the study seeks to develop a systematic categorisation of perpetrator-related interventions to inform evaluative frameworks, thereby facilitating the integration of perpetrator-focused action planning as a core component of multi-agency processes. To achieve this, the study uses data from one London

local authority in the UK which has implemented a daily MARAC since December 2020. The daily MARAC initiative is designed to enhance the responsiveness of agencies by conducting daily meetings as opposed to the usual monthly meetings typically associated with the MARAC. This is an innovative approach that has only been implemented in a few areas across the UK, making this local authority a good case study to investigate. The study involves analysing data relating to 100 cases sampled between 1st April 2021 and 31st March 2022. The analysis critically examines the information obtained and documented regarding perpetrators to assess their visibility. Additionally, it evaluates action planning and outcomes measured to assess efforts to hold them accountable.

Overall, the study highlights significant limitations in achieving visibility and accountability within the daily MARAC. Key gaps include specific cohorts, such as young perpetrators and those not known to the criminal justice system (CJS), being hidden from this process. Inaccurate and incomplete perpetrator information also present a concern by further undermining visibility. Actions targeting perpetrators are minimal, limited in relation to direct engagement, and not well-tailored to individual risks or needs. Finally, insufficient outcome data further hinders assessment of the daily MARAC's effectiveness in responding to perpetrators.

Literature

Multi-agency processes and interventions are widely implemented across England and Wales, operating on the premise that no one single agency can effectively address domestic abuse. It is believed that improving responses requires coordination of interventions and the facilitation

of effective communication and information sharing pathways (Davies and Biddle, 2017). The influential Project Mirabal evaluation in the UK found that coordinated responses to perpetrators which integrated support services for victims and children are more likely to reduce harm, influence the perpetrator's conceptualisation of the abuse and empower victims (Kelly and Westmarland 2015). The move to coordination involved the development of many panels and forums designed to bring together key agencies to support in preventing and protecting from domestic abuse. This study examines the prominent example of the MARAC, including its daily meeting variation, as well as the Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC), a process established to achieve a stronger emphasis on perpetrators.

MARAC

The most significant example of a multi-agency response to domestic abuse is the MARAC which was established in Cardiff in 2003 (Robinson, 2006) and rolled out nationally in 2006 (Turgoose, 2016). Originally designed to be held once a month, the MARAC is a meeting that requires engagement from the multi-agency network contributing to tackling domestic abuse within each local authority (Robinson, 2006). The process is designed to safeguard high-risk victims and any children involved by providing agencies with a forum to share information and create multi-agency action plans to reduce harm caused by the abuse (*ibid.*). Currently, there are approximately 300 MARACs across the UK (Davies et al, 2024), with international adaptations of the model observed in Finland⁶ and Canada⁷. Each MARAC receives referrals from practitioners when one of the following criteria is met:

⁶ In Finland, the first MARAC was established in 2010 and by 2016, the number had grown to 31 (EIGE, 2016). An evaluation of all MARACs from 2010-2014 found that over 70% of cases had no police-reported incidents within six months, although 40% of victims interviewed reported that stalking behaviours continued despite the cessation of physical abuse (Piispa, 2016).

⁷ In Canada, MARACs were piloted in three areas in Ontario starting in 2021 (WomenACT, n.d.). No evaluation of this pilot has been published yet.

Visible high risk: determined based on an actuarial assessment using the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour Based Violence Risk Identification Checklist (DASH RIC) with a score of 14 and above classified as high risk. Developed in 2009, the DASH RIC offers a standardised approach to identifying and assessing risk (Myhill et al, 2023). The checklist is widely employed by the police and most victim support organisations to aid with determining risk levels and assessing if cases meet the MARAC criteria (Turner et al, 2019).

Escalation: assessed by examining the frequency and/or severity of the abuse over time. It is generally accepted that three or more domestic abuse incidents reported by any agency within a 12-month period signals escalation in the level of abuse. Incidents may include police calls outs or instances where a victim sought hospital treatment for injuries.

Repeat referral: a referral to the MARAC is needed if a further incident of abuse takes place within the 12-month period since the original referral. This must be an incident involving the same perpetrator and victim.

Professional judgement: relies on the practitioner's own assessment of risk, allowing them to use their knowledge, skill and experience to identify a case as high risk even if it does not meet any of the three other criteria.

(SafeLives, 2018)

At a MARAC meeting, relevant information is shared, and agency representatives collaborate to create a coordinated action plan to enhance victim safety (SafeLives, 2014). Key agencies include the police, victim advocacy services, housing, children's and adult social care,

probation, and a range of health-related services including primary health and mental health (SafeLives, 2017). The four primary aims of a MARAC are - safeguard victims of abuse, manage perpetrators' behaviours, safeguard practitioners, and link into other safeguarding processes (ibid.). The MARAC process recognises the importance of addressing perpetrators to ensure safety outcomes for victims and children (SafeLives, n.d.). However, some argue that it fails to shift the focus onto perpetrators by remaining predominantly focused on victim responses (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). While MARACs have increased professional attention to cases assessed as high risk, this prioritisation has been criticised for potentially diverting attention and resources away from cases categorised as standard or medium risk, leading to such cases being subjected to weaker risk management responses (Phillips, 2018). Furthermore, practitioners have highlighted the need for clearer guidance and more robust outcome measures, indicating that MARACs may overemphasise information sharing while insufficiently ensuring follow up with agencies to maintain accountability for agreed actions (SafeLives, 2025).

As outlined above, one mechanism through which cases are identified for referral to the MARAC is the use of the DASH RIC to classify cases as high risk. However, the assessment too has not been without critique and its effectiveness in accurately identifying risk remains contested. There are limited evaluations and published research on the DASH RIC, raising questions around its capacity to reliably identify individuals at high risk of harm (Whinney, 2015). Further concerns relate to whether the assessment plays a 'good enough' role at being able to prevent further abuse (Turner et al, 2019). In a study examining 118 cases of serious domestic assault or murder over a three-year period, Thornton (2011) found that only five cases had been previously assessed as high-risk (cited in Whinney, 2015). This finding raises significant concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of the assessment, particularly given

that it often functions as the primary referral route into MARACs. Furthermore, a growing body of research highlights persistent inconsistencies in how the tool is applied in practice, especially by police officers. For example, officers frequently exercising discretion by altering or omitting questions, often prioritising indicators of physical violence and visible injury over other risk factors (Robinson et al, 2016). Similarly, Myhill et al (2023) identified an ‘officer effect’ whereby risk assessment outcomes were influenced by the individual officer completing it, suggesting a lack of objectivity and standardisation in its application. Such inconsistencies have been identified as potentially undermining the effectiveness of the DASH RIC assessment and the MARAC in safeguarding victims (Robinson et al, 2016). More recently, the DASH RIC has been subject to political criticism that has been widely reported in the media. These critiques contend that the tool lacks effectiveness and leaves gaps in the accurate identification of individuals at the highest risk of further harm (Nathoo and Kraemer, 2025). In response, a government-led commitment has been made to review and revise the DASH RIC, with the aim of developing a more appropriate and reliable measure of risk (*ibid.*).

Many of these challenges can be addressed through the development of a more robust research evidence base to enhance understanding of the effectiveness of the MARAC and the mechanisms used to identify cases for referral. Returning to the focus of this study, it is crucial to examine findings of existing evaluations and consider how the MARAC approaches the goal of ‘managing perpetrators’ behaviours’.

MARAC Evaluations

The first evaluation into MARAC was conducted in 2004 on the original MARAC in Cardiff. This evaluation, covering a six-month period, involved interviewing practitioners and victims as well as reviewing police data (Robinson, 2004). To evaluate this MARAC’s success at

improving victim safety, the focus was on assessing whether further police call outs or complaints were made post-MARAC as well as what victims disclosed in the interviews (ibid.). The study found that around 60% of victims were not revictimized in the six months following the MARAC and suggested that these results are indicative of the positive impact that this multi-agency approach can have on victim safety. Further follow up data obtained for the 12-month period following the MARAC indicated that this figure drops to 40% (Robinson, 2013; SafeLives, 2024). Robinson (2006) conducted a subsequent evaluation of the Cardiff MARAC using the same measures and found that 70% of cases did not have a further call out to the police in the six months following the MARAC. Additionally, 27 victims were interviewed and 63% of them indicated no further violence or threats had been experienced since the MARAC (Robinson, 2006). This study highlights these positive outcomes while also outlining the potential limitations, including the lack of a control comparison group that could have strengthened the validity of these findings.

It is important to acknowledge the concerns with reliance on police data as a measure of 'success' given that most victims do not report abuse to the police (DAC, 2025; Davies et al, 2024; Steel et al, 2011). From my practice experience, I have encountered many victims who refrain from reporting further abuse after initial interventions by agencies had escalated their situation. Therefore, using police data as the sole or primary measure cannot be considered a reliable indicator (Davies et al, 2024). Additionally, reliance on revictimization rates as a measure of success may be problematic as one study observed significant variability in these rates ranging from 3% to 64% (Steel et al, 2011). This raises concerns around the quality of data collected at MARACs to indicate this and calls into question whether revictimization rates are a reliable measure of MARAC effectiveness (ibid.).

In 2011, the Home Office commissioned a study which included conducting online surveys with key practitioners involved in the MARAC process across England and Wales, yielding 636 responses, as well as interviews and in-depth case studies being analysed for four MARACs. The study focused on analysing several factors around processes, referrals, victim engagement, and the effectiveness of MARAC (Home Office, 2011). In terms of improving outcomes for victims, 97% of respondents said the MARAC was ‘very effective’ or ‘fairly effective’ at this. However, the study warns against generalising these findings to MARACs across England and Wales due to limitations including the limited number of in-depth case studies and surveys only sent out to practitioners in specific roles. Steel et al (2011) built on data from the Home Office report by conducting a literature review and analysing performance data from over 200 MARACs. They conclude that the existing evidence around MARAC is “relatively weak” and called for more rigorous research (Steel et al, 2011: ii). This concern was also echoed by Berry et al (2014) who noted the lack of robust evidence around MARAC. In 2015, the HMIC reviewed 52 MARACs across 34 police force areas, finding that participants believed MARAC to be effective in safeguarding victims and children through the process of information sharing and joint action planning (HMIC, 2015). However, the report identified several challenges, including high caseloads and difficulties in securing attendance from key agencies. The substantial volume of cases discussed at meetings can place considerable demands on practitioners, potentially compromising the quality and robustness of actions plans (Davies et al, 2023; Walklate et al, 2021). In addition, inconsistent or insufficient representation from key agencies may hinder effective multi-agency management and coordinated decision-making (SafeLives, 2025; Walklate et al, 2021).

Research comparing a sample of MARAC and non-MARAC cases over a two-year period showed evidence of significant reductions in abuse for both groups (Whinney, 2015). In fact,

further analysis into a subset of the sample indicated that harm had increased for the MARAC cases compared to the non-MARAC cases, contradicting with findings of the Cardiff evaluations. This is further evidence that there is a need to develop more rigorous evidence around MARAC outcomes (Berry et al, 2014; Steel et al, 2011; Whinney, 2015). Regular reviews of MARACs in local areas are essential to improving their effectiveness and strengthening the evidence base (Steel et al, 2011). Given that one of the aims of MARAC is to tackle perpetrators, it is important to investigate what MARACs are achieving around them.

Perpetrators within the MARAC

Although several studies and evaluations have examined MARAC processes, research specifically focusing on understanding how they respond to perpetrators is limited and shows evidence of gaps. Many domestic abuse approaches and initiatives are predominantly victim-focused, and consequently evaluations lack a focus on perpetrators. The limited existing research has demonstrated challenges in identifying and tracking abusive behaviours, identifying trends, and implementing strategies that facilitate perpetrators' desistance (Davies et al, 2024). Data in both the Home Office (2011) and Steel et al (2011) evaluations assessed the MARAC's ability to identify and respond to risks associated with perpetrators. In terms of identifying risks for the perpetrator, 55% of all respondents indicated this happened 'all the time', with 20% reporting that this takes place 'sometimes' or 'never', and a further 3% indicating they did not know (Home Office, 2011). It is unclear from this report what is meant by 'risks for the perpetrator'; whether this indicates risks posed by perpetrators or risks relating to the needs of perpetrators themselves. As for dealing with perpetrators, 45% of respondents indicated MARAC was 'very effective', 42% 'fairly effective' and 14% 'not very effective' (Steel et al, 2011). Notably, this 14% was the highest proportion within the study with a 'not very effective' rating with the second highest rate being that 11% believed that MARAC was

‘not very effective’ at increasing successful prosecutions (*ibid.*). It is noteworthy that the two measures with the highest ineffectiveness rates related to perpetrators.

Studies also show missed opportunities for the MARAC to connect with other perpetrator-focused processes (Adisa, 2020; Steel et al, 2011). Strengthening these links is essential for holding perpetrators accountable and improving how perpetrators fit into victim-centred processes (Steel et al, 2011). Providing more comprehensive information around perpetrators, such as detailed assessments from perpetrator programmes, could improve how MARACs deal with risks posed by perpetrators and ensure a more thorough focus beyond only offering support to victims (Westmarland et al, 2010). Therefore, integrating such joint working processes should be done consistently. Davies et al (2024) present a study on a modified MARAC in one area in England where the process has been adapted to focus on perpetrators. The study finds that perpetrators are ‘elusive’ and ‘missing’ with challenges around ineffective information sharing and assessments of risk, practitioners reporting lack of direct engagement with perpetrators, lack of effective services offered to perpetrators including around substance use or mental health (Davies et al, 2024). It concludes by highlighting that despite improvements in multi-agency responses, holding perpetrators to account remains the biggest challenge.

Overall, research shows that a stronger focus on early preventive work and interventions with perpetrators is needed within the MARAC process (HMIC, 2015). As the literature suggests, safeguarding victims and children requires an effective approach towards tackling perpetrators. However, the lack of perpetrator data and perpetrator-focused evaluations makes it challenging to ascertain what MARACs can achieve around perpetrators. Contributing to this problem is the action planning aspect of the MARAC and the lack of agency accountability within this

process. Action planning is a core element of any MARAC. To contextualise the focus of this study, it is important to consider what this process entails, and the challenges associated with it.

Action planning within the MARAC

The goal of referring a case to MARAC is to share relevant information and to create a tailored action plan to enhance victim safety (Steel et al, 2011; Whinney, 2015). SafeLives offer a template to guide the process of devising actions that target the various risks identified for each case (Whinney, 2015). A wide range of actions can be implemented, and some studies have attempted to provide an overview of the most common actions (Phillips, 2018; Robinson, 2006; Whinney, 2015). Categorising actions can be a complex task and how they are devised and recorded may not necessarily facilitate precise and accurate measurement (Robinson, 2006). Actions may also provide limited insight into the productivity or efficiency of interventions. In Robinson's (2006) MARAC evaluation, actions were divided into two categories - a) actions that fall within an agency's regular duties, and b) actions which involve collaboration with other agencies. This classification is useful for distinguishing whether actions require intervention by a single agency or the multi-agency network. However, it does not clarify the purpose of these actions or identify which individuals they pertain to. Greater detail is necessary, as a categorisation based solely on the number of agencies involved prevents meaningful assessment of a MARAC's effectiveness regarding perpetrators, given that the action classification does not allow for this. It is useful to consider other examples of categorisations that may provide a greater level of detail. Focusing on how the MARAC manages perpetrators, SafeLives categorise actions in relation to whether they divert, manage, disrupt or prosecute perpetrators (SafeLives, n.d.). The Drive Project evaluation classified actions into either direct or indirect work. Within direct work, actions were classified into the

following subcategories - a) maintaining and sustaining contact, b) direct support, and c) behaviour change support (Hester et al, 2019). As for indirect work, the subcategories were - a) case update, b) background research, and c) multi-agency work. Although the Drive process differs from the MARAC, this categorisation remains useful for guiding the level of detail that should be captured to assist evaluations in becoming more perpetrator-focused. Notably, this evaluation found that 20% of interventions involved direct work, whereas 80% involved indirect work.

Actions at MARAC can be allocated to any agency, though the police and victim advocacy services often receive the bulk of actions (Robinson, 2006). Common actions at MARAC include offering victims support, the police flagging victim addresses to speed up responses in case of a further police call out and conducting housing checks or carrying out required repairs to victim addresses (Whinney, 2015). To guide agencies in how they manage perpetrators, SafeLives (n.d.) provide examples that include facilitating police arrests, referring perpetrators to services, signposting to behaviour change programmes, and considering how all agencies can coordinate efforts to address the needs and risks of perpetrators. Action planning at MARAC can present several challenges. This can include agencies not completing their assigned actions and inadequate record keeping, particularly in cases where actions have not been completed (Steel et al, 2011). Additionally, some MARACs may not have processes that monitor actions and track their progress, making it challenging to ascertain whether they have been achieved (HMIC, 2015). This presents a key gap as without monitoring and review of actions, it is difficult to ensure that agencies are held accountable for the actions they take (Robinson, 2004). These challenges are echoed in this study, highlighting action planning as a critical yet underdeveloped aspect of the MARAC process.

Daily MARACs

Given that this study investigates a daily MARAC, it is important to gain a clearer understanding of this process and the rationale behind its implementation. Most MARACs across the UK occur once a month, although some areas have increased the frequency of meetings to manage high case volumes, with meetings held fortnightly or daily (Walklate et al, 2021). Currently, there appears to be seven daily MARACs in the UK, with three of these in London. Daily MARAC meetings can allow for fewer cases to be discussed at a time, thereby reducing the length of time agencies spend in one meeting (SafeLives, 2019). Some areas may increase the frequency of their MARACs to respond to demand, but this can inadvertently place additional pressures on agencies regarding the resourcing needed to conduct more frequent meetings (HMIC, 2015). Some of this increased pressure could also be due to a rise in the number of overall referrals (SafeLives, 2019). Interviews with practitioners involved in daily MARACs revealed positive feedback with many quoting the benefits of this swift response (Walklate et al, 2021). Many domestic homicide reviews have highlighted the need for “speedier, better informed, more responsive decision-making with all the relevant agencies in the room” (*ibid.*: 186). A requirement which a daily meeting seems to facilitate.

Another variation of the MARAC that is important to consider is the MATAC.

MATAC

The strong victim focus inherent in MARACs has prompted the development of more perpetrator-centred initiatives. Examining such processes is valuable, as this can offer insights into the potential outcomes of centring multi-agency processes around perpetrators. One such

example of this is the MATAC⁸ which was introduced by Northumbria police in 2015 as a way of enhancing responses to perpetrators (Davies, 2018). As with the MARAC, the MATAC involves a multi-agency meeting attended by representatives from various agencies with the goal of identifying and sharing information related to high-risk cases (HMICFRS, 2024). The primary difference lies in the outcome of the meeting, where the focus of the MATAC is on identifying which agencies will attempt to engage with perpetrators to offer help and ongoing services (Henderson, 2019). A two-year evaluation of the MATAC showed a 61% reduction in overall offending and 65% in domestic abuse offending (Davies and Biddle, 2017). Measures taken to address perpetrators included engagement in perpetrator programmes, addressing alcohol use, issuing warning letters and orders, and offering housing support (Davies, 2018). The positive outcomes noted in Northumbria led to the MATAC model being embedded in other areas such as Durham, Cleveland, West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire, Humberside (College of Policing, 2024a) and Greater Manchester (GMCA, 2025). In North Yorkshire, implementation began in December 2018 and an evaluation of 317 perpetrators whose cases had been discussed showed that 71 had no new incidents in the six months following the MATAC, with 81 scoring lower on risk assessments due to no further offending noted in the two years following the MATAC discussion (College of Policing, 2024b). Although these outcomes are promising, the report notes the difficulty in attributing these results solely to the MATAC.

Are these processes truly multi-agency and coordinated?

Despite the implementation and expansion of multi-agency processes for several decades now, it remains important to critically examine the extent to which these processes are truly multi-

⁸ A comparable model, known as the Multi Agency Testing and Co-ordination (MATAC), has been implemented by the police in Sweden and its initial evaluation has shown reductions in offending committed by perpetrators post-MATAC (Brå, 2017).

agency and coordinated. Research indicates that when implemented effectively, such approaches can reduce abusive behaviours and enhance victim safety (Hester et al, 2019). However, establishing effective multi-agency processes and trusting partnerships can be challenging and time-consuming and agencies may fear losing their autonomy (Davies and Biddle, 2017). Many coordinated, multi-agency processes remain focused on criminal justice responses. For instance, Steel et al (2011) found that the biggest challenge to agencies was increasing non-police referrals to MARAC with approximately two thirds of referrals in their review coming from the police. This emphasises a gap as most victims do not report the abuse with figures suggesting that less than one in five do (DAC, 2025; Davies et al, 2024). This raises questions around how these cases are managed and why they may not be reaching MARACs. The high level of police referrals combined with a substantial proportion of actions allocated to police and victim advocacy services calls into question the true multi-agency nature of the MARAC.

Methodology

This study uses data from the daily MARAC in one local authority in London. The aim of this meeting is to discuss all medium-risk and high-risk cases of domestic abuse referred by various practitioners such as the police, domestic abuse services and children's social care. This local authority implemented the daily MARAC process in December 2020. Prior to this, it followed the traditional MARAC process with monthly meetings held.

The process

The daily MARAC is chaired by the local authority's violence against women and girls (VAWG) team and requires attendance from representatives from core agencies such as the police, children's social care, housing and health. Other non-core agencies are invited when this is required based on the needs and risks identified for each case. This can include agencies such as probation, mental health and drug and alcohol services. The VAWG team leads on collating and disseminating referrals to the representatives. The meeting takes place at 2pm every day of the working week and each meeting hears a maximum of three cases. At the meeting, relevant information is shared and agencies work together to develop a coordinated action plan. All cases are allocated approximately 15 minutes for discussion and action planning with information initially shared around the victim's wishes, followed by police information focused on the perpetrator. Following this, other agencies are invited to share any additional information before an action plan is then formulated. The daily MARAC seeks to hold a concise, relevant and whole-family discussion that addresses victims, children, perpetrators and any other individuals involved. All actions created are monitored by the VAWG team with agencies mandated to submit timely updates on their actions.

Referral criteria

The daily MARAC adopts a similar referral criterion to the MARAC with two significant differences. While the MARAC focuses only on high-risk cases, this daily MARAC discusses both medium-risk and high-risk cases. This is intended to facilitate a more proactive response, allowing for medium-risk cases to be addressed before risks escalate. This aligns with recent research findings around the importance of focusing on cases that may be considered as 'less serious' or 'harder-to-evidence' (HMIC and HMCPSI, 2017). Additionally, some research has demonstrated the importance of considering cases with evidence of controlling behaviours as

being a precursor to domestic femicide (Smith, 2020). Focusing solely on high-risk cases also can come at the expense of victims who have been assessed at a lower risk level (Berry et al, 2014). This signifies the importance of assessing and planning around cases effectively at every risk level and not merely focusing on those appearing to be high risk.

The other difference is in relation to the escalation criteria. While the MARAC recommendation is three or more incidents occurring within a 12-month period, this daily MARAC defines escalation as six or more incidents within a 12-month period. Many areas in the UK raise the threshold for the escalation criteria in a similar way to manage demand and referral numbers. SafeLives suggest that local areas can make decisions around changing thresholds based on a review of the volume of cases being heard at meetings and measuring that against national MARAC figures and the recommended volume for each area based on population numbers (SafeLives, 2014).

Research aims

The purpose of this study is to examine how coordinated, multi-agency processes address perpetrators by focusing on what they can achieve around perpetrator visibility and accountability. The main research questions for this study are:

1. To what extent does this daily MARAC make perpetrators visible?
2. Is there evidence of multi-agency efforts to intervene with perpetrators in ways that seek to achieve accountability?
3. Are outcomes around perpetrators consistently and systematically measured and monitored in ways that demonstrate that visibility and accountability are being meaningfully pursued?

Dataset

Access to data was granted through a remote desktop application which provided access to the local authority's VAWG team folders. These folders contained all data pertaining to the daily MARAC including a spreadsheet tracking all cases heard at the daily MARAC, all referral forms submitted by practitioners, and all minutes and action plans created at each meeting. These documents held a wide range of relevant information shared by various agencies at every single daily MARAC meeting. This enabled the study to adopt a multi-agency approach and consider information shared by all the key agencies involved in managing the risks around each case.

In addition to this, access was granted to other systems to complement the analysis. This included access to children's social care and early help databases to consider what engagement these services have had with perpetrators in the sample who are known to them. Full access to both systems enabled extensive searches to be conducted on all cases sampled. Furthermore, additional access was granted to specific aspects of the VAWG team's work, including consultation records to determine cases where practitioners had sought guidance from the team and a tracker for the in-house behaviour change programme used to monitor details of perpetrators who were referred and accessed services.

Finally, analysis was conducted of cases heard at the pre-daily MARAC, a process developed by the local authority to discuss and plan around cases that do not meet the medium to high-risk criteria of the daily MARAC and where there is no risk of immediate harm. These are cases that are more likely to require a single-agency response and are managed at a weekly meeting that is held between the VAWG team and the police.

To gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the process, four daily MARACs were observed between January and August 2022. This enabled a deeper understanding of the process, who the key agencies in attendance are and how case decisions are made. In this capacity, I acted as an observer only and did not contribute to the discussion. Notes were made to improve understanding of the process, particularly in relation to information offered by agencies and actions created to address the concerns. These notes did not form part of this analysis but served to enhance understanding of the daily MARAC. While attending, I was introduced to the practitioners present at the start of each meeting. As such, none of the cases observed were selected as part of the sample to ensure that the discussion and action planning of any cases within the sample have not been influenced by my presence at these meetings. Furthermore, several discussions were held with practitioners involved in organising and overseeing the daily MARAC to ensure full understanding of the process and to ask questions where needed to clarify any details and fill in any gaps in knowledge. References to these discussions are made where needed to further elaborate on the findings.

Sampling

A sample of 100 cases was selected from the 683 daily MARAC cases heard between 1st of April 2021 and 31st of March 2022. A case here signifies a referral that includes a perpetrator-victim dyad. This sample was selected randomly using a random sample generator website⁹. Random sampling was selected to ensure a representative sample and to mitigate potential biases inherent in alternative methods. Recognised as the least biased method, random sampling provides each item with an equal probability of being selected (Jawale, 2012). Consequently, it strengthens the validity and reliability of data analysis and increases the

⁹ <https://numb ergenerator.org/>

generalisability of findings to other populations (Paturkar et al, 2024). To generate a random sample, numbers were assigned to the full dataset and then these numbers were entered into the generator website to create a random list of 100 case numbers. Using the same method, an additional random sample of 20 cases from the pre-daily MARAC was selected to complement analysis of the daily MARAC data. Detailed analysis of this is not provided here but is referenced where relevant for comparative purposes.

To assess whether the 100 sampled cases returned to the daily MARAC as a repeat case, the daily MARAC dataset was checked up to 31st August 2023 (when the data collation period came to an end). During this additional period, 897 cases were heard at the daily MARAC. Extensive searches were conducted using perpetrators' names, victims' names, perpetrators' date of birth, perpetrators' post code as well as any possible variations in the spelling of names to ensure that no cases are missed. To determine repeat referrals, the daily MARAC and MARAC criteria was adhered to and, as such, only cases which returned to the daily MARAC with the same perpetrator-victim dyad (i.e. a referral with the same perpetrator and the same victim) within a 12-month period were considered a repeat referral. If a case reappeared as a repeat within 12 months, further checks were carried out from the date of this second referral to determine whether another repeat occurred in the following 12 months, eventually concluding checks in August 2023.

Analysis

The current study employed a content analysis approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the data. This hybrid approach is particularly helpful in facilitating a deep understanding of the complex nature of this data. The qualitative analysis involved a detailed examination of the textual data to identify underlying

themes and patterns using an inductive thematic analysis approach. This process entailed a thorough reading of the data, during which codes were developed to represent emergent themes (Vanover et al, 2021). Specifically, key words, phrases and concepts were identified within the data. An inductive coding strategy was employed, meaning that the codes were derived from the data itself rather than based on pre-existing assumptions or categorisations (ibid.). This approach facilitates an opened-ended, flexible methodology for theory development, allowing the data to inform the analysis rather than relying on predetermined ideas and frameworks (Guest et al, 2012). Following this, a quantitative analysis was conducted to provide a statistical overview of some of the generated codes, where the range of values allowed for this. This step involved systematically counting and numerically analysing the generated codes and themes. By quantifying the occurrence and frequency of the variables, the study identified patterns and themes that can support in making inferences to answer the research questions. This approach allowed for a more nuanced, in-depth interpretation of the data where the findings can be presented in a more comprehensive manner.

Variables

Variables which allowed for an assessment of perpetrator visibility and accountability are prioritised in this study. Visibility was assessed by focusing on variables that signal the presence of perpetrator-related information within the data. This involved evaluating the quantity and quality (extent and depth) of the available data concerning perpetrators as well as assessing the degree to which discussions centred around this information. Accountability was assessed by identifying where action planning, decision-making and monitoring outcomes centred around perpetrators and their behaviours. The variables measured focused on four key areas - referral information, perpetrator profiles, agency input and further compounding factors.

Results

Overview of sample

The following data reflects information related to the full 100 sampled cases. One case consisted of two perpetrators (victims' parents) while the rest only one perpetrator. As such, 101 perpetrators exist within the sample. The sample also consisted of some perpetrators whose cases appeared as a repeat within the sample itself, at times with the same victim and sometimes with another. Of these, four perpetrators had multiple cases within the sample making the actual number of individual perpetrators within the sample 95. To ensure consistency in detailing the results, unless otherwise stated, all data is presented to reflect a count of the 100 cases as opposed to individual perpetrators. Many of the tables presented in this section report data in percentage form. As one case is equivalent to 1%, the inclusion of absolute case numbers would be repetitive and has therefore been omitted. Each table clearly specifies when the data relates to a total of 100 cases. Where the data refers to a different sample size, both percentage and numerical values are provided.

In presenting this data, comparisons are made with figures produced by SafeLives for all MARACs taking place across England and Wales for the period of April 2021 to March 2022, the same period this sample relates to. The purpose of this is to assess how the daily MARAC fits in within the wider context, both in relation to London and nationally.

Gender

The sample consisted of 95 cases involving a male perpetrator, four cases involving a female perpetrator, and one case involving both a male and a female perpetrator (victims' parents), resulting in a total of 101 perpetrators. Of the five cases with female perpetrators, two indicated

that the female was in fact the primary victim (one case involved false counter-allegations made by the perpetrator and the other a victim who had acted violently in self-defence). Consequently, the actual number of male perpetrators within the sample is 98 and female perpetrators is three. None of the female perpetrators appeared as a repeat within the sample.

Age

The average age of perpetrators within the sample was 42, with the youngest being 15 and the oldest 71. The 15-year-old was the only case involving a young person within the sample (with a victim who was 13 years of age). Ages were only known for 83 perpetrators within the sample, as 17 had incorrect or missing data around their date of birth information. For comparison, the pre-daily MARAC sample had an average age of 36, with a minimum age of 25 and a maximum age of 74.

Referral Information

Data was collated and analysed to reflect referral patterns with a focus on the referring agency, the criteria used to refer and whether cases returned to the daily MARAC as a repeat.

Referring agency

Measuring this variable involved noting down the name of the agency which referred the case. This is a nominal level (categorical) variable. The daily MARAC records data around which agencies refer in to track patterns of referrals to ensure involvement from all agencies in identifying cases for discussion. This variable gives insight into visibility as it pertains to an agency's ability to recognise cases meeting the daily MARAC criteria and, thereby, referring perpetrators for discussion. Agencies indicated within the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Referring agency

Referring Agency	Percentages
Police	41%
Victim advocacy services	29%
Children's social care	14%
Mental health	4%
Probation	3%
Drug and alcohol services	2%
Early help	2%
Housing	2%
MARAC to MARAC transfer	2%
Housing association	1%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size $n = 100$

Within the sample, the police accounted for 41% of referrals, making it the agency with the highest number of referrals. SafeLives national figures for April 2021 to March 2022 indicate that police account for 67.4% of referrals into MARACs across England and Wales (SafeLives, 2022). However, this significantly drops to 37.4% when considering rates for London for the same period. The 14% referral rate by children's social care within this sample differs significantly from figures found across England and Wales (3%) and London (8.2%) (*ibid.*). This suggests greater engagement from children's social care in this local authority than is found elsewhere. Overall, there is a significant dominance of referrals from the police and victim advocacy services which together account for 70% of the referrals.

Referral criteria

The possible values here are in line with the MARAC data which indicates reasons for referrals to be - visible high risk, escalation, repeat referral, or professional judgment. This a categorical variable which indicates visibility in the 'repeat referral' criteria by demonstrating whether agencies are recognising repeat offending and harm. This variable was determined by collating information on the written reasons given by practitioners for making a referral. The data is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Referral criteria

Reason for Referral	Percentages
Professional judgement	55%
Repeat referral	19%
Visible high risk	15%
Escalation	11%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

Only the ‘repeat referrals’ category has guidance and national statistics by SafeLives who suggest a repeat rate that ranges between 28-40% for a well-established MARAC (SafeLives, 2023). According to SafeLives, a repeat referral is classified as a future referral for the same perpetrator-victim dyad which occurs within 12 months since the case was originally heard. While the figure above indicates that 19% of cases had ‘repeat’ listed as the reason for the referral, further examination of the sample indicated that 25% of cases had in fact been heard at the MARAC or the daily MARAC in the 12-month period prior to the sampled case. This analysis included reviewing all referral information for each identified case and examining whether the repeat cases had occurred within the 12 months prior to the sampled case being discussed and whether the concerns raised were in relation to the same perpetrator and same victim. One of the reasons that the two figures differ could be due to referring practitioners not having knowledge of whether the case had been referred in before or when that case was heard. Correct recording of this will often depend on what processes different agencies have in place to monitor and track such information on their systems.

SafeLives national figures for April 2021 to March 2022 indicate that the repeat referral rate for England and Wales is 33%, with the rate reducing to 26% for London (SafeLives, 2022).

Repeat referral information

This variable relates to whether cases were re-referred to the daily MARAC in the 12-month period following the date of the sampled case. The set of values recorded for this variable included 0 (no repeat referral), 1 (1 repeat referral), 2 (2 repeat referrals) and so on. This is treated as a continuous variable. As with the ‘referral criteria’ variable, assessing this information also gave insight into whether repeat offending was recognised and referred for discussion. The distinction between this variable and the previous one is that with the referral criteria an assessment is made regarding whether the current referral is already a repeat case, whereas this variable considers whether a subsequent referral was made following the discussion of the sampled case. To determine this, checks were conducted to cover the period between the date when each case in the sample was initially discussed and 31st August 2023 (date when data collation ended). If a case was re-referred again within the initial 12 months since the referral, further checks were conducted to evaluate whether another re-referral was then made in the new 12-month period from the date of the second referral. Following the point at which sampled cases were heard at the daily MARAC, 28% of cases returned as a repeat. Most of these cases were re-referred once only whereas a few appeared on multiple occasions. This data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Further repeat referrals

Frequency of repeat referrals	Percentages
0 further repeat referrals	72%
1 further repeat referral	21%
2 further repeat referrals	4%
3 further repeat referrals	3%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

Perpetrator Profiles

Characteristics related to the perpetrator were collated and analysed to assess relevant factors such as where perpetrators reside, their relationship to victims, the number of victims they pose risks to and whether they have additional support needs.

Location of the perpetrator

Cases are referred into the relevant MARAC or daily MARAC based on where victims reside. As such, perpetrators who are discussed at these meetings may live outside of the specified area. This variable allows for both visibility and accountability to be assessed in examining whether the location of a perpetrator has an impact on the level of information available as well as the actions created. To maintain anonymity and to produce manageable data, analysis involved creating a categorical variable as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Location of perpetrator

Location	Percentages
Within local authority	41%
Outside local authority	37%
Not known	13%
No fixed abode	5%
In prison	4%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

It is interesting to note that the figures for perpetrators living in and out of the local authority do not differ greatly. Local authorities allocate funding and resources towards intervening with perpetrators who reside within their area. The fact that 37% of perpetrators do not live in this local authority could indicate a challenge to the local authority's ability to tackle these perpetrators and to effectively dedicate services and interventions that do so.

Perpetrator's relationship to victim

This included noting down the relationship between perpetrators and victims. All values indicated that perpetrators were either past or current intimate partners or family members of victims. This is a categorical variable that allows for both visibility and accountability to be assessed by establishing whether the type of relationship between perpetrators and victims has an impact on the level of information available as well as the action planning process. The type of relationship is indicated in Table 5.

Table 5: Perpetrator's relationship to victim

Perpetrator's relationship to victim	Percentages
Ex-partner	58%
Partner	22%
Husband	6%
Brother	5%
Son	5%
Daughter	1%
Father	1%
Mother	1%
Parents	1%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

Based on the data presented in Table 5, cases were categorised as familial abuse (abuse among family members and includes relationships listed above as - brother, daughter, father, mother, parents, son) and intimate partner violence (IPV) (abuse in current or previous intimate relationships and included relationships listed above as - ex-partner, husband, partner). These categories accounted for the percentages shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Type of abuse

Type of abuse	Percentages
IPV	86%
Familial	14%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

The above distinction is not one that appears to be made when SafeLives report on MARAC data and is not one that this local authority classifies in this way. Consequently, it is difficult to establish how these figures fit in with the local or national context.

Number of victims linked to each perpetrator

All perpetrators within the sample had to be linked to at least one victim for referrals to be made but some posed risks to additional victims. This was recorded as 1 victim, 2 victims, 3 victims, etc. This is a continuous variable. For some cases, the data indicated more than one victim but was unclear on how many and this was coded as ‘multiple – number unclear’. Assessing the number of victims linked to perpetrators can provide insight into visibility - in relation to level of information available on this cohort, and accountability - whether planning is adapted based on the level of harm associated with perpetrators offending towards more than one victim. Results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Victim numbers

Number of victims	Percentages
1 victim	58%
Multiple – number unclear	20%
2 victims	16%
3 victims	6%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

The ‘multiple – number unclear’ category refers to cases in which perpetrators were reported to have harmed multiple victims, though no specific number could be deduced from the data. This included cases with mention of Clare’s Law¹⁰ disclosures, references to perpetrators as prolific offenders, and vague or brief mentions of harm to other victims. Of the 42 cases with

¹⁰ Clare’s Law is a police-run scheme that enables individuals to formally request or receive information around a partner’s criminal history. Requests can be made by a person concerned for their own relationship or by friends, family and agencies who may have concerns about someone (Clare’s Law, n.d.).

more than one victim or with unclear information about multiple victims, only one case involved a female perpetrator.

Perpetrator's additional needs

The varying support needs of perpetrators can be part of the discussion and action planning at the daily MARAC. Analysing this data yielded a substantial amount of information which was not always immediately accessible or easy to interpret. Examining this data created a series of categorical variables. An examination of perpetrators' additional needs provides insights into both concepts. For visibility, this would be in relation to whether that information is evident in the discussion and documentation. As for accountability, this relates to whether action planning and outcomes captured account for these needs. For this analysis, presented in Table 8, a focus was placed on mental health and substance use due to the high frequency of cases where these were highlighted.

Table 8: Additional needs

Presenting need	Percentages
None indicated	37%
Both mental health and substance use	27%
Mental health only	16%
Substance use only	13%
Unclear information	7%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

Cases classified as 'unclear information' primarily involved instances where perpetrators were noted as being known to the police for drugs but there was no other clear mention of drug use by perpetrators within the notes. Therefore, it is unclear if these perpetrators use drugs themselves or, for example, whether they are known for supplying drugs.

Agency Input

Data was gathered to offer insight into the level of engagement that perpetrators had with agencies. This relates to information that indicates involvement with the CJS, what agencies had direct contact with perpetrators and what action planning was devised to address perpetrators.

CJS information

The data provided rich information around whether perpetrators were linked to any CJS agency. Initially, qualitative data was noted to provide the level of detail needed to build a good understanding of this variable. Subsequently, this was coded into a categorical variable to generate presentable data. As outlined above, much of domestic abuse goes unreported. As such, it was important to establish whether perpetrators not known to any CJS agency were visible within this sample, indicating that the daily MARAC achieves visibility for this cohort. Unfortunately, determining whether legal accountability had been achieved was challenging as the available data was often unclear, limited or inconsistently documented in most cases.

Analysis of this data is presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Involvement with the CJS

Involvement with the CJS	Percentages
Police	84%
Police and probation	13%
Not known	3%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

For comparison, the 20 pre-daily MARAC cases indicated that all perpetrators (100%) were known to the police, of which 10% were known to both police and probation.

Agency contact with the perpetrator

Analysis was conducted to determine what agencies perpetrators had direct contact with. This contact did not necessarily reflect an extensive piece of work but was also considered to include any indication of one-off communications such as phone calls, emails or meetings. This created a series of categorical variables for the name of the agency/agencies involved. Where perpetrators had contact with more than one agency, this has been clearly indicated. This variable is indicative of visibility - whether these perpetrators are known to agencies, and accountability - whether these agencies are engaging with perpetrators in effective, meaningful ways. Table 10 shows that clear information around agency contact with perpetrators was found in 29 cases. In one additional case, notes indicated that no one should engage with the perpetrator directly as it would be unsafe to do so. The remaining 70 cases did not have any indication of any agency having contact with perpetrators.

Table 10: Agency contact

Agency	Percentages
None indicated	70%
Probation	14%
Prison	4%
Police	2%
Children's social care	1%
Drug and alcohol services	1%
Hospital	1%
Housing	1%
Mental health	1%
Multiple – police and children's social care	1%
Multiple – prison, probation	1%
Multiple – police, drug and alcohol services	1%
Multiple – police, children's social care, drug and alcohol services	1%
Perpetrator unsafe to contact	1%
TOTAL	100%

Sample size n = 100

Action planning

This category was extensively examined to better understand agency input around actions created at the daily MARAC meeting. Here the focus is on accountability as evidenced through plans created with actions that relate to perpetrators' needs, risks and behaviours. It could also provide an indication around visibility in relation to how outcomes are monitored and recorded, assessing whether current processes focus on perpetrators. This category is often missing from evaluations of MARAC that tend to focus on processes and prevalence as opposed to actions and outcomes. Action planning is a significant aspect of the daily MARAC and involves creating a list of actions to address risks and support needs identified at the meeting. To examine this process, actions created for all 100 cases were categorised in great detail with a focus on perpetrator-related actions and reviewing data linked to action completion and outcomes. To understand action planning more comprehensively, a series of elements were assessed.

Analysis of all actions created

The sample of 100 cases resulted in 432 actions following the daily MARAC discussion for each case. The minimum number of actions per case was none and the maximum was eight actions. Categorising these actions was a complex task which involved analysing which individual the actions related to (e.g. perpetrator, victim, child, other individuals), the nature of the action, and which practitioner or agency will complete the action. Qualitative analysis of these factors allowed for categorical variables to be developed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Action categories

Agency actions	Refers to tasks performed by one agency fulfilling their duties or multiple agencies working in partnership with no direct interaction with the family. Examples included facilitating communication between practitioners for joint case working, offering case advice
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	to practitioners, or emailing an absent agency with details of the meeting discussion.
Child actions	These actions focused on offering support to children, responding to safeguarding concerns, or establishing support networks around them. Examples included agencies being tasked with referring concerns to children's social care or offering therapeutic support to children.
Perpetrator actions	These actions revolved around addressing perpetrators either directly or indirectly. Examples included sharing perpetrators' location with the police to facilitate an arrest, offering behaviour change services or addressing additional support needs related to housing or mental health.
Shared perpetrator-victim actions	These actions involved contact with both perpetrators and victims and/or were aimed at safeguarding victims as well as tackling perpetrators. These included actions around Clare's Law, requesting restraining orders, and agencies submitting a third-party report to the police.
Victim actions	The purpose of these actions was to support victims in relation to their needs, safety and wellbeing. Examples included exploring housing options, assisting with injunctions, and developing safety plans.
Other actions	This category was created to reflect actions that addressed concerns for other individuals. This primarily included other victims, additional perpetrators or vulnerable family members.

This categorisation, developed specifically for this study, aims to provide a robust framework for comprehensively analysing effectiveness and outcomes while carefully considering the subject of interventions. Its broader adoption could enhance the assessment of perpetrator responses by offering a clearer structure for evaluating outcomes of multi-agency processes in relation to perpetrators. The prevalence of these actions is presented in Table 11.

Table 11: Action categories

Action category	Number of actions	Percentages
Victim actions	237	54.9%
Agency actions	104	24.1%
Perpetrator actions	49	11.3%
Shared perpetrator-victim actions	17	3.9%
Child actions	15	3.5%
Other actions	10	2.3%
TOTAL	432	100%

Analysis of perpetrator-related actions

For ease, both 'perpetrator actions' and 'shared perpetrator-victim actions' (as depicted in [Table 11](#)) will be referred to as 'perpetrator-related actions' for the remainder of this analysis. Both categories involved addressing or managing perpetrators as part of the action planning. Analysis included coding the number of actions, how many cases they pertain to, and evaluating each action to create further classifications that can provide insight into the nature and frequency of the sub-categories of perpetrator-related actions. The total number of perpetrator-related actions was 66 (perpetrator actions n=49, shared perpetrator-victim actions n=17). These actions were in relation to 52 cases, with a breakdown shown in [Table 12](#).

Table 12: Frequency of perpetrator-related actions

Number of actions	Number of cases	Percentages
1 action	39	75%
2 actions	12	23.1%
3 actions	1	1.9%
TOTAL	52	100%

Sub-categories of perpetrator-related actions

The perpetrator-related actions were divided into nine sub-categories shown in [Table 13](#), highlighting whether they involve direct contact with perpetrators or not.

Table 13: Action sub-category and level of contact

Action sub-category	Action category	Contact with perpetrator
Case review	Perpetrator action	Indirect
Clare's Law	Shared perpetrator-victim action	Indirect
External information sharing	Perpetrator action	Indirect
Flagging files	Perpetrator action	Indirect
Internal agency checks	Perpetrator action	Indirect
Multi-agency working	Perpetrator action	Indirect
Protection orders	Shared perpetrator-victim action	Direct
Signpost/refer perpetrator	Perpetrator action	Direct
Third party report	Shared perpetrator-victim action	Indirect

The proportion of these sub-categories of actions is presented in Table 14.

Table 14: Frequency of action sub-categories

Action sub-categories	Number of actions	Percentages
External information sharing	13	19.7%
Clare's Law	11	16.7%
Signpost/refer perpetrator	9	13.6%
Multi-agency working	8	12.1%
Protection orders	6	9.1%
Case review	6	9.1%
Internal agency checks	6	9.1%
Flagging files	5	7.6%
Third party report	2	3%
TOTAL	66	100%

This data indicates that the highest number of perpetrator-related actions was in relation to external information sharing which accounted for 19.7% of actions. Such actions typically involve agencies being requested to share information on perpetrators which can facilitate the process of ensuring perpetrators become better known to services and more visible; particularly in relation to their patterns of behaviour, the risks they pose or their additional needs. Following this, Clare's Law actions accounted for 16.7% of actions. These actions were created due to a recognition by agencies that perpetrators' history of abuse towards other victims should be disclosed to the current victim. This increases awareness of perpetrators' actions and ensures they are visible as serial perpetrators to victims as well.

Level of contact with the perpetrator

An analysis was conducted to assess the form of contact required for actions involving perpetrators, categorised as either direct or indirect. Direct actions involved practitioner contact with perpetrators (e.g. contacting them to explore a referral for a behaviour change programme). Indirect actions required no actual interaction (e.g. agencies flagging perpetrators on their case records). Table 15 demonstrates most actions as being indirect.

Table 15: Contact with the perpetrator

Contact with perpetrator	Number of actions	Percentages
Indirect	51	77.3%
Direct	15	22.7%
TOTAL	66	100%

Type of abuse and perpetrator-related actions

Actions were analysed to assess whether they related to IPV or familial cases. When analysing perpetrator-related actions against this variable, an interesting finding is evident in Table 16.

Table 16: Type of abuse and perpetrator-related actions

	Familial	IPV	TOTAL
Number of cases with perpetrator-related actions	11	41	52
Total number of cases in sample	14	86	100
Percentages	78.6%	47.7%	

This shows that action planning around perpetrators occurred in 78.6% of familial cases compared to 47.7% of IPV cases, indicating a possible variance in responses to perpetrators based on their relationship to victims.

Outcome of actions

Finally, the local authority's outcomes tracker was checked for updates on all actions for this sample. A continuous variable was created to count the number of actions completed, ranging from none (no actions completed) and a realised maximum of eight possible actions. Following

this, qualitative data was examined in relation to perpetrator-related actions to provide further insights into the outcome of these. Of the 432 actions created, 233 were completed according to updates on the tracker. This signifies a completion rate of 54%. The tracker was checked and analysed in March 2025 which could be taken to indicate that no further updates were likely to be added to the tracker for these cases discussed in 2021-2022. It is important to note that practitioners and agencies may have completed more actions than this but had not sent information to the VAWG team for the tracker to be updated. While this is required of agencies, there may be some gaps around the practice of reporting back with updates. For this study, data analysis can only rely on what is recorded. Completed actions were analysed in relation to whether they relate to perpetrators or not (see Table 17).

Table 17: Status of actions

	Completed	No update	TOTAL
Perpetrator-related actions	42	24	66
Non-perpetrator actions	191	175	366
TOTAL	233	199	432

For non-perpetrator actions, the completion rate was 52.2% (191 out of 366 actions) while for perpetrator-related actions this was higher at 63.6% (42 out of 66 actions). This may suggest that agencies are more effective at completing and reporting back on actions related to perpetrators. However, further analysis which considered which agency was assigned the action provided valuable insights as presented in Table 18.

Table 18: Status of actions by agency

Agency	Completed actions	Incomplete actions	TOTAL
Police	15	5	20
Local authority VAWG team	15	3	18
Housing	4	5	9
Probation	2	5	7
Children's social care	4	2	6
All agencies	2	1	3
Victim advocacy services	0	2	2
Mental health	0	1	1
TOTAL	42	24	66

It is evident that both the police and the VAWG team are assigned most perpetrator-related actions, accounting for 57.6% of all actions (38 out of 66 actions: police n=20, VAWG n=18). Additionally, these two agencies are responsible for most of the completed actions, accounting for 71.4% of the completed actions (30 out of the 42 actions: police n=15, VAWG n=15). The role of these two agencies in being assigned and in completing actions was investigated further in relation to non-perpetrator actions for comparison. Of the 366 non-perpetrator actions, a total of 112 were assigned to these two agencies (police n=32, VAWG n=80) amounting to 30.6% of all actions. Of the actions completed (n=191), both agencies were responsible for 88 actions (police n=26, VAWG n=62). Meaning that 78.6% of the completed non-perpetrator actions belonged to these two agencies. This demonstrates that the police and the VAWG team have a higher rate of action completion and reporting back on updates even when assigned fewer actions. Therefore, the slightly higher rate of action completion for perpetrators (63.6% compared to 52.2%) could be attributed to this.

It is also important to note that this analysis relates to a small proportion of the overall actions, with perpetrator-related actions accounting for only 15.2% of all actions (11.3% perpetrator actions and 3.9% shared perpetrator-victim actions; see [Table 11](#)). Additionally, some agencies appear to have a limited number of actions assigned to them (e.g. mental health n=1). Victim advocacy services were allocated two actions only which is to be expected given that their work around perpetrators would be minimal.

Deeper analysis of some actions revealed additional insights in relation to specific areas. Of the ‘signpost/refer perpetrator’ actions (see [Table 14](#)), five were in relation to referrals to behaviour change programmes. Of these, two cases had no updates on the outcome of these

actions. The three cases with updates indicated that only one resulted in a referral being made, one case had already been closed to the practitioner tasked with considering a referral, and the final case was still under review by the practitioner. Of the 56 cases with identified needs around mental health and/or substance use (mental health n=16, substance use n=13, and both n=27; see [Table 8](#)), only eight cases had action planning that involved addressing this need, amounting to 14.3% of these cases. Notably, three of these cases were of the same perpetrator and the actions were of a very similar nature (VAWG team to update housing on his mental health needs). Of the cases with actions, only two involved a direct referral being made to the local drug and alcohol service for perpetrators to address this identified need. Four of the eight cases had updates on the actions, three of which pertained to the same perpetrator as mentioned above, resulting in him eventually being accommodated. In relation to repeat offenders, perpetrators who appeared within the sample more than once, the action completion rate was slightly higher at 69%. This figure relates to four perpetrators who had 10 referrals within the sample – meaning they represented 10% of the cohort. A total of 13 actions were created for these four perpetrators and nine of these were completed. Finally, although only one case within the sample related to a young person, it was important to analyse actions for this case due to the prevalence of this issue nationally (Weir and Barrow-Grint, 2025) and this being a concern for this local authority. There was one perpetrator-related action for the social worker to link in with a specialist agency that works with young people using abuse. However, no update on this was recorded on the tracker.

Further Compounding Factors

Through the data analysis, some factors became relevant which the study had not sought to measure initially. Two significant examples of this were around cases of counter-allegations,

where both parties have alleged abuse, and additional perpetrators identified as posing a risk to victims.

Counter-allegations

This variable pertained to cases where both individuals noted as victim and perpetrator had made allegations of abuse against each other. Counter-allegations may take different forms. They can involve false claims made by perpetrators to deflect responsibility or to further abuse and exert control over the victim (Rights of Women, 2025). Alternatively, counter claims made by perpetrators may be partially or wholly substantiated, often reflecting cases where victims had used defensive or retaliatory acts in response to ongoing abuse (ibid.). Ratio values were recorded to measure the presence of counter-allegations, false or otherwise, within this sample - 0 (no counter-allegations), 1 (counter-allegations present). Following this, detailed qualitative analysis was conducted where this was a presenting concern. Examining counter-allegations serves as an indicator of visibility, reflecting whether agencies accurately identify perpetrators and victims. It also signifies accountability through the extent to which action plans address these dynamics and rectify records where needed. Within the sample, there were 14 such cases (14%), all of which were cases of IPV involving male and female partners. In five of these cases, there was acknowledgment at the meeting that the females who had been referred as perpetrators were, in fact, victims, indicating that these referrals constituted false counter-allegations. In one case, an action was assigned for the female to receive victim support in recognition of this. Two additional cases illustrated the severe CJS consequences faced by female victims when perpetrators make false allegations. In one case, the victim was arrested and held in custody for 22 hours. Although the meeting recognised her as the victim, attempts

by the police to process a panic alarm and a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN)¹¹ were unsuccessful as she had been recorded as the suspect. In the second case, the victim was arrested and issued a Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO)¹² against her despite the police acknowledging that these are false allegations and that they believe the male partner is manipulating officers into arresting her. In neither case were actions taken to rectify these CJS outcomes.

Additional perpetrators

In some cases, victims faced risks from multiple perpetrators. To measure this, interval values were used as follows - 1 (indicating the perpetrator identified within this sample), 2 (indicating the perpetrator within the sample plus an additional perpetrator). No other values were found in the sample. This factor is indicative of both concepts shedding light around whether information is available around additional perpetrators (visibility) and what planning looks like around them (accountability). The data revealed four victims identified as experiencing abuse from additional perpetrators. For three of these cases, the referral listed one perpetrator only and the additional perpetrators were identified only through reading notes within the referral forms and action plans. As a result, information available around these perpetrators was minimal. At times, this included lack of names, dates of birth and addresses. Perpetrator-related action planning for second perpetrators was found in one of these cases only.

¹¹ DVPNs are police-issued notices that last for 48 hours and act as an emergency non-molestation and eviction notice (Home Office, 2022a).

¹² Following a DVPN, an application can then be made by the police to a magistrates' court for a DVPO that can prevent the perpetrator from having contact with the victim or returning to their residence for up to 28 days (Home Office, 2022a).

Discussion

The study aimed to examine perpetrator visibility and accountability within the multi-agency process of a daily MARAC by analysing data pertaining to perpetrators. It focused on assessing the quantity and quality of information held around perpetrators, the degree to which discussions centred on them, and the nature of perpetrator-related action planning and outcomes documented. Returning to the first research question, the focus here is on the extent to which the daily MARAC facilitates perpetrator visibility. Visibility relates to the extent to which information and discussions are centred on perpetrators, ensuring their presence is acknowledged throughout the process. To assess this, several key variables were considered. This included referral information, to evaluate the process's ability to ensure the visibility of every perpetrator, and the quantity and quality of the information available around perpetrators.

Visibility of repeat offenders and more 'new' cases

An analysis was conducted to determine whether repeat offenders were visible within the daily MARAC, as evidenced by repeat referrals following the initial case discussion as well as cases coming into the daily MARAC under the repeat referral criteria. Additionally, whether new perpetrators were being identified and brought to the attention of this process, as evidenced by the number of referrals not previously known. The objective here was to establish whether the daily MARAC effectively maintains visibility of both cohorts of perpetrators. The data demonstrated good visibility of repeat cases as well as new, unknown cases coming to the attention of the daily MARAC. This can be interpreted as an indicator of perpetrator visibility within systems.

Repeat

Domestic abuse is known to consist of a pattern of behaviour that repeats and, therefore, there is an expectation that cases will be referred to MARACs more than once (SafeLives, 2023).

For the daily MARAC, 28% of the cases sampled (see Table 3) returned to the daily MARAC following the initial discussion. SafeLives suggest that MARACs should have a repeat rate that ranges between 28-40% and the national average across England and Wales was reported to be 33% for the year 2021-2022 (SafeLives, 2022). A breakdown of figures by area shows that the average across London is 26% (*ibid.*) which suggests that the daily MARAC repeat rate fits in with the wider picture across London. Although it is important to note that what constitutes a good repeat referral rate remains an area of debate within the literature (Steel et al, 2011).

Assessing the referral criteria for the sample, as recorded in the daily MARAC documentation, showed that 19% were referred in due to meeting the ‘repeat’ criteria. However, further analysis of the sample showed that 25% of cases should have been flagged as a repeat. While the 25% fits in with wider London figures, this discrepancy in recording is an important one to highlight as it could suggest that agencies may not be flagging cases accurately to ensure they reflect when cases are discussed. One possible consequence of this could be that agencies overlook the need to refer a case as a repeat. This may be a contributing factor to the low referral rates by some agencies (e.g. health, children’s social care), with police and VAWG possibly benefiting from more consistent and efficient systems for tracking and flagging cases.

New cases

Prior to implementing the daily MARAC, this local authority had a repeat rate of 32% at their MARAC which suggests that the daily MARAC process has supported in reducing that. However, referral numbers have increased substantially following the implementation of the

daily MARAC. Prior to its introduction, the local authority's monthly MARAC heard 371 cases between April 2018 and March 2019, and 335 cases between April 2019 and March 2020. The daily MARAC model was implemented in December 2020 and since then referral numbers have nearly doubled, with 683 cases heard between April 2021 and March 2022 and 631 cases between April 2022 and March 2023. This could indicate that more 'unknown' cases are coming to the daily MARAC meaning more perpetrators becoming visible to their multi-agency systems. Another figure that is important to consider here is SafeLives' recommendation that this local authority should discuss 350 cases annually based on their population numbers. This is a number that the daily MARAC is consistently exceeding since its implementation. One factor that could be contributing to this is the fact that this daily MARAC includes medium-risk cases.

MARAC criteria is victim-focused, exacerbating perpetrator invisibility

One factor that can affect visibility of perpetrators is the way that case information is recorded. Aligning with MARAC, the daily MARAC process lists cases under victims' names. During analysis, this resulted in challenges finding information relating to perpetrators which was exacerbated when cases had incorrect spellings of perpetrator names or minimal information around demographics. Gaps in perpetrator data were noted in relation to missing or incorrect information in some of the variables analysed (20% for number of victims, 17% for date of birth, 13% for perpetrator location, 7% for additional needs, missing names for four perpetrators and for two of the secondary perpetrators). While some of these numbers may appear small, they can have an impact on identifying risks and needs as well as action planning. Having full, good quality information that is shared in a timely manner is pivotal to effective risk management (Davies et al, 2024).

The referral criteria into this daily MARAC, as is the case with the MARAC, requires that the victim, and not necessarily the perpetrator, lives in the local authority. As shown in this sample, 37% of perpetrators lived outside of the local authority (see [Table 4](#)) which could present challenges as some services may only have access to data related to perpetrators residing in the area. Speaking to members of the VAWG team with oversight over the daily MARAC, they reported this to be a concern as they face challenges when trying to manage a case where perpetrators live in other areas with limited options for interventions, for example areas with no behaviour change programmes. Similarly, there are perpetrators of domestic abuse living in this local authority who are likely to be unknown to processes such as the daily MARAC because the perpetrator is using abuse towards victims who live outside of the local authority. Both of these scenarios demonstrate how perpetrator visibility can be greatly impacted - either for perpetrators who live elsewhere but are causing harm in this local authority or for those who live within the local authority but are causing harm to individuals in other jurisdictions.

Visibility of perpetrators not known to the CJS

Responses to domestic abuse often focus on criminal justice avenues which can leave perpetrators who are never reported to the police invisible from systems. Within this sample, 44% of referrals came from criminal justice agencies (41% police, 3% probation; see [Table 1](#)). Additionally, 97% of perpetrators in the daily MARAC sample were known to the CJS (see [Table 9](#)) with the figure rising to 100% for the pre-daily MARAC. This aligns with literature around the overrepresentation of cases involving the police within MARACs (Steel et al, 2011). It also highlights the dominance of CJS related cases within these processes. Recent figures indicate that fewer than one in five victims report to the police (Davies et al, 2024) which raises concerns around the low number of perpetrators within this sample who are not known to the CJS. Additionally, domestic homicide reviews consistently reveal that many perpetrators who

commit homicide are not known to any CJS agency. For instance, one review indicated that only 10% had been managed by police or probation (Hoeger et al, 2024). These figures are concerning and prompt questions around what multi-agency processes or systems are aware of perpetrators capable of such significant harm, indicating a gap for managing this cohort. Agencies such as health and housing play key roles in responding to domestic abuse and have regular contact with perpetrators and victims (Home Office, 2022b). For example, victims state that they are more likely to disclose the abuse to health practitioners than to the police (DAC, 2022). Yet these agencies only accounted for 7% of referrals (housing providers 3%, mental health 4%; see Table 1) and 3% of agency contact (housing 1%, hospital 1%, mental health 1%; see Table 10).

Visibility of young people

Visibility of young people within the sample was assessed in order to examine whether the daily MARAC recognises such cases and ensures their inclusion. In the sample, only one case involved young people (perpetrator aged 15 years, victim aged 13 years). Another case involved a 16-year-old victim, but the perpetrator was unknown, with data only indicating that he was 18 years of age. Due to this perpetrator residing outside of London, there was no information around him at the meeting, including no name provided. Additionally, no action planning was outlined to address this issue or to demonstrate efforts to tackle this perpetrator's invisibility by seeking to gather more information about him. The action planning in this case solely focused on the victim, with no actions targeting the perpetrator. This provides strong evidence of how invisibility can obstruct efforts around accountability. There were no cases involving young people identified in the pre-daily MARAC sample.

This data reveals a gap where a key age group is missing from these processes. ONS data in 2020 shows that young women between the ages of 16 and 19 are the most likely group to experience domestic abuse, and yet they are the group less likely to be referred for support (Weir and Barrow-Grint, 2025). This study aligns with such findings. Although this local authority appears to have one of the very few MARACs, if not the only, that discusses cases where victims are under 16 years of age, it is clear that such cases are not effectively identified and referred in by practitioners. No similar data exists around the prevalence of various age groups of perpetrators, so it is difficult to make a comparison to this daily MARAC data.

The second research question focused on examining accountability by investigating whether there is evidence of multi-agency efforts targeted towards intervening with perpetrators. Accountability, in this context, was assessed through the ways in which responsibility for the abuse was assigned and the expectations outlined in the action planning process. This involved exploring how perpetrators were supported around their needs, how agencies intervened with them to reduce and prevent harm, and what actions were directly assigned to them to establish clear expectations for addressing the abuse. Several variables provided insights into this including direct engagement taking place with perpetrators, offers of services around behaviour change or any additional needs, adapting approaches based on different case factors and finally an in-depth analysis of the action planning created at the meeting. These factors can serve as indicators of accountability as they directly address perpetrators' behaviours, ensure they are linked into the necessary services and work towards generating outcomes that are perpetrator-centred. This approach allows for accountability to be examined beyond a sole focus on criminal justice outcomes, ensuring that input from all relevant agencies is considered within this.

Limited direct engagement

The variable measuring ‘agency contact with perpetrators’ provides a good indication around willingness and ability to work with perpetrators. In this sample, only 29% of cases (see [Table 10](#)) had a clear indication of an agency having direct contact. The agency with the highest rate of engagement was probation, who were engaging with 14% of these cases, again evidencing a strong CJS focus. Only four perpetrators within the sample had contact with more than one agency. Contact here does not necessarily reflect any extensive pieces of work and, as such, these figures are noteworthy and reflect a substantial gap in the direct work that agencies offer to perpetrators. Part of the issue may stem from missing information or inadequate recording, which closely links it to invisibility caused by poor documentation practices. However, the data still revealed evidence that most perpetrators were not linked in with any agency. Practitioners may feel reluctant to engage with perpetrators directly or feel that engaging with perpetrators is not within their roles (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). The results presented here may show some evidence of this.

Moreover, only one additional perpetrator had notes within the data that clearly indicated that no contact should be established with him due to the risk he poses. The absence of such safety assessments in the remaining 99% cases is stark. Fears and anxieties around safety issues can result in lack of attempts to engage with perpetrators and avoidance of this work (Tsantefski et al, 2023). These two issues are closely linked and it is important to assess safety while also understanding how it may pose a barrier to effective engagement. Members of the VAWG team noted that these discussions take place at the daily MARAC but are not necessarily always recorded.

Offering suitable interventions around perpetrators can often be a challenge. Within the sample, 52 cases had 66 perpetrator-related actions (see [Table 13](#) and [Table 14](#)) accounting for 15.2% of the overall actions. Of these actions, only 15 would have involved direct contact (see [Table 15](#)) namely by seeking out protection orders which would be served on perpetrators or through referring or signposting perpetrators to interventions. This amounts to 22.7% of all perpetrator-related actions. While this may appear to be a low figure, it closely aligns with the Drive evaluation which found that direct work took place with 20% of the perpetrators known to Drive (Hester et al, 2019).

Limited interventions offered

While the needs of perpetrators can vary, mental health and substance use are often a presenting need in many cases. Within this sample, 16% had a mental health need, 13% had an issue with substance use and 27% had both (see [Table 8](#)). This accounts for 56% of cases, and yet planning around this identified need only occurred in eight cases – 14.3%. There may be many reasons for the low rate of services offered around these needs, including the possibility that no agency had direct contact with the perpetrator to offer interventions around these needs. In the two cases where a referral was part of the action planning, this was tasked to the police who still had contact with the perpetrator due to an ongoing investigation.

Research into domestic abuse perpetrators who present with mental health or substance use is extensive and highlights gaps in how services respond to these (Davies et al, 2024). In relation to mental health, services may disregard perpetrators' needs or view them as not worthy of support (Knipe et al, 2023). Meanwhile, a lack of recognition of the overlap between domestic abuse and substance use can result in perpetrators' needs going unrecognised and remaining invisible (Humphreys et al, 2005). This highlights an area of practice where invisibility and a

lack of accountability reinforce one another. Here, perpetrators with additional needs are invisible from the services necessary to address their needs. As a result, they do not receive the services needed and the agencies fail to intervene appropriately, demonstrating a lack of accountability, both for perpetrators and these agencies. This is particularly important given that perpetrators may use their additional needs as a justification for the abuse (Home Office, 2022b). While it is difficult to establish what the reasons are for the lack of planning around these needs in the data, it is evident that this is a significant gap.

Tailoring interventions

By nature of offending

While the good rates of repeat referrals are encouraging, this should be followed by the critical task of addressing repeat offenders effectively and adjusting approaches to better recognise the serial nature of their behaviours. However, there was less evidence of this in the sample. A key example of this is the level of information held when repeat perpetration and victimisation occurs. Within the sample, 42% of cases (see [Table 7](#)) provided an indication that perpetrators had been abusive towards other victims. Of these, 20% lacked detail around number of victims, nature of abuse or whether this was a current risk. Additionally, four victims were identified as experiencing abuse from multiple perpetrators but minimal information was held on the secondary perpetrators, including a lack of names in some cases. Of these four cases, action planning around secondary perpetrators was only evident in one case. This could be indicative of the daily MARAC's approach not adapting to cases relating to serial perpetrators or cases where victims face abuse from multiple individuals. Here, a clear connection between visibility and accountability is observed. The limited visibility, as evidenced by missing information and lack of efforts to rectify this, directly impacts on accountability, as reflected in the lack of

intervention efforts to address perpetrators who pose risks to other individuals as well as to protect victims from additional perpetrators who exacerbate risks to them.

For cases involving counter-allegations

Within the sample, 14% of cases involving counter-allegations were identified. Five of these cases constituted false claims and it was indicated that while the male in that relationship had reported the female for abuse, the female was in fact the genuine victim. This indicates a good assessment of patterns of behaviours in these cases and the importance of establishing who is the person that is causing the harm. However, the response to these cases largely differed. Only in one case was there an action for the partner recognised as the victim to now to receive victim support services. In two cases, the involvement of criminal justice processes created a hindrance for the victims, with one victim denied access to safety measures (a panic alarm and a protection notice) and another who suffered sanctions (being issued with a protection order against her). Additionally, these five victims continued to be listed as perpetrators on referral information and, quite likely, on the systems of other agencies as there does not appear to be processes in place to correct this information. This demonstrates how failing to adapt approaches based on the evidence and patterns of behaviours leads to accountability being placed on victims rather than perpetrators. Ultimately, while a degree of visibility was achieved through the accurate identification of the primary perpetrator and genuine victim, corresponding efforts to achieve accountability did not follow. This is further evidence of how perpetrators can successfully use and manipulate systems which ought to be in place to protect victims from them (Mandel et al, 2020).

One way in which this local authority attempts to tackle the issue of counter-allegation cases is by listing such cases at the pre-daily MARAC instead of the daily MARAC. This was evident

in the pre-daily MARAC cases sampled which revealed that 30% of these cases had elements of counter-allegations. This is a higher rate than the daily MARAC's 14%. The local authority recognises this higher rate by explaining that they attempt to 'pre-discuss' these cases at the pre-daily MARAC to establish who perpetrators and victims are in such cases. However, even here the recording of information does not seem to be rectified when these discussions support agencies to establish that the person who had been reported for abuse is in fact the victim. Strong research evidence indicates that mislabelling victims as perpetrators can have significant negative consequences, including difficulties maintaining care of their children and lack of access to victim services (Henning et al, 2006) as well as victims facing sanctions by the CJS (CWJ, 2022).

By type of abuse

Perpetrator-related action planning appeared to differ between cases identified as familial abuse as opposed to cases of IPV (78.6% and 47.7% respectively; see [Table 16](#)). The difference in the two figures suggests that the approach is somewhat adapted in responding to perpetrators falling under each group. It is often the perception within the sector that familial abuse cases are more challenging to work with, so this figure appears contrary to what one would have expected to see. It is difficult to establish from the data why this was the case or what factors could have contributed to this. Some reasons may include better access to perpetrators who are family members of victims as opposed to IPV cases where most perpetrators were ex-partners (see [Table 5](#)). The level of information available may have also been a contributing factor. Of the familial abuse cases, only one perpetrator had an unknown name, and one lacked clarity around the number of victims they posed a risk too. It may be that the minimal gaps in key information contributed to better planning around these perpetrators. However, further analysis into this is required to reach any conclusions. It is also important to note that there are only 14

cases of familial abuse within this sample, which could be considered too small a sample to make generalisations.

Finally, the study explored whether outcomes around perpetrators were consistently and systematically measured, monitored and reported in ways that demonstrate visibility and accountability or evidence efforts that they were pursued. To examine this, the focus was on the outcomes of the daily MARAC discussion as well as the process of how this local authority tracks and monitors actions. This can shed light on the 'success' of achieving visibility and accountability for perpetrators but also on a key aspect of any multi-agency process - agency accountability. Reporting on outcomes related to perpetrators ensures their visibility, provides evidence of whether accountability has been achieved and ultimately offers insight into agency accountability.

The local authority developed an outcomes tracker to monitor actions generated at meetings and to record updates provided by agencies around their actions. This study had intended to review this tracker to assess outcomes of perpetrator-related actions. However, at the time of data collection information within this tracker was minimal and often lacked details that could have supported this analysis. This is an issue that the local authority was aware of and started working on resolving. As of 2023, recording within the tracker has become more comprehensive with more detail noted. This involved going back to earlier cases and adding relevant information around them. Consequently, the tracker was accessed in 2025 to complete analysis of outcomes.

Outcomes specific to perpetrators

Analysis of actions which contained updates from agencies showed that the overall rate of completion was 54% but was higher for perpetrator-related actions at 63.6%. While this initially seemed positive, it was evident that a contributing factor is the fact that most perpetrator-related actions are assigned to the police and the VAWG team who have higher completion rates than any other agency. The rate of completion for perpetrators who appeared multiple times within the sample was 69% which indicates a slightly improved rate. For this analysis, it is important to consider specific actions - for example, actions around referrals to behaviour change programmes (only one out of five led to referral being made) and responses to additional needs (only four out of eight actions were completed, with three of these relating to the same perpetrator). Of the 42 completed actions (see [Table 17](#) and [Table 18](#)), detailed, positive outcomes were documented in four cases only – a perpetrator who was arrested, a perpetrator offered accommodation, a Clare’s Law disclosure in progress, and a referral made to the perpetrator programme. Three additional cases had detailed updates but were around agencies determining actions as unsuitable – the risk level not meeting the threshold for a specialist safeguarding referral, criteria for a Clare’s Law disclosure not met, and perpetrator’s risk level not meeting criteria for inclusion as a high-risk offender with the police.

Analysis of ‘completion’

It is essential to critically examine the nature of the actions and their intended outcomes. For instance, there is a difference between an action where a practitioner is asked to engage the perpetrator in a discussion around their behaviour and to explore a referral to a behaviour change programme, and another action focused solely on sharing one practitioner’s contact details with another. While both actions are important, their impact around perpetrator visibility and accountability is likely to differ significantly. However, given that outcomes are measured

with minimal updates, assessing this tangible difference becomes a challenging task. Many updates were brief, stating only 'email sent' or 'completed' with no indication as to the outcome of this update. Notable examples included instances where Clare's Law was an action with updates only indicating 'police officer informed' or when practitioners had actions to seek case guidance from the VAWG team or make a referral to a service, and the update would merely state 'practitioner informed'. This leaves unanswered questions around whether the actual actions were completed and what these actions may have achieved.

It is evident that this analysis of actions and their outcomes reveals significant limitations in understanding the impact of the daily MARAC process on individual perpetrators. It raises more questions than answers, particularly regarding whether the abuse has ceased, harm has been reduced or whether perpetrators' behaviours have been addressed. Consequently, it remains unclear whether victims and children are safer as a result of these actions - an important outcome that does not appear to be systematically recorded or tracked at present. One must also question whether these actions are genuinely aimed at achieving change or if they primarily serve to address gaps or rectify areas where agencies have not fulfilled their duties. Do these actions simply initiate processes, such as facilitating communication between practitioners, making a referral or offering case support to a practitioner? Ultimately, the examination of these actions raises fundamental questions around what constitutes success, positive or negative outcomes and how these are being measured. Currently, the available data does not provide adequate answers to these questions. However, it is important to recognise that the local authority has worked on improving this process since the initial data analysis was conducted.

A work in progress

It is widely believed that the review process involved in multi-agency meetings such as MARAC is important in holding agencies accountable for their actions (Robinson, 2004). However, this remains a significant issue that many MARACs struggle with (HMIC, 2015; Steel et al, 2011). How actions are monitored within this local authority has significantly evolved since the daily MARAC's conception. The local authority is consistently reviewing how it records actions and their outcomes which was evident in the different versions of outcome trackers that were available to access for analysis. Tracking as of 2024 appears to be more detailed and now includes the lead agency and practitioner, outcome status (categorised as - complete, ongoing, if¹³, no longer relevant, incomplete), and more comprehensive updates on outcomes. It also included a greater level of detail showing efforts by the VAWG team to chase up agencies to obtain updates on actions.

To assess whether these improved trackers resulted in changes in outcomes, further analysis was conducted of actions for 2024 and for January and February 2025. For 2024, 400 cases were discussed with a total of 1942 actions created. Of these, 69.5% had a completed status (n=1349) and 9.4% (n=183) had no information on the tracker. Notes were also added on many cases to show that the VAWG team had made efforts to contact practitioners to request an update. For January and February 2025, 88 cases were discussed with a total of 364 actions created. Of these, 44.2% (n=161) had a completed status and 32.4% (n=118) had no information on the tracker. The higher rate of no updates can likely be explained by the recency of these cases.

¹³ The 'if' status refers to actions that only need to be completed if a condition has been met. For example, if consent is obtained then a referral can be made to a support service.

Limitations

A significant challenge was faced in relation to categorising all 432 actions (see [Figure 1](#)) created at the daily MARAC. Efforts were made to consider what purpose the action served, who would complete the action and whether it would involve direct contact with victims, perpetrators or children. Whilst this supported the categorisation process, it was still difficult to make decisions around some actions that appeared to overlap across different categories. This challenge is echoed in the Drive evaluation where researchers note finding that some actions overlapped across more than one category (Hester et al, 2019). The way in which some of the actions were documented also made it challenging to establish what the goal of the action was or how it was reached, even after reading the minutes of the discussion. This could have resulted in decisions made around the categorisation of actions being subjective and vulnerable to interpretation. Furthermore, the analysis conducted within this study was highly reliant on how information was recorded by the practitioners who completed the referral forms and those within the VAWG team who typed the meeting minutes, documented the action plans and had oversight of the action tracker. Such recording can be subjective or may be more reflective of that individual's style of working or what they view as a priority.

The daily MARAC is designed as a fast-paced, concise process where the information provided, both verbally and in writing, may not provide a holistic picture. The daily MARAC does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of cases but rather a focus on current needs and risks. Therefore, the data obtained for this study is merely a reflection of this. For example, if the meeting notes do not reflect that any agency has spoken to the perpetrator, this does not necessarily mean that this has never taken place. Verifying data by examining other databases

and systems helped manage this limitation to an extent but would not have eliminated it completely. SafeLives' reflection on the implementation of daily MARACs in some areas across the UK also reflects on this challenge, highlighting how there may be an issue around lack of research presented by agencies at meetings due to the fast turnaround expected (SafeLives, 2019). For the daily MARAC, agencies receive the case list by 10am for cases to be heard at 2pm the next working day. Agencies are expected to conduct their research within that timeframe and be ready to present this at the meeting. This may mean that agencies do not have sufficient time to research the full history of the case. Moreover, as each case is allocated 15 minutes for discussion and planning this would not allow time for a discussion of the full history.

Finally, this study examined a daily MARAC process within a single local authority in London focusing on its response to perpetrators. It is crucial to consider the generalisability of these findings and whether comparisons can be made to other areas. Given the variability between local authorities, caution is required when extrapolating these results. For instance, this local authority is frequently praised for its strong commitment towards investing in and innovating around VAWG, a characteristic that may not be present in all regions across England and Wales.

Conclusion

Implementing processes such as the daily MARAC plays a considerable role in strengthening multi-agency partnerships and this local authority has experienced positive changes due to its implementation. Through examining its data, various variables provided valuable insight into the visibility and accountability of perpetrators. It is evident that such processes still have some

way to go towards becoming perpetrator-focused in how they operate and in ensuring that actions and outcomes reflect this. The sample indicated that, although good repeat referral rates and a large increase in the number of referrals to the daily MARAC suggest good visibility, notable limitations remain in relation to specific cohorts, namely young people and perpetrators not known to CJS agencies. Overall, key gaps in perpetrator data and information were identified. These were further compounded by case information presented in victim-centred ways, hindering efforts to access and track perpetrator information. Approaches to perpetrators were also limited regarding direct engagement, offering the interventions needed and ensuring approaches were adapted to meet the varying levels of need and risk. Actions targeting perpetrators were also limited in comparison to agency and victim actions. Where actions do exist, they are typically insufficient in terms of their potential impact and are not effectively monitored and tracked. Furthermore, completed actions show very limited evidence of what has been achieved. Instead, they merely signify that a task has been performed without indicating substantive progress or outcomes. As a result, it is not possible to determine, using the available data, whether this daily MARAC has achieved safety for victims and children or contributed to a reduction in risk and harm caused by perpetrators. Following processes such as MARAC may appear to be more about fulfilling procedural requirements that remain victim-focused, rather than actively and purposefully creating meaningful outcomes around perpetrators.

While a stronger emphasis on more coordinated, multi-agency responses that focus on perpetrators has been encouraged in practice for several decades now, significant gaps still exist in relation to addressing perpetrators effectively. The shift towards these approaches has been positive but questions remain as to whether current systems align with them or how to assess their success. It is important to recognise that the move from single agency responses towards

multi-agency ones has been substantial and this approach is now considered standard practice, while also acknowledging that systems still have more work to do to become perpetrator-centred. Processes such as the MARAC remain victim-focused solutions and examining outcomes around perpetrators within such systems is extremely limited. It also remains a concern that SafeLives, or any other agency, do not report on any perpetrator data within MARACs. Finally, it is crucial to reflect on the fact that processes like the MARAC were established to address systemic failures in responding to domestic abuse effectively. Over two decades later, many of these issues persist. If systems functioned more effectively and with greater agency accountability, particularly in relation to perpetrators, a process like the MARAC may not even be needed.

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Chapter 3: ‘Something is still missing’ - Practitioner reflections on domestic abuse perpetrator visibility and accountability

Introduction

Attitudes towards working with domestic abuse perpetrators have evolved over time. Historically, working with perpetrators was “not originally seen to be a priority, desirable or even realistic” with limited expectations for behaviour change to occur (Hilder and Freeman, 2016: 275). Perpetrators were often regarded as an undeserving client group compared to their victims (Brown, 2004). These attitudes appear to have resulted in a pattern of practice that focuses on victims as the sole solution to the domestic abuse, shifting responsibility and accountability onto them to protect themselves and their children against the abuse (Ofsted et al, 2017). This approach overlooks perpetrators, focusing instead on removing victims from the situation while perpetrators continue to cause harm (*ibid.*). In recent decades, feminist research and activism have emphasised the need to target perpetrators as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing domestic abuse (Davies and Biddle, 2017). It is now more widely accepted that working with perpetrators is a crucial step in working towards this and that a narrow focus on victim work is insufficient (SafeLives, 2016). Maintaining a clear, focused approach on perpetrators is now considered essential for victim safety and reducing future offending (Home Office, 2023).

Many services supporting families in need encounter significant numbers of domestic abuse cases. Practitioners and agencies across both the statutory and voluntary sectors hold varying levels of responsibility for addressing perpetrators. Domestic abuse impacts multiple areas of

family life, generating support needs across sectors such as health, education, policing, social care, housing and many more. Practitioner roles are diverse and can vary even within the same agency or team, as they approach domestic abuse from multiple angles. It is widely acknowledged that all agencies play a critical role in ensuring perpetrator accountability, with statutory guidance underscoring the significant contributions that various agencies can make towards this goal (Home Office, 2022).

While criminal justice agencies such as the police, probation and the courts are key in addressing perpetrators, other sectors such as social care, health, housing, education, and the voluntary sector hold an important role. With fewer than one in five victims reporting abuse to the police (Home Office, 2022), many perpetrators evade intervention by criminal justice agencies (Schalk and Fernandes, 2024). Additionally, criminal justice responses to domestic abuse have been deemed insufficient (Spencer, 2016) with minimal evidence to suggest that such sanctions can lead to changes in perpetrators' behaviours (Kelly and Westmarland 2015; Trevena and Poynton, 2016). This highlights the need for a broader multi-agency approach where agencies outside the criminal justice system (CJS) can contribute to holding perpetrators accountable through alternative means. This can help establish a "more extensive system of responses by a wider range of services with which perpetrators come into contact" (Schalk and Fernandes, 2024: 3406). Such a system has been described by Spencer (2016) as a 'web of accountability' where interconnected services collaborate to ensure perpetrators face meaningful consequences for their behaviours. Creating such multi-agency systems can bring together diverse agencies, each contributing unique perspectives and resources, thereby enhancing collective efforts to address perpetrators more effectively. Therefore, it is important to consider how these processes and systems operate in their efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and increase their visibility in practice.

This chapter investigates how practitioners responsible for implementing the shift towards perpetrator-centred practice perceive and navigate this aspect of their role, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of their capacity to enhance perpetrator visibility and accountability in the context of this advancement in practice. It aims to explore how perpetrator-focused approaches integrate with historically victim-centred frameworks while examining the tensions, opportunities and challenges that may arise from this transition in practice.

Literature on multi-agency perpetrator-focused work is scarce. Where literature exists, it often focuses on evaluating newly designed interventions and programme delivery within specific contexts and typically relying on data from a single source or agency. Such evidence is insufficient for providing a comprehensive understanding of the broader 'web of accountability' operating around perpetrators, failing to offer a full picture of the multi-agency systems designed to respond to them. For instance, Renehan (2021) and Renehan and Gadd (2024) focus on probation responses, while Donovan and Griffiths (2015) centre around health and social care settings. A multi-agency perspective is employed in Humphreys et al (2024) and Tsantefski et al (2023) but both focus on practitioner safety as the primary concern. The notable exception to this is Davies et al (2024) which investigates practitioner responses to perpetrators across multiple agencies. However, the focus here is on practitioners' experiences within a single process, an adapted version of the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) that focuses on perpetrators. As such, this study seeks to build upon and extend those insights by broadening the scope to encompass a wider range of practitioner experiences across all aspects of direct and indirect perpetrator interventions. This study addresses gaps in current literature, gathering insights from practitioners across various agencies in a London local authority on their experiences of addressing perpetration, making perpetrators visible and holding them accountable. A thematic qualitative analysis was conducted to understand

practitioners' perspectives on current practices and any successes, tensions or barriers they encounter.

The findings of the study indicate that, despite the political and feminist shifts towards more perpetrator-focused interventions, practice continues to fall short of its goal of enhancing perpetrator visibility and accountability. This was evidenced in practitioner reflections of gaps in relation to the availability of perpetrator-related information, insufficient efforts to engage with perpetrators directly, the lack of meaningful consequences experienced by them, and limited intervention options and resources available. Additionally, significant gaps were identified in the training and skill development offered to practitioners to conduct this work effectively. The challenges posed by these systemic factors were further compounded by workforce-related issues. These included a continued focus on victim-centred practice, decision-making processes around perpetrators that inadvertently heighten risks to victims, negative perceptions of perpetrators and perpetrator-focused work, and practitioner-related factors such as gender and safety concerns which presented additional barriers to effective practice.

The implications of these challenges are significant as the practitioner accounts gathered clearly illustrate the profound impact these factors have on their ability to hold perpetrators accountable and ensure their visibility. The findings demonstrate that, while individual practitioners may recognise the value of this shift and make efforts to incorporate it into their work, numerous gaps and obstacles exist beyond their individual practice that impede the attainment of visibility and accountability.

Literature

A comprehensive understanding of both the theoretical and practical dimensions of intervening with perpetrators is crucial for agencies seeking to address their needs and behaviours. By integrating theoretical models into practice, agencies can design better informed and targeted interventions, while also facilitating the development of robust mechanisms for assessing impact and effectiveness. Several key theoretical frameworks are explored with a focus on how they inform domestic abuse responses and can be applied to direct practice with perpetrators, linking them to the concepts of visibility and accountability. For the purposes of this study, the focus is on frameworks that emphasise the need to respond to perpetrators through an understanding of gender dynamics, power and control, working with shame and centring perpetrator-focused interventions around victim safety. Additionally, the study explores the practice implications of working with perpetrators, examining how these play a role in either facilitating or hindering efforts to foster meaningful visibility and accountability. To achieve this, the concepts of visibility and accountability are explored as they relate to direct engagement with perpetrators as well as in the documentation and recording of perpetrator information.

Theoretical considerations

Theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into perpetrator behaviours and can guide the development of interventions designed to address them. Given the multi-faceted nature of domestic abuse, a comprehensive approach is essential to understanding its causes and solutions (Meyer et al, 2023). This section explores key theoretical concepts as they relate to intervening with perpetrators, examining their implications on visibility and accountability.

Gendered abuse

It is widely acknowledged and accepted that most domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) is perpetrated by men towards women (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). This renders it imperative to incorporate a gendered understanding when addressing perpetrators. A key principle for organisations working with perpetrators is to understand that the causes and consequences of male violence towards women are exacerbated by structural gender inequalities (Respect, 2022). Domestic abuse is largely understood as being rooted in gendered power dynamics with abusive behaviours serving as a manifestation of male power and control (Mandel, 2019a). This underscores the importance of interventions being aimed at addressing gendered societal norms that sustain and perpetuate abuse (Schrock and Padavic, 2007).

In connecting this foundational understanding to the themes of visibility and accountability, it is crucial to consider the gender dynamics at play. Research highlights concerns around implementing generic, gender-neutral programmes when intervening with male perpetrators. Gender-neutral approaches can impede the development of interventions that effectively address male violence by obscuring important gender dynamics (Mandel, 2019a). Furthermore, it is essential to consider how perpetrators may exploit gender dynamics to evade accountability. A practitioner's gender plays a critical role with perpetrators potentially using this to shut down efforts around visibility and accountability. Research indicates significant differences in the experiences of female and male practitioners, with female practitioners facing additional challenges and burdens (Apps and Gregory, 2011; Iliffe and Steed, 2000). In a study examining the experiences of probation practitioners, female practitioners were more likely to describe male perpetrators as 'frightening' expressing feelings such as rage, fear and hate towards them (Renahan, 2021). In contrast, male practitioners expressed feeling well-equipped

to explore gender aspects and perpetrators' abusive choices. A further study highlighted female practitioners' experiences of working in environments where they felt unsafe, controlled, intimidated and devalued (Reimer, 2020). Male practitioners working with male perpetrators report a sense of identification with these individuals, raising a question as to whether this can serve as a tool to facilitate change or whether it would, knowingly or not, drive a form of collusion undermining efforts to challenge these perpetrators (Morran, 2008).

It is important to reflect on how female practitioners possibly practicing 'in fear' may struggle to adopt a firm stance on visibility and accountability and work in ways that challenge perpetrators' actions. Similarly, it is useful to reflect on the possibility that some male practitioners may be susceptible to colluding with perpetrators through over-identifying with their experiences, resulting in practice that fails to achieve visibility and accountability. The findings of this study highlight gender as a critical factor to understanding perpetrators' responses and practitioners' experiences of working with them. Understanding the role of gender within domestic abuse closely ties in to how power and control dynamics are perceived and analysed.

Power and control

A solid understanding of power and control dynamics is essential in comprehending domestic abuse and has shaped the development of many perpetrator interventions (Wagers et al, 2019). Theories explaining domestic abuse often use frameworks underpinned by gendered power relations, portraying abuse as a means to maintaining male dominance in intimate relationships (Lenton, 2007). Renowned programmes, such as the Duluth Model developed in the 1980s, emphasise the role of institutionalised male power and patriarchal dominance (Brown et al, 2010). The model was created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) to intervene

with perpetrators by focusing on identifying behaviours men use to exert power and control, providing them with alternatives to these behaviours whilst challenging their denial of the abuse and promoting positive changes in actions and attitudes (Herman et al, 2014). The Minnesota Power and Control Wheel, developed by the DAIP, is a widely used tool designed to highlight tactics perpetrators use to maintain control (Dutton and Starzomski, 1997). Tactics include intimidation, emotional abuse, coercion and threats, exploiting male privilege and minimising, denying or blaming other factors for their behaviours; all of which are tactics used to support their ability to maintain control (ibid.).

Efforts to make perpetrators seen and hold them responsible inherently threaten their power and control, presenting significant obstacles for practice. Effective intervention requires disrupting and challenging both their patterns of behaviours and the power and control they exert (Brown et al, 2010). Considering this, interventions must be designed in ways that address the impact these dynamics can have on engagement. For instance, some programmes have adapted the Duluth model to integrate the psychological management of responses to this loss of power (ibid.). It is important to understand that only an approach that directly challenges power and control can effectively achieve the goals of visibility and accountability, while maintaining an understanding of what perpetrator responses this may result in. The findings of this study support these principles, underscoring the necessity to address power and control in efforts to engage with perpetrators. Additionally, perpetrator interventions must be directed towards the goal of encouraging perpetrators to take ownership of their use of power and control, and this must be grounded within the principle of accountability (Hamberger, 2002 cited in Home Office, 2023). A crucial consideration in implementing this approach is that some perpetrators may respond by attempting to manipulate systems to reinforce their power. Tactics used can include making false reports alleging abuse by victims or targeting

practitioners working with the family (Mandel et al, 2020). This manipulation, if successful, “compounds, reinforces and legitimizes their power” (ibid: 2). Therefore, it is essential to consider how to respond to such efforts in order to dismantle perpetrators’ power and control, thereby facilitating accountability. This study provides empirical evidence of such manipulative tactics, offering insights into the challenges they pose to practitioners.

A potential barrier to practitioners’ efforts to challenge power and control is the fact that perpetrators may perceive acknowledging their actions and accessing services as being associated with accepting their identity as a perpetrator which can carry negative connotations and create barriers to engagement (Harvey et al, 2024). Therefore, if the goal is to change behaviours, it is crucial to consider the role of shame and stigma in influencing help-seeking and help-accepting behaviours.

Working with shame

Shame experienced by perpetrators plays a pivotal role in engaging and intervening with them; both positively and negatively. It can act as a motivating force for changing behaviours or as a barrier if perceived as conflicting with their identity as men (Morran, 2022). As such, shame has a dual role where it can promote responsibility or foster defensiveness and denial (Camp, 2018). How shame is managed, either by practitioners or by those in the perpetrator’s personal networks, can have a significant impact on whether this shame motivates or deters (Morran, 2022). Poorly managed shame can undermine the process of holding perpetrators accountable and obstruct change (Camp, 2018). Consequently, interventions based on a foundation of non-judgement and self-reflection where shame is processed in a supportive context can encourage engagement and meaningful change (Brown, 2004; Harvey et al, 2024). This approach

encourages the use of shame as a tool for self-reflection instead of as a punitive measure (Camp, 2018).

These considerations around shame and stigma further highlight the need to strike a delicate balance between fostering visibility and accountability through meaningful engagement while avoiding approaches that inadvertently shame perpetrators and reduce opportunities for positive and effective outcomes. Approaches focused on achieving accountability and visibility must account for this dynamic, as poorly managed shame is likely to undermine efforts to achieve these goals by driving perpetrators away from services. Conversely, an excessive fear of using and managing shame successfully may prevent practitioners from engaging in constructive discussions with perpetrators around their actions, thereby also hindering efforts around accountability and visibility. This study sheds light on these dynamics, illustrating how contrasting approaches - those rooted in shame versus non-judgment - yield different practice outcomes.

Excessive or insufficient use of shame as a tool in practice may impede efforts around visibility and accountability which, in turn, could affect victims' safety. Any efforts around intervening with perpetrators must be evaluated in relation to their impact on victims, ensuring that engagement and accountability efforts remain centred around the needs and safety of victims.

Victim-informed interventions

Interventions with perpetrators must balance the potential benefits of engagement with any consequences for the safety of victims and children (Morran, 2013; Morrison et al, 2019). Decision-making should be centred around victims' safety, ensuring thorough assessments around risk implications for victims prior to any engagement taking place with perpetrators

(Respect, 2022). The primary goal of interventions should be to enhance the victim's space for action and improve outcomes in relation to their safety and freedom (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015; Respect, 2022). Therefore, the pursuit of visibility and accountability must be carefully balanced with the potential impacts this approach can have on victims and any children. The goal is not to prioritise achieving these two objectives at all costs, but rather to fully assess and comprehend the real-life implications for those around the perpetrator. Failing to consider victims when intervening with perpetrators can lead to dangerous decision-making, as demonstrated in some of the practice examples of this study.

Literature indicates that victims value interventions targeting perpetrators with the goal of behaviour change. McGinn et al (2019) emphasise victims' wishes for long-term, sustainable behaviour change that fosters feelings of safety for themselves and their children. Similarly, Harvey et al's (2024) study highlights a desire by victims to see two key outcomes from perpetrator interventions - behaviour change and accountability. This is an interesting finding which demonstrates that victims value approaches that hold perpetrators accountable. It challenges some of the unproductive goals often emphasised in practice such as simply focusing on removing perpetrators from the picture (Kelly and Garner, 2023). As such, it is important to adopt a twofold approach to perpetrator interventions that considers both the victim and the perpetrator (Harvey et al, 2024). Only with such an approach can more effective, perpetrator-focused interventions be designed and delivered with victims in mind.

Engaging and intervening with perpetrators necessitates consideration of various frameworks as outlined above. These carry important implications for practice and practitioners, particularly considering recent efforts to shift practice towards a more robust focus on perpetrators.

Practice implications

Considering the practice implications of the call to strengthen direct work with perpetrators is crucial. Specifically, whether systems and processes have adapted to accommodate this shift and what the implications may be for practitioners encouraged to work in this way. Possible implications are considered with a focus on direct, frontline engagement with perpetrators as well as how visibility and accountability can be maintained in case documentation.

Perpetrator tactics to interrupt visibility and accountability

Agencies and practitioners must address how perpetrators respond to engagement efforts and the barriers that this may create for visibility and accountability. Research has long shown how perpetrators employ strategies to evade accountability such as minimising the severity of abuse or justifying actions by blaming external factors such as the victim or experiencing stress (Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Dery et al, 2022; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Renehan, 2022). To intervene more effectively, interventions must confront these rationalisations which serve to sustain and perpetuate the abuse (Dempsey and Day, 2010; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). To facilitate the adoption of this approach, practitioners should work to build an understanding of the underlying causes of such responses. Research suggests that some perpetrators may fear the consequences of acknowledging their actions, with concerns around criminal justice sanctions or loss of contact with their children being prominent factors that hinder engagement (Turhan, 2021).

In practice, one can see the significance of designing interventions that equip practitioners to challenge these expressions. Frameworks that rely on external factors in explaining perpetration of abuse mirror perpetrators' presentation, further allowing them to evade

accountability and remain hidden from practice by diverting attention to other factors. Hence, interventions must tackle these attitudes and emphasise responsibility. Failure to do so can result in practice where victims are blamed or become the sole focus of the support offered (Davies et al, 2024). These areas continue to represent significant concerns in practice, as is evidenced in this study.

It is important to consider the impact that challenging perpetrator responses can have on practitioners' safety and the need for approaches that foster visibility and accountability to be highly cognisant of potential risks.

Considering practitioner safety in direct work

Direct engagement with perpetrators poses inherent risks to the safety of practitioners which may inadvertently be heightened by recent shifts towards improving engagement and accountability (Humphreys et al, 2024). Rationally, this shift will mean increased time spent engaging with perpetrators and greater efforts to challenge their behaviours. Neglecting safety concerns can negatively affect practice, leading practitioners to avoid engagement with perpetrators and place responsibility on victims instead (Mandel, 2019b). Practitioners fearing for their own safety can become “dangerous workers” who minimise the abuse or collude with perpetrator narratives (Humphreys et al, 2024: 715). This may arise from practitioners' concerns that directly challenging a perpetrator or fully acknowledging the severity of their actions could pose risks to their own safety. As such, perpetrators may go unchallenged and the harm they inflict may be downplayed or disregarded. Worker safety issues are also gendered with female practitioners reporting greater concerns (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Humphreys et al, 2024; Iliffe and Steed, 2000; Morran, 2008). Additionally, practitioners' personal experiences of abuse can influence how they assess their own safety leading to distorted risk

assessments, either by underestimating or overestimating risks (Mandel, 2019b). Although practitioner safety is undeniably crucial, this study highlights how efforts to address this effectively and consistently remain a challenge.

While complete safety cannot be guaranteed, various measures can reduce risks to practitioners (Tsantefski et al, 2023). Training and effective supervision can address safety concerns and mitigate tactics perpetrators may use against practitioners (Humphreys et al, 2024). Focusing training efforts around how to work with male perpetrators can enhance practitioners' skills and confidence in assessing and managing risk (Mandel, 2019b). Additionally, it is essential that practitioners do not feel solely responsible for their own safety as such practice is "unhelpful and destructive" (Humphreys et al, 2024: 715).

Engaging with perpetrators presents safety risks for practitioners which may be heightened by a stronger focus on better visibility and accountability. Improving documentation of the risks that perpetrators pose can help address these concerns (Humphreys et al, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to consider how current systems and processes collect and record information around perpetrators.

Achieving visibility and accountability in case documentation

Obtaining and sharing information on perpetrators remains a significant barrier in practice. This issue has been continually highlighted within reports investigating domestic homicides and serious child abuse case reviews (Olszowy et al, 2020). Davies et al (2024) note concerns around inadequate data recording and incomplete perpetrator histories which hindered effective collaboration across agencies and efforts to engage with perpetrators. They further highlight how information sharing primarily focuses on victim data, leaving perpetrators invisible

(Davies et al, 2024). Timely sharing of good quality information that is regularly reviewed and updated is critical for holding perpetrators accountable (*ibid.*). Kelly and Westmarland (2015) identify challenges in information gathering, noting how the lack of relevant data impedes the ability of behaviour change programmes to provide a tailored approach to each perpetrator. Having information that allows practitioners and agencies to develop a good understanding of perpetrator behaviours can be a catalyst for defining and assessing real change (Mandel, 2020).

The accurate and timely recording and sharing of perpetrator data are essential for enhancing interventions. However, the findings of this study consistently demonstrate substantial gaps in this area. Effective documentation practices enable the allocation of appropriate, tailored interventions based on a comprehensive understanding of perpetrators' needs and behaviours. In turn, this can strengthen decision-making around resourcing of services targeted at promoting visibility and accountability.

Resource and service allocation to promote visibility and accountability

There are several notable limitations regarding the availability and accessibility of resources and services for perpetrators. In interviews conducted with perpetrators, many felt that fewer resources and services were available to them compared to support offered to victims, with some stating they had no knowledge of available interventions (Harvey et al, 2024). Practitioners also highlight gaps in services due to insufficient funding and limited access to effective programmes (Davies et al, 2024). Many agencies fail to refer perpetrators to services, citing lack of awareness of options and limited local options as reasons for this (Hester et al, 2006). Findings of this study reveal numerous gaps across various aspects of service provision, demonstrating how these impede intervention efforts.

The literature identifies several gaps in the provision of interventions and two notable examples relate to housing responses as well as timely availability of behaviour change programmes. Housing responses often focus on victims needing to leave their home, rather than exploring housing options for perpetrators (Hester et al, 2006). Additionally, housing practitioners report a lack of knowledge and skills around intervening with perpetrators (Henderson, 2019). Timely access to interventions is also critical for perpetrators, particularly for those ambivalent about change. However, practice shows evidence of delays in providing behaviour change interventions at the time when perpetrators express readiness to change (Hester et al, 2006). These delays highlight the importance of continuing to pursue visibility and accountability for perpetrators awaiting such programmes. Despite this, research indicates that practitioners may feel they lack the skills required to work with perpetrators prior to the commencement of these programmes (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Consequently, a key aspect of resourcing to consider, is the investment in training and upskilling practitioners to work in ways that improve outcomes around perpetrators. For an effective approach to visibility and accountability, it is critical to assess the resources dedicated to developing the workforce responsible for implementing this shift in practice.

Equipping the workforce with appropriate training and skills

It is important to consider the training and skill development opportunities available to practitioners as they become more increasingly tasked with enhancing the quantity and quality of their work with perpetrators in pursuit of visibility and accountability. Effective direct engagement with perpetrators requires practitioners to possess the necessary skills and knowledge (Hester et al, 2006). However, many report gaps in these areas resulting in difficulties engaging with perpetrators (Davies et al, 2024) and a lack of confidence in engaging with violent men (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Lack of appropriate skills and supervisory

support can lead to tokenistic relationships developed between perpetrators and practitioners highlighting the need to improve practice by allowing practitioners to have the time, skills and resources needed to adopt a curious approach (Renahan and Gadd, 2024). Developing the skill set required for engaging with perpetrators and recognising the risks they pose should be a priority area for practitioner training (Humphreys et al, 2024). However, this continues to be a considerable challenge, with this study confirming this to be a persistent issue across all sectors.

One organisation where this training gap is frequently cited in the literature is children's social care. Responsibility for engaging with perpetrators frequently falls to social workers but gaps in practice reveal assessments and interventions that focus on victims and neglect the role of perpetrators (Olszowy et al, 2020). This focus places unrealistic expectations on victims to protect children and is indicative of a systemic issue in social work training, which fails to equip practitioners with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage effectively with perpetrators (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). In the absence of this knowledge and skill set, it is foreseeable that gaps will persist, preventing practitioners from effectively working directly with perpetrators in ways that facilitate the cultivation of visibility and accountability. Calls for improved training for social workers have been ongoing for some time (e.g. Hester, 2011) and remain evident in the discourse today (e.g. DAC, 2025a) with no significant improvements noted. Addressing workforce gaps in skills and confidence is essential for improving how services engage with and rehabilitate perpetrators (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015).

Having outlined the most prominent theoretical considerations and practice implications, this chapter now turns to explore their manifestations within the systems and processes working to address perpetrators.

Methodology

Research aims

This research seeks to deepen understanding of practitioners' experiences of working with perpetrators. It is situated within the context of recent shifts across sectors that emphasise the need to improve the extent and depth of engagement with perpetrators. This recent shift, noted in both policy and practice as highlighted in earlier chapters, aims to achieve better perpetrator engagement and accountability and to ensure that decision-making within practice is centred around perpetrators. The implications of this shift, across the multi-agency spectrum, are important to understand, particularly as they may uncover opportunities and challenges for the sector. Ultimately, the study aims to establish whether this shift has resulted in any notable changes in practice with an emphasis on processes, systems and practitioner capabilities.

As outlined above, previous research in this area has predominantly highlighted the challenges faced by the sector in responding to perpetrators, often from a narrow, single-agency or initiative-specific perspective. This study seeks to expand on this existing knowledge by adopting a multi-agency approach, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the practice implications associated with the recent drive towards perpetrator-centred interventions. The study draws on the example of a London local authority well-known for its strong commitment to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the way that it invests in and innovates practice. This local authority serves as a relevant case study, as it has made strategic efforts to enhance the integration of perpetrator-focused responses within its broader VAWG strategy.

The study investigates the perspectives and experiences of practitioners across various agencies involved in this local authority's response to domestic abuse. It focuses specifically on practitioners as they are most likely to be the first to experience the effects - whether positive or negative - of these shifts in practice. The research questions this study aims to answer include:

1. How have systems and processes evolved in response to the increasing emphasis on enhanced engagement with perpetrators?
2. What forms of support, training or resources have been offered to practitioners to ensure they are adequately equipped to adapt to this shift?
3. Ultimately, what tangible outcomes has this shift achieved in practice and what opportunities and challenges have emerged as a result?

Interview questions

The interview questions developed for this study were shaped by several key factors. Insights gained from prior research (Chapter 2) informed the identification of existing processes related to perpetrators. This research analysed data from the local authority's daily MARAC, a multi-agency forum addressing medium and high-risk domestic abuse cases. The research process was further informed by familiarity with the local authority's systems, acquired through participation in various meetings and forums, which deepened understanding of local domestic abuse responses. This experiential knowledge guided the formulation of relevant and contextually appropriate questions. Finally, a review of the literature on multi-agency systems that address perpetrators provided foundational knowledge. This review informed the development of questions that reflect best practices and current trends in the field.

Process

Prior to the interviews, all participants received consent forms and information sheets detailing the research. Consent was given prior to interview. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with video and audio recordings made to facilitate subsequent thematic analysis. Given the diverse nature of the participant group, not all questions were universally applicable. Consequently, questions were tailored to ensure their relevance for each participant, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of data collected during the interviews.

Sampling

The recruitment process was designed to engage participants in various departments and teams within the local authority, including children's social care, housing, and the VAWG team, as well as external organisations such as the police and the NHS. Efforts to secure interviews with representatives from adult social care, probation, mental health services, substance use services, and a specialist gang intervention team were unsuccessful.

The study employed a combination of sampling methods to obtain a broad range of perspectives from practitioners within the multi-agency systems. This process generated 14 interviews. Purposive sampling was used to target relevant agencies identified through key contacts within the council, focusing on those most likely to provide valuable insights based on their area of expertise (Campbell et al, 2020). This approach enhanced the study's depth but carried the risk of potential bias, as selection was influenced by the VAWG team's contacts within the local authority. Additionally, some participants who were unable to take part in the research signposted information to their colleagues who then reached out to volunteer to take part. This approach, known as volunteer sampling, enabled the study to access participants who

might otherwise have been overlooked (Hiratsuka, 2025). While this approach broadens participant identification, it can introduce bias as volunteers might share specific characteristics influencing their decision to engage in the study (*ibid.*). For instance, those who volunteered may have held a strong commitment to addressing perpetrators or a vested interest in tackling domestic abuse. Finally, during interviews some participants recommended additional practitioners for inclusion. This method of snowball sampling is effective for reaching hard-to-access and hidden populations (Johnson, 2014). However, selection here may compromise the voluntary nature of participation in the study (Hiratsuka, 2025) and reinforce subjectivity through the non-random selection of such participants (Johnson, 2014).

Demographics

A total of 14 interviews were conducted with practitioners working in children's social care (n=3), education/early prevention (n=1), health (n=1), housing (n=1), police (n=2), VAWG and youth safety (n=5), and victim advocacy services (n=1). Those interviewed represented a diverse range of professional roles, encompassing frontline practitioners working directly with perpetrators, victims and children, advisors responsible for providing guidance and training, managers and supervisors overseeing direct interventions and practitioners operating as part of a multi-agency process in roles that involve conducting research on cases and facilitating practice discussions. For the purposes of gaining a holistic perspective around how perpetrators are addressed in this local authority, this mixture of roles and responsibilities was purposefully sought out. This allowed for a better understanding of what happens with perpetrators at the frontline as well as on operational and strategic levels, emphasising the importance of both direct and indirect perpetrator interventions.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis using NVivo software. An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed, wherein the primary data generated from interviews was systematically examined to identify key themes and patterns to inform the subsequent analysis and discussion (Guest et al, 2012). Despite the limited sample size of 14 interviews, the themes raised were commonly echoed by all participants. As such, data collection became saturated, and it was assessed that no additional insights could be gained from holding further interviews.

Findings and Discussion

While participants shared some examples of good practice, it was evident that shifting focus to perpetrators remains a significant challenge. All participants acknowledged experiencing difficulties in prioritising perpetrators. Overall, the consensus was that the challenges outweigh improvements seen in practice with pockets of good practice being sporadic and inconsistent. Analysis of transcripts revealed the two main themes and their associated sub-themes as hindering practitioners and their agencies from shifting the focus to perpetrators (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Themes

Systemic factors	Workforce factors
Lack of information	Onus in frontline practice remains on victim
Lack of engagement with perpetrators	Decision-making not centred around victim safety
Lack of consequences faced by perpetrators	Practitioners' gender
Lack of resources and interventions	Practitioners' safety
Lack of training and skills	Perceptions of perpetrator work

Some themes overlapped but efforts have been made to categorise these as clearly as possible to present the findings in a coherent way. This is indicative of the complex nature of this work. For example, inadequate training and concerns around the skill set of practitioners can hinder effective interventions. While this may appear to be an issue relating to an individual practitioner, it is certainly a systemic one observed across all agencies.

All quotes supporting the discussion are anonymised to protect the identity of participants. References to participants' agencies, roles, and gender are minimal and included only when deemed necessary to contextualise the findings. No additional references are made to any other unique features that may enable identification of participants. This is essential given the small sample size and the fact that, in some cases, only one participant was interviewed per agency.

Systemic factors

Challenges in how systems respond to domestic abuse perpetrators were consistently noted. These challenges were entrenched, multi-layered and spanned across many areas of practice. Participants expressed concerns regarding the lack of available information, the limited consequences faced by perpetrators, insufficient efforts to directly engage with perpetrators, inadequate resources and intervention options and the lack of training and support offered to practitioners to work effectively with perpetrators. Participants reflected on how these factors hindered their ability to centre practice around perpetrators in ways that could promote visibility and accountability.

Lack of information

A significant challenge shared by participants was the invisibility of perpetrators within their own systems and across the multi-agency systems they work within. Several participants reflected on how this lack of visibility, often evidenced by lack of information or ineffective documentation, hindered the process of holding perpetrators accountable. One participant simply stated “*we just don't have any information on the perpetrators*” (participant 1), whilst another reflected on how this creates a barrier around shifting practice.

“When you've got the referral for a perpetrator or the information from the [daily MARAC] about the perpetrator, it is minimal and shifting the focus is quite difficult when there's a lot of unknowns and so I think the biggest thing is the unknowns, because there is a lot of unknown around perpetrators” (participant 13).

This lack of information was observed in two primary ways.

Ineffective recording and flagging

Invisibility of perpetrators within systems was a concern shared by participants across several agencies, indicating a wider issue that transcends individual agency practices or issues with individual practitioners. Some participants noted that information recorded within their own systems was often outdated and inaccurate. Others observed that perpetrator records were not consistently linked to the case records of victims and children, contributing to the perpetrator's invisibility, with both children's social care and early help databases being the prominent examples. The responsibility for updating and linking case files would have been placed on the relevant teams and practitioners assigned to work with the family. However, there was a lack of consistency in practice noted in relation to whether this task was completed. One participant

expressed hope that individual practitioners in these two agencies would rectify this issue in documentation but was less certain that this consistently translated into practice.

Another reflection on recording issues was around agencies that do not flag someone as a perpetrator. One participant shared concerns about this in relation to practice within housing exclaiming “*you record she's a victim, why don't you record that he's a perpetrator?*” (participant 10). A failure to record an individual as a perpetrator could result in critical information being overlooked by practitioners and agencies working with the family. Consequently, this diminished visibility can hinder efforts to ensure accountability and result in missed opportunities to safely plan interventions.

Difficulties gathering relevant information

Participants felt that the lack of information was exacerbated when perpetrators lived outside the local authority with all participants, bar one, reflecting that obtaining relevant information becomes more difficult. This was worsened when perpetrators lived outside of London with one participant referring to this as “*an absolute nightmare*” (participant 11). They provided an example of a high-risk case where they sent a query to another local authority regarding a recent incident that took place in that area. The participant noted that they are still waiting for a response more than four weeks later. Of more concern, some participants felt that their ability to identify and respond to serial offenders was significantly compromised when perpetrators reside outside of the local authority or when incidents occur in other areas. This highlights how the absence of pertinent perpetrator information can obstruct practitioner efforts to promote accountability. For participants, this lack of visibility, manifested in having no knowledge of these individuals’ offending behaviours, hindered their ability to address such behaviours within their interventions.

Reflecting on positive practice examples, one participant described a shift in their own approach to documentation, with recording practices becoming more focused on perpetrators. They reflected on how they ensure their case records detail the abuse by focusing on perpetrators' actions, “*making sure that the perpetrator is far more present in our writing because they are often missing*” (participant 8). This shift in practice was due to a training session they attended around improving language and recording in VAWG cases.

Access to relevant information and effective, reliable documentation of perpetrator-related data is critical for intervening with this population and has significant implications around risk management (Respect, 2022). Lack of relevant information also leaves agencies vulnerable to manipulation by perpetrators (Mandel et al, 2020). Participants consistently noted that insufficient information and inadequate recording practices result in agencies overlooking information necessary for centring interventions around perpetrators. Overall, the absence of reliable data and standardised practices for documenting information emerged as a significant gap.

Lack of engagement with perpetrators

Moving beyond the visibility of perpetrators as depicted within databases and case records, it is critical to explore how such visibility translates into frontline practice. Many participants highlighted concerns around low engagement rates with perpetrators with one participant referring to engagement with perpetrators as “*the biggest challenge*” they face in relation to holding perpetrators accountable (participant 9). Several reasons for this were discussed by participants.

Lack of curiosity around perpetrators

Some participants felt that some agencies lack curiosity and a willingness to respond to perpetrators. One commented on how perpetrators are already known to services who “*aren't doing anything about the abusive behaviour*” (participant 10). So, while these perpetrators are known, so can be deemed as visible, there is no evidence of efforts to hold them accountable. They felt this was a particular concern for housing where they have consistently observed this lack of curiosity.

“She's got black eyes, you know, like very obvious. They're just chatting away to him like nothing happened and you're like, you don't even wanna ask anything. You know, the curiosity is not there” (participant 10).

Some participants described how this lack of curiosity is exacerbated when domestic abuse cases come to the attention of agencies for unrelated reasons. This was identified as a challenge by some who felt this can hinder practice. Two participants noted this as a particular issue for probation who may be working with perpetrators where the index offence¹⁴ is unrelated. There was an appreciation that the burden to be curious and robust then falls on individual practitioners. However, many felt this was a gap in practice and reported that practitioners can be restricted in what they can do with such perpetrators due to limitations in their roles as well as lacking the confidence and authority to address the abuse. Focusing on probation responses, studies show that the lack of an inquisitive approach can lead to superficial relationships between practitioners and perpetrators that do not create meaningful engagement (Renahan and Gadd, 2024). One participant described this challenge in this area of practice as missing an

¹⁴ An index offence is the offence which has resulted in the offender's current conviction or sentence (Scottish Parole Board, n.d.).

opportunity with a “*captive audience*” (participant 7). In this context, while visibility may be achieved (i.e. through case records that indicate they are a perpetrator), frontline practice still misses the opportunity for direct engagement. As a result, practice fails to translate this visibility into meaningful accountability.

Concerns were also raised at the opposite end of the spectrum, with participants sharing how some practitioners may go too far in their approach, ultimately hindering constructive curiosity. One example cited was the use of the label perpetrator during direct contact with some feeling this could push perpetrators away from services. As one participant remarked, such terminology would “*shut down any work or conversations about it*” and “*reduce any kind of curiosity*” (participant 14). Conversely, others argued that this labelling can foster meaningful engagement where the term can promote curiosity and specificity around behaviours in ways that facilitate accountability. What is evident is that there is no definitive answer regarding whether to use the label. Rather, there is a greater need for practitioners to assess context carefully and remain cognisant of the potential impact on engagement with each individual perpetrator they work with.

Perpetrators' lack of insight

Perpetrators' lack of acknowledgement of the abuse was noted as creating a barrier to efforts to work effectively with them. One participant described how engagement can be “*very difficult*” (participant 6) when perpetrators deny their actions. Another reflection on engagement issues focused on how this lack of insight can impede direct work with perpetrators who minimise the abuse or blame other external factors such as the victim. It was felt that this presentation resulted in perpetrators not facing scrutiny for their behaviours.

“Minimising or not saying that there's an issue in terms of their behaviour or kind of seeing the problem is with their partner or ex-partner. There's only so much we can do [...]. It is more easy for that sort of perpetrator to escape that kind of scrutiny” (participant 7).

One participant raised a concern around practitioners who may mirror excuses and justifications given by perpetrators, leading to practice that colludes with them. They disclosed hearing comments from other practitioners describing perpetrators as “charming” and being “such a nice person, you would never imagine that he could do that” (participant 6).

A further participant offered an insightful thought into why they think perpetrators may not want to acknowledge the abuse linking this to power and control dynamics.

“Domestic abuse is all about power and control, and it [the acknowledgment] is relinquishing that control, which is really, really difficult for that person to do” (participant 8).

Findings linked to how perpetrators respond to services align with existing literature showing how perpetrators often respond in ways that minimise or justify the abuse, emphasising the importance of confronting these responses (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). Challenging such responses is vital for visibility and accountability and it is evident that work is still needed to ensure this is achieved. Failure to work in this way can inadvertently result in victim-blaming attitudes and practices (Davies et al, 2024).

Fear of consequences

One participant explored further reasons why perpetrators may be reluctant to engage with services, suggesting that fear of agency consequences may be a contributing factor.

“They won’t go to other professionals for the obvious reasons. If I go to children’s social care, they’ll take my kids off me. Go to housing and I’ll lose my flat. If I go to probation, they’ll put me in prison [...] there’s lots of consequences” (participant 13).

This aligns closely with Turhan (2021) suggesting that perpetrators’ failure to acknowledge their actions may stem from fears of criminal justice consequences or losing access to their children. Further concerns they may have could be linked to the stigma and shame associated with being identified as a perpetrator.

Fear of being judged

Fears around being judged was another factor that participants felt may contribute to lack of engagement. One, working within a perpetrator service, shared feedback that they receive from perpetrators who have completed the programme. For many, the key to sustained engagement was the non-judgmental approach of practitioners they worked with, which they described as being different from what they experience when working with other agencies. In their feedback, perpetrators reflected on finding it easy to engage with practitioners in the perpetrator service as they challenged them and discussed their behaviours in a non-judgemental way. This participant highlighted how this approach considers that *“there’s a difference between accountability and judgment”* drawing attention to the fact that this often gets masked by other practitioners (participant 13). This aligns with literature indicating the tension between accountability and stigma observed in direct work with perpetrators (Harvey et al, 2024). Achieving this balance is complex and requires a level of skill and a deep understanding of how to work with shame in ways that foster engagement and accountability as opposed to defensiveness and disengagement (Camp, 2018). The data clearly highlights that such knowledge is limited across the various agencies involved in responding to perpetrators, indicating issues around implementing an effective approach to this.

Overall, direct engagement emerged as a primary concern with participants reflecting on difficulties they face when working with perpetrators directly as well as challenges arising from other agencies and practitioners not recognising the importance of this work or lacking the capacity and skill for it. A factor contributing to this issue may be that practitioners do not view working with perpetrators as part of their role (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Concerns around lack of engagement appear to be further exacerbated for perpetrators who present in challenging ways or when fears around consequences and being judged are not considered. The use of the perpetrator label appears to play a critical role here, with agencies and practitioners needing to assess whether its use can promote curiosity or hinder engagement.

Lack of consequences faced by perpetrators

A recurring frustration among participants was the limited consequences and ramifications experienced by perpetrators. This was exacerbated by systems and processes that facilitated this lack of accountability, with the CJS being a prominent example of this. Notably, participants expressed ways in which perpetrators' presentation added another layer to the lack of consequences.

'I wasn't convicted so I didn't do it'

A key example provided by participants was on their inability to challenge perpetrators around their behaviours once they have been found 'not guilty' at court. In many of their cases, they reported that perpetrators would say 'I wasn't convicted so I didn't do it' to evade accountability and shut down attempts to address the abuse.

"From the perspective of working with men who might be using these behaviours, it [the court's decision] creates a really unhelpful binary of guilty or not [...] it means

that those men are very rarely convicted and then that's then seen as being off the hook" (participant 14).

A further participant commented on how perpetrators repeatedly walking away with a ‘not guilty’ verdict and facing no consequences allows them to learn more about how systems can work in their favour.

"You can't prove it [...] OK, I got arrested and OK, I got even charged or whatever and I got interviewed. I stay in custody for a day. I went to court, but look, I walk away. So you know, that doesn't mean anything, you know. So next time and the following time or whatever, they'll have that attitude. I know exactly what's gonna happen. That kind of attitude" (participant 5).

Conviction rates for domestic abuse offenders remain a significant concern with a recent report indicating that only 5% of reported offences result in a successful conviction (DAC, 2025b). The notably low rate underscores the challenges faced by practitioners seeking to achieve accountability in their own work as their efforts are undermined when perpetrators evade legal accountability. Some participants reflected on how this issue is intensified when victims are prosecuted for violent resistance or self-defence, further cementing perpetrators’ claim of innocence and victim status in such cases. This was attributed to victims’ reluctance to report abuse due to fears of repercussions, while perpetrators easily report incidents due to the lack of fear. Participants linked consequences for victims in these cases to the harsher criminal justice sanctions that women face, resulting in female victims being “*quickly criminalised*” (participant 7) and perpetrators then evading accountability by being “*flagged as victims*” (participant 1). Research by CWJ (2022) provides a detailed examination of the consequences of this approach, highlighting the extent to which such cases are prevalent in practice and often result in perpetrators facing no consequences for their false counter-allegations.

'It's one word against another'

Overall, low conviction rates for perpetrators of domestic abuse were cited as one of the biggest barriers to effective engagement. This was linked by many participants to thresholds within legal courts and the evidence required for determining guilt. Many reflected that, by nature, domestic abuse is the type of crime that often leaves very little evidence behind. One participant noted that current criminal justice thresholds are not fit for purpose in relation to domestic abuse where common evidence that courts rely on, such as CCTV or witness statements, is a rarity and decision-making relies on assessing 'one word against another' – a phrase used by several participants. This appeared to also be a phrase that perpetrators use to evade accountability with participants recounting working with perpetrators who would deny the abuse stating 'it's my word against hers'. One participant reflected on how this results in high-risk perpetrators facing no consequences for the abuse.

"It's often one word against the other. So often the police could find it difficult to kind of get into court as it is, and so that means that obviously those high-risk offenders aren't going to prison. They aren't being managed by probation. They're just out and about" (participant 8).

Perpetrators are getting 'slaps on the wrist'

On the few occasions where participants reported working with perpetrators who have been convicted, a significant challenge remained around the repercussions attached to this conviction being trivial and minimal.

"My personal opinion is the amount of police time and the amount of partner agency time, the amount of distress and risk to the victim is not reflected in the sentencing. Particularly, you know, like the fact that they are a vulnerable person in their own home

where they should be safe should be viewed as an aggravating factor to me” (participant 11).

This was echoed in relation to perpetrators who breach protection orders such as non-molestation orders, where it was felt that these are not taken seriously by courts. One participant commented on how these orders, which contain a power of arrest if a breach occurs, rarely lead to perpetrators being arrested. One further participant reflected on how this lack of consequences has allowed perpetrators to continue evading accountability.

“In my opinion, perpetrators are getting smart and tactical at evading the system and they're getting slaps on the wrist like nothing is really holding them accountable for the stuff that they're doing” (participant 1).

Participants expressed frustration with the CJS perceiving it as a hindrance to their ability to intervene with perpetrators. While some felt their teams and agencies were working towards better engagement and interventions for perpetrators, they noted that a measurable shift in improving criminal justice sanctions was still lacking. Concerns regarding criminal justice responses emerged as the most frequently cited issue among participants with many highlighting the barriers this presents for their work. A prevalent sense of frustration and helplessness was expressed as participants felt that their efforts were rendered fruitless due to the absence of legal accountability. The fact that perpetrators were able to exploit this further compounded this challenge, making it considerably more difficult to seek visibility and accountability. These findings emphasise the interconnectedness of these two concepts, particularly in how they operate within the context of Spencer’s (2016) ‘web of accountability’. Here we see how failure to secure accountability within one system, such as the CJS, can undermine visibility and accountability within other systems. When cases are dismissed or result in ‘not guilty’ verdicts, perpetrators’ actions and the harms associated with them are less

acknowledged by other agencies, ultimately limiting their capacity to respond effectively and pursue accountability.

The CJS has been consistently criticised for its failure to provide protection for victims and enforce sanctions on perpetrators (DAC, 2025b). Much of the existing legislation that this system relies on was designed to address physical violence between strangers, making it unfit for addressing the complex dynamics of domestic abuse (Bishop, 2016). The CJS has also been criticised for structural shortcomings, such as its failure to respond to coercive control effectively and the gendered nature of this abuse, with some describing it as one of “the most heavily male-dominated and patriarchal institutions within society, where gendered assumptions are still evident and often go unchallenged” (ibid.: 60).

Limited resources and interventions

Participants reflected on resourcing constraints creating difficulties in finding appropriate services to signpost perpetrators to, commenting on various layers to this concern.

Limited responses around the housing needs of perpetrators

Most participants strongly believed that inadequate responses to the housing needs of perpetrators increased risks to victims particularly from perpetrators who are homeless and, therefore, more likely to want to maintain the relationship. They emphasised that the primary goal of addressing perpetrators’ housing needs is to reduce risks to victims and any children with one participant stating “*house them [perpetrators] to make the victim safe*” (participant 2). Overall, many reported having negative experiences in relation to addressing these housing needs with one participant summarising their experiences as “*horrific*” (participant 6). A commonly cited example involved cases in which housing declined to offer accommodation to

perpetrators, despite this being assessed as the safest option for victims. These concerns align with findings in the literature that suggest that housing practitioners often lack knowledge of how to respond to perpetrators and are unaware of the measures available to them to do so (Henderson, 2019; Scottish Women's Aid, 2017).

Limited variety of interventions offered

A lack of diversity in terms of service provision was noted by various participants who felt that current offers are “*for the minority of people*” (participant 14) leaving most perpetrators with no access to specialist programmes. One participant felt this resulted in agencies having to hold and manage risks themselves.

“There's not a particularly wide range of support services available for perpetrators of domestic abuse and also it's difficult because one size doesn't fit all. There's different levels of risk [...] it's quite difficult I think for local authorities to be able to offer support to perpetrators at every single level and therefore you kind of rely on, I guess, on other services to kind of manage some of that risk” (participant 8).

If services only target a subset of perpetrators, other cohorts will remain hidden and efforts to attribute responsibility to them will remain inadequate. It is crucial to recognise the need for a diverse range of services that are tailored to the varying levels of risk, need and motivation (Respect, 2022).

Lack of agency resources

Beyond perpetrator-facing work being a barrier, some participants reflected on wider issues around agency resources and funding decisions. One participant attributed what they referred to as “*massive failings*” (participant 11) in the court system to limited resources which have

led to a huge backlog of cases that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are consistently dealing with. This participant offered an example of a case where CPS had offered the courts no evidence less than two hours prior to the court hearing, resulting in a decision made to cancel the court hearing. Attempts by the police to appeal this were unsuccessful and the case was dropped due to lack of evidence, leaving the victim with no protection and the perpetrator to face no accountability.

Provision of services for perpetrators is inconsistent and marked by many gaps in both the availability and range of what is offered (DAC, 2022; Davies et al, 2024). Evidence from the literature and current findings highlights the need for tailored interventions that address the diverse profiles and behaviours of perpetrators (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Hester et al, 2006; Respect, 2022). Ensuring that appropriate services are available is crucial to preventing gaps in provision from becoming a barrier to visibility and accountability.

Lack of training and skills

The level of training input varies significantly among practitioners who respond to domestic abuse, both within and across agencies. This was evident in participant accounts around the training they received on domestic abuse and, more specifically, on how to work with perpetrators. This was particularly noted for those working within social care where two participants discussed gaps in training when studying to qualify as social workers. One described how domestic abuse “*wasn't really explored in any specificity or depth*” reflecting on how this contradicts with the fact that domestic abuse will be the biggest risk factor any social worker deals with (participant 14).

“In terms of my own experiences of working with perpetrators, certainly when I was a newly qualified social worker, I found it very challenging, partly because of the lack of

training that I'd had at the time and training also wasn't specific to working with perpetrators" (participant 8).

Overall, participants reflected on how efforts to engage with perpetrators, in ways that promote visibility and accountability, were undermined by the lack of knowledge, skills and confidence in undertaking this work. Several participants offered examples of how this lack of training can manifest itself in practice.

Practitioner anxieties around working with perpetrators

Many comments were made on anxieties that practitioners could have around directly working with perpetrators with one participant commenting on practitioners having a "*fear around perpetrator work*" (participant 3). The lack of training around how to work with perpetrators was described as leading to anxieties which cause practitioners to overlook the abuse.

"They just don't speak to perpetrators, even if they see the abuse happening, like they see it, they know it's happening. They see women covered in bruises, everything happening, phones just being taken off them as soon as they give the women phones, all this stuff. But they are always afraid to talk to them, and partly because of risk, which I get, but they just don't know how to do it" (participant 10).

This presents a more nuanced dimension of visibility. Although such perpetrators may be known to agencies, thus visible in one sense, a significant challenge persists regarding how this visibility translates into practice and its effectiveness in supporting efforts to hold them accountable. Consequently, it is necessary to question what such practices aim to achieve in relation to reducing harm, addressing perpetrators and safeguarding victims. Participant

reflections reveal a tension in practice between possessing knowledge of perpetrators and actively responding to them and their behaviours in ways that promote effective practice.

Lack of foundational domestic abuse knowledge

Some participants reported concerns around practitioners who lack basic domestic abuse awareness that is needed for their roles. One participant commented on practitioners within the CJS who do not have “*a good understanding around DV [domestic violence] and how to have that conversation and address it*” (participant 1). Another felt that lack of training within the police affected “*how they approach and deal with perpetrators*” resulting in potential collusion with perpetrators and practice where “*they don't believe the survivor*” (participant 2). Finally, one participant noted that the lack of fundamental training manifests itself in how some practitioners regard non-physical abuse as less concerning meaning that perpetrators who use other forms of abuse are less visible and not held accountable. Once again reflecting the complex nature of visibility, lacking basic domestic abuse knowledge resulted in practitioners being aware of incidents of abuse but without fully grasping the nature of perpetration, power and control dynamics or the behavioural patterns in question. This lack of depth in understanding meant that practice fell short of achieving meaningful and comprehensive visibility.

Lack of specialist skills for specialist cases

Some participants noted that the lack of training was especially problematic in cases requiring specialist knowledge and skills. This included child to parent violence (CPV), familial abuse and teenage relationship abuse cases. Participants felt that such cases are inadequately addressed due to ill-equipped systems that result in them being taken less seriously than adult

IPV. This then hindered effective interventions with perpetrators, particularly as those perpetrating abuse in such cases remained invisible from systems.

Working with cases where allegations of abuse are made by both parties was described as common in practice. Many recognised that these appear to mostly be cases where victims have used violent resistance against perpetrators or cases where perpetrators are making false counter-allegations against victims. Some participants noted that agencies and practitioners often lack the necessary training to adequately identify and respond to these cases. When systems fail to comprehend the nature of these allegations and enable them, perpetrators evade accountability as practitioners overlook their behaviours and tactics. This can lead to practitioners shifting their focus back to victims with one participant noting that agencies then “*bring in her behaviour, you know, trying to excuse his behaviour*” (participant 10). This participant felt that this was more commonly observed in teenage relationship abuse cases where practitioner attitudes reflect a disbelief that these young women are acting outside of “*expected female behaviours*”. Conversely, when agencies do not succumb to false counter-allegations, one participant observed that perpetrators may file formal complaints against agencies and practitioners, drawing attention to how the lack of training exacerbates this issue. In such cases, they commented on how failure to consider the underlying motivations behind these complaints enables perpetrators’ manipulation of systems.

Lack of adequate training significantly undermines practitioners’ capacity to engage effectively with perpetrators leaving them without the necessary knowledge, skills and tools needed to do so (Davies et al, 2024). Expecting practitioners to centre their work around perpetrators without providing appropriate training can be considered as setting them up for failure. If any progress is to be made around visibility and accountability, practitioners need to be systematically and

consistently provided with the necessary training to achieve this (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Humphreys et al, 2024).

Workforce factors

These challenges were indicated in relation to practice decisions on individual cases, aspects of the identity and experiences of practitioners, and perceptions around the importance of perpetrator work. These concerns evidenced that the workforce has not yet adapted to prioritising perpetrator-centred practice or to working in ways that promote visibility and accountability.

Onus in frontline practice remains on victim

Participants repeatedly referenced the challenges involved in shifting the focus of traditionally victim-centred practices to perpetrators. This concern remained evident even when new perpetrator-focused initiatives, such as a perpetrator panel, were introduced. Some felt that many practitioners found this shift challenging as the norm has always been to focus discussions on victims. One participant commented on the challenges faced in helping practitioners understand that this is a perpetrator-focused process and that “*focusing on the perpetrator is also a way of protecting the survivor*” stating that it took four months of the panel operating before they felt any positive shifts in focus (participant 13). They further reflected on how practitioners who struggle to keep the focus on perpetrators retreat to focusing on victims as a result.

“People get stuck on knowing what to do with [perpetrators] and therefore, naturally people then go back to what they are comfortable with [...], let's go back to what we are comfortable with and talking about how we're keeping her safe” (participant 13).

Recently, however, the perpetrator panel was discontinued following a review by the local authority which concluded that the panel was not delivering the intended outcomes in terms of focusing interventions on perpetrators and improving how they are targeted. It was determined that the panel had largely replicated existing victim-focused processes rather than offering a distinct response to perpetrators. This development illustrates that the implementation of new systems and processes does not, in itself, ensure corresponding shifts in professional practice. It highlights the need to address underlying workforce attitudes and organisational cultures to achieve meaningful changes to practice.

Practitioners interviewed offered specific agency examples that demonstrated challenges around shifting the focus from victims onto perpetrators. One agency whose practice was consistently highlighted as an issue here was children's social care. Concerns were shared around how processes within children's social care focus on victims, leaving perpetrators invisible from practice. These were highlighted by participants in various agencies, including those working within children's social care. Participants commented on practice placing “*too many expectations on mums*” (participant 14) and that there is a “*reliance on the victim to protect the children, to protect themselves and to do things to not be at risk and reduce the risk*” (participant 1).

One participant reflected that, despite improvements in practice over recent years and a reduction in negative reflections of victims' ability to protect themselves and their children, the

onus is often still placed on victims. They explored how this improved emphasis on perpetrator visibility and accountability has not necessarily diminished the focus on victims. The participant noted how framing victim efforts using more positive language is still indicative of them being the focus of practice.

“I mean there is the flip side of that, sometimes which is the kind of positive, of well it's positive that the mother has acted protectively and has called the police etc. So the onus, whether it's viewed in a negative or a positive sense, the onus is still expected to be kind of partly on the mother in those sorts of situations” (participant 7).

Although some efforts have been dedicated to improving practice within children's social care, these appear insufficient. Further work is evidently needed to prevent victims from being held responsible for perpetrators' actions. While child protection processes clearly require social workers to work directly with fathers who are abusive, the focus of practice remains compromised by ongoing high expectations placed on mothers who are experiencing abuse (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). Participants identified the lack of engagement with perpetrators in their role as fathers as a significant challenge. One participant commented on perpetrators being invited to social care meetings but with no real expectation for their attendance, unlike the mandatory obligations placed on mothers who are victims. Perpetrators' engagement with social care was described as being “*more of an option*” (participant 9). This practice can lead to victims voicing frustrations.

“Certainly more than one case where a woman has sort of expressed frustration that she's the one having to do all the dealing with social services and the main problems was the ex-partner and they're getting off without that happening. And that's a fair kind of criticism” (participant 7).

One participant reflected on how this practice needs to change if we want to improve the way we work with perpetrators stating: “*if we're so rigid in what [the victim] has to do then we need to think about our approach being more rigid with the perpetrator*” (participant 9).

Some participants were able to offer examples of a shift in practice in children’s social care with less blame placed on victims, and consequently, more perpetrator visibility. A participant who is a manager commented on how they guide practitioners they supervise to write about cases in ways that affirm the “*perpetrator is heard and seen*” (participant 8). This involved ensuring case notes reflected the perpetrator’s actions and their impacts as opposed to focusing solely on how victims have responded to the abuse. Others reflected on how practice that places the onus on victims is “*happening less and less*” (participant 7) and “*definitely nowhere near as bad*” as it used to be (participant 4).

Participant reflections signified practice that predominantly focuses on victims while overlooking perpetrators. A key issue appears to be a limited understanding of the fact that engaging with perpetrators is integral to ensuring victim safety (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015; Respect, 2022). A recurrent theme in the accounts provided was the emphasis on victims’ behaviour and decision-making, rather than centring interventions around perpetrators. Specific examples shared around responses within children’s social care further evidence practice that positions victims as both the problem and the solution. Moving away from this practice is critical for achieving perpetrator visibility and accountability and needs to begin with elevating practice standards around engaging with perpetrators and agencies’ expectations of them.

Decision-making not centred around victim safety

While it is crucial to ensure that decisions regarding perpetrators prioritise victim safety, participants provided examples where they felt this was not consistently reflected in practice. Here, many examples were shared highlighting this to be an issue with criminal justice and housing responses. Several participants reflected on criminal justice decisions negatively impacting victim safety. They cited instances where perpetrators were released or granted bail by police or courts returning to the same address as or in close vicinity to victims. Ultimately, one participant felt that the CJS's failure to centre their decisions around victim safety “*stops survivors bothering because they know it's not going to keep them safe*” (participant 4). They discussed how this means victims are less likely to report future abuse resulting in perpetrators evading legal accountability. These shortcomings in CJS responses fail to safeguard victims, deter them from seeking support and, ultimately, reinforce perpetrators' power and control (Respect, 2024).

Participants shared case examples where perpetrators were offered housing options by the local authority but with unsafe decisions being made by accommodating them close to victims. One example involved a perpetrator who had made false counter-allegations that he was the victim, resulting in him being housed in the same local authority as the victim despite her being relocated 10 times by the same local authority due to the abuse. A further example cited a perpetrator involved in a serious stalking case who was housed directly across the road from his victim. These examples are evident of practice that has failed to shift focus onto a better understanding of the risks posed by these perpetrators when making such significant decisions. It also indicates that the behaviours of these perpetrators were either invisible to decision-makers or simply overlooked.

While it is widely acknowledged that perpetrator-focused practice must be underpinned by a commitment to victim safety (Morran, 2013; Morrison et al, 2019; Respect, 2022), the findings suggest that practice does not align with this. Participants shared examples of decisions made by agencies which exacerbated risks to victims and pushed them away from services. In relation to the concepts of visibility and accountability, it is important to consider the consequences of victims experiencing such flawed responses. To what extent are these victims likely to report subsequent abuse or seek agency support? When victims' ability to disclose is minimised and obstructed, this can result in a diminished understanding of perpetrators and their actions, rendering them effectively invisible and unaccountable. Victims who perceive agencies as exacerbating their situation are less inclined to speak out against perpetrators which, in turn, will have a detrimental impact on whether agencies are aware of perpetrators and their abuse (visibility) and their capacity to address the harm they cause (accountability).

Practitioners' gender

Various participants reflected on additional challenges faced by female practitioners mirroring what has been highlighted in the literature above. This was a significant concern for some participants who highlighted that agencies responsible for tackling domestic abuse often consist of a "*heavily female population of workers*" (participant 10). Reflecting on how most perpetrators known to services are male perpetrators using abuse and control towards women, this led to implications around how female practitioners felt about engaging with perpetrators. For example, one participant noted how this could result in female practitioners "*not wanting to meet him*" (participant 10) indicating an avoidance of perpetrator-facing work. One female participant explored the difficulties they face when working with perpetrators presenting in one of two ways - those who are "*challenging, really defensive, quite aggressive*" and those who are "*nice and manipulative*" (participant 8). They reflected on how their gender exacerbated

these experiences, at times, leaving them feeling intimidated and finding direct work with perpetrators a challenge. Another female participant focused on the difficulties they face due to their challenge of male perpetrators' power and control and the role their gender plays within that.

“The fact that I am a female [...] what they would do is that they try and have that power and control within the session because that's sort of like being taken away from them, isn't it? I'll start to see it manifest within the sessions. And I'm also a woman talking to them about their behaviour changing so depending on how they view women as well, sometimes it can be challenging. A lot of them will come and try and be charming” (participant 6).

One participant who works as a manager reflected on the stark differences in the experiences of the male and female practitioners they oversee.

“I do feel that as a [female practitioner], you do have to set up those boundaries and challenges a bit firmer. The misogynistic personalities come out a lot quicker for [name of female practitioner]. The men will test her from the beginning to see how much they can get away with just in terms of even attitudes. The way they speak to her. So I think she does have to work harder at the beginning to set those boundaries with them than [name of male practitioner] does because when they go to [name of male practitioner] there's like respect because you're a male” (participant 13).

The significant and distinct impacts that are unique to female practitioners working with male perpetrators are well-documented in the literature (Apps and Gregory, 2011; Iliffe and Steed, 2000, Reimer, 2020; Renehan, 2021). The findings of this study reveal how perpetrators' use of power and control can result in female practitioners being unwilling to engage with them,

thereby disrupting efforts to achieve visibility and accountability. More importantly, they highlight how perpetrators often resort to abuse, manipulation and control when confronted with practitioners who seek to promote these concepts. Efforts to disrupt power and control are inherently needed to effectively engage with perpetrators (Brown et al, 2010), but they can result in behavioural patterns that consist of tactics aimed at regaining power and control (Mandel et al, 2020). It is evident from the findings that these tactics are disproportionately and significantly experienced by female practitioners.

Practitioners' safety

When discussing safety measures for working with perpetrators, many participants shared strategies they implemented to address concerns around physical safety. This was particularly relevant for cases where participants knew they were working with perpetrators with high-risk behaviours or who have posed risks to practitioners in the past. Strategies used by participants included asking security staff at the office building to monitor the room they are in, conducting visits with a colleague, positioning themselves near exits, and holding visits at the office instead of perpetrators' homes. Despite these examples, many acknowledged that the above arrangements are often down to individual practitioners as well as discussions they have with their managers. What strategies can be implemented also heavily relied on what resources were available to them and their agency. Many of these were informal arrangements and were often not documented clearly within case files or in multi-agency discussions. Concerns around safety also appeared to influence the type of discussions some participants felt able to have with perpetrators and the extent to which they could challenge the abuse.

“Maybe I feel like I have to be more careful in the way that I talk or act, which I think is the result of people being intimidating or controlling” (participant 14).

These findings clearly indicate how safety risks that practitioners may perceive and experience can affect the nature of their engagement with perpetrators. As illustrated in the preceding quote, practitioner efforts to hold meaningful conversations can be undermined by anxieties around safety. Participants reflected on how these concerns can be heightened for practitioners who fear using the perpetrator label in direct work due to concerns for their own safety. One participant commented on how this can lead to practitioners “*skirting around the issue*” (participant 10) as they worry about potential risks to their own safety if they were to adopt such a direct approach in addressing perpetrators. If safety concerns remain unaddressed, research indicates that practitioners may adopt unsafe, avoidant or anxiety-driven practices in their work with perpetrators (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Humphreys et al, 2024), further undermining efforts to achieve visibility and accountability.

Perceptions of perpetrator work

Participants described challenges around perceptions of perpetrators within the workforce and around some practitioners’ ability to appreciate the value of perpetrator-focused work. These attitudes were highlighted as being a barrier to achieving the shift in focus towards better perpetrator engagement and accountability. There was a sense that the priority has always been to work with victims and that shifting the focus could be seen as detrimental to victim work. One participant spoke of practitioners who still view direct work with perpetrators as “*not victim minded*” which results in a lack of effort by these practitioners to engage with perpetrators (participant 10). Many felt that practice continues to prioritise removing perpetrators from the picture with minimal to no direct engagement taking place with them. This tendency reflects underlying tensions between these two approaches, highlighting the limited recognition of the fact that engaging perpetrators is integral to safeguarding victims.

Participants reflected on the interconnected nature of perpetrator-focused approaches and broader efforts to safeguard victims and any children involved.

“I doubt people even think about it as a priority. It's just in the way it's spoken about and you know I think the focus is on protecting children and survivors of abuse, which is obviously not wrong. But one of the ways you do that is by challenging men's behaviour, but yeah, there's no focus on that at all” (participant 14).

“Even some people would think ‘ohh like, does he deserve that help?’ . Maybe he doesn't, but if he gets that help and it makes him a better person in society and then it helps the survivor then you've not really done a bad thing have you” (participant 3).

Related to this were attitudes towards those working directly with perpetrators in behaviour change programmes. Some felt they were perceived as friends of or advocates for the perpetrator, or even as colluding with them. Additionally, one participant reflected on hearing comments from other practitioners such as *“I don't know how you could sit in a room with him”* (participant 3) which they felt revealed a sense of judgement around their work. This reveals an interesting dichotomy and underlying tension within agency responses where two conflicting attitudes and approaches are presented - a drive towards achieving perpetrator visibility and accountability, alongside a contradictory desire to ignore and erase their presence from intervention efforts.

Further perceptions emerged regarding how perpetrators are labelled by practitioners. Some participants reflected on how referring to them as perpetrators can lead to negative and narrow perceptions that fail to consider that this is *“not their only identity”* (participant 8). They emphasised that there are aspects of their identity unrelated to the abuse that should not be

overlooked. In contrast, others argued that such labelling is entirely appropriate, believing it helps to establish the correct perceptions. In their view, this approach facilitates the clear identification of both the individual and their actions, enabling practitioners to perceive perpetrators more accurately and in ways that promote accountability.

The findings presented here clearly highlight the need to ensure that practitioners and agencies grasp the critical link between perpetrator-focused work and victim safety. For such efforts to be effective, it is imperative that the central message - that perpetrator-focused interventions are inherently victim-centred - remains consistently emphasised. The findings related to perceptions of perpetrator workers are noteworthy and highlight a gap in literature that explores these. There is limited understanding regarding how practitioners within multi-agency networks perceive those who work with perpetrators closely and on a long-term basis. The tension between the desire for this work to be done and the view of it as 'undoable' reveals underlying complexities. Moreover, this conflict raises important questions around its impact on visibility and accountability, particularly if such attitudes translate into a reluctance or lack of efforts invested by those who question how someone 'can sit in a room with him'.

Limitations

While the study encompassed a broad range of agencies across the statutory and voluntary sectors, the perspectives of a few agencies were not captured. Multiple attempts were made to seek out participation from additional agencies including mental health, substance use, adult social care and probation but these were unsuccessful. As a result, the practice experiences of these agencies are not reflected in this study. This can be perceived as a gap as these agencies

play an important role in tackling domestic abuse and interact with perpetrators regularly. Some of the challenges raised by participants in this study were related to the work of these absent agencies. Consequently, including representatives from these agencies would have been valuable.

The study involved interviewing 14 participants which can be considered a small number. Again, further efforts were made to interview additional participants, but this was not possible due to a lack of further responses from agencies contacted as well as time limitations that hindered continued efforts to seek further participants. However, it is useful to note that the issues raised by participants were frequently echoed by one another, meaning that data collection became saturated and limited additional insights may have been gained from pursuing additional interviews. Finally, for some agencies only one participant took part in the study. Therefore, it is important to employ caution when attempting to generalise the views of any participants to help gain a wider understanding of one agency's experiences.

Conclusion

Tackling perpetrators of domestic abuse has always been a challenging area of practice and remains so despite minor improvements in recent decades. This is reflected in the literature as well as reiterated by participants of this study. These challenges manifest on multiple levels - an individual practitioner's response, the practice and work culture of agencies, and the multi-agency systems that practitioners and agencies work within. They span across various aspects of perpetrator responses, evidencing significant systematic and workforce-related obstacles which hinder effective practices aimed at promoting perpetrator visibility and accountability.

Ultimately, these challenges result in practitioners and systems failing to address perpetrators and reverting to the default position of placing the onus on victims. While this is not a new or surprising finding, it is significant given the recent drive for practitioners to better engage with perpetrators.

Despite these challenges, there was a shared belief across all participants that perpetrator work is important and serves to safeguard victims and children. Many felt that services should intervene with perpetrators as this may be the thing needed to help their victims and children. In an era where practice in many areas across the country remains victim-focused, it is encouraging to see that all participants in this study appreciated the importance of direct work with perpetrators and the value that this brings in relation to safeguarding those around them. However, as one participant observed '*something is still missing*', emphasising the need to investigate the barriers that hinder efforts to improve how systems tackle perpetrators and to take the necessary steps towards meaningful change.

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Chapter 4: A way forward - Working towards change

Summary

The primary objective of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive guide to support practitioners, agencies and systems in developing a more perpetrator-focused approach to domestic abuse practice. It seeks to inform and shape future practices with a particular focus on enhancing interventions for perpetrators of domestic abuse. This is accomplished through an examination of both direct interventions and the broader systemic reforms necessary to ensure effective prevention and protection from domestic abuse. The research underpinning this chapter is part of a PhD project partially funded by a local authority in London. The content has been specifically tailored to support this council's violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy which is scheduled for renewal in 2026. The chapter presents findings from this research in the form of a series of recommendations. The recommendations have been informed by a review of relevant guidance and policy documents, analysis of data from the council's daily Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), observations of various meetings, and interviews with practitioners across the multi-agency systems working to tackle domestic abuse. Presentation of the research findings are complemented with references to existing literature where relevant. The chapter has been developed with the local authority in mind, ensuring that the research findings, as encapsulated in these recommendations, can serve as a catalyst for meaningful change in relation to achieving perpetrator visibility and accountability. An overview of recommendations is presented in Figure 3.

Overview of recommendations

Figure 3: Overview of recommendations

A. Enhancing engagement and intervention options for perpetrators
Recommendation 1 – offering the right intervention at the right time
Recommendation 2 – improving pathways into behaviour change interventions
Recommendation 3 – improving documentation of perpetrator information
B. Strengthening support structures for practitioners
Recommendation 4 – upskilling the workforce
Recommendation 5 – access to case support
Recommendation 6 – mechanisms to support around practitioner safety
C. Improving effectiveness of local processes
Recommendation 7 – prevention
Recommendation 8 – monitoring and evaluation
Recommendation 9 – dissemination of outcomes
D. Promoting systemic improvements on a national level
Recommendation 10 – improved information sharing
Recommendation 11 – improved legal accountability
Recommendation 12 – national perpetrator data

Introduction

In 2024, the UK government made a commitment to halve VAWG in a decade, pledging to use “every government tool available to target perpetrators and address the root causes of abuse and violence” (Labour Party, 2024: 67). Within the same year, VAWG was also declared a national emergency by police chiefs (NPCC, 2024). In England and Wales, responding to

domestic abuse costs approximately £78 billion (HM Government, 2023), or £84 billion when adjusted for 2024-2025 pricing (NAO, 2025). This reflects a substantial increase since the initial estimate of £66 billion was made in 2017 (Oliver et al, 2019), with no evidence to suggest that this figure is either stabilising or declining.

Current processes and systems appear to be inadequate in effectively addressing domestic abuse, a conclusion consistently reinforced both in practice and across various reports and evaluations. In January 2025, the National Audit Office (NAO) published a review on government spending dedicated to tackling VAWG. The findings of the review indicate that outcomes for victims have not improved, and no discernible progress has been made by the government in enhancing prevention strategies or achieving long-term cultural and societal changes – key commitments made in the 2021 ‘Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy’ (NAO, 2025). In the same month, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) issued a report detailing significant shortcomings within the criminal justice system (CJS) as evidenced by a decrease in the number of domestic abuse suspects referred by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for a charging decision with numbers falling from over 125,000 in 2014-2015 to less than 75,000 in 2023-2024 (DAC, 2025a). The report describes the apparent deterioration in outcomes as “appalling” (*ibid.*: 55).

These findings underscore the urgency with which responses to VAWG and domestic abuse need to be reviewed, improved and strengthened. Efforts to do so need to be evident at a national level as stated by the UK government (Labour Party, 2024). While some of the required changes must focus on victims and children, it is increasingly evident that far greater attention and resourcing are needed to address perpetration. Perpetrator-focused interventions have been expanding globally over the past few decades, but this area of practice continues to

present significant challenges for practitioners and agencies. It is clear that our understanding of effective interventions for perpetrators remains limited (Lila and Gilchrist, 2023).

This chapter outlines a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing practice related to perpetrators, drawing on findings from several pieces of research. It incorporates patterns identified in analysis of data from the local authority's daily MARAC and pre-daily MARAC¹⁵ and themes emerging from interviews conducted with practitioners across various agencies central to addressing domestic abuse. Consistent patterns emerged from both data sets, and these have been grouped together to provide the recommendations set out in this chapter. In summary, the findings emphasise the need for improvements in processes and systems across multiple levels which include perpetrator-facing engagement, support for practitioners, improvements within local systems and addressing critical issues at a national level.

Methodology

The recommendations presented here are a culmination of research findings derived from a collaborative project with a local authority in London which facilitated access to data to analyse, practitioners to interview and meetings to observe. Their role has been instrumental in building the evidence base used for this chapter which has been complemented with a review of the existing literature and an examination of policy and guidance documents relevant to the area of perpetrator intervention. The overarching research question has focused on examining the visibility and accountability of perpetrators and the manifestations of these objectives in

¹⁵ In this local authority, the pre-daily MARAC is a weekly meeting held between the police and VAWG to discuss cases referred that do not meet the daily MARAC criteria.

practice. This chapter seeks to integrate the empirical evidence gathered throughout the study and present it as a set of recommendations to improve this area of practice. The study involved using multiple data sources.

Daily MARAC data analysis

Research involved an analysis of case data recorded as part of the daily MARAC and the pre-daily MARAC. The focus of this analysis was on information related to perpetrators and any action planning centred around them. The study examined referral forms, meeting minutes and action plans created for a sample of 100 daily MARAC cases randomly selected. This was complemented by a further random selection of a sample of 20 pre-daily MARAC cases. Both samples were selected from cases heard between 1st of April 2021 and 31st of March 2022. In this context, a case refers to a single referral for one perpetrator-victim dyad.

This study explored the following research questions

1. To what extent does this daily MARAC make perpetrators visible?
2. Is there evidence of multi-agency efforts to intervene with perpetrators in ways that seek to achieve accountability?
3. Are outcomes around perpetrators consistently and systematically measured and monitored in ways that demonstrate that visibility and accountability are being meaningfully pursued?

Qualitative practitioner interviews

Interviews were conducted with 14 practitioners working across the multi-agency spectrum in agencies that included children's social care, housing, the council's VAWG team, the police

and the NHS. To identify practitioners for these interviews various sampling methods were employed such as purposive, snowball, and volunteer sampling.

This study aimed to investigate the following research questions

1. How have systems and processes evolved in response to the increasing emphasis on enhanced engagement with perpetrators?
2. What forms of support, training or resources have been offered to practitioners to ensure they are adequately equipped to adapt to this shift?
3. Ultimately, what tangible outcomes has this shift achieved in practice and what opportunities and challenges have emerged as a result?

The interview questions addressed three key areas: systems and processes, opportunities and challenges, and case and perpetrator characteristics. Practitioners were asked a key question which has been pivotal in shaping the recommendations in this chapter - '*What systems, processes, or interventions do you think are needed to improve how agencies work with perpetrators?*'. Where relevant, anonymised quotes from the practitioner interviews are presented to illustrate their perspectives.

The two research methods outlined above were also complemented by

- observations of four daily MARACs between January and August 2022 to gain a deeper understanding of the process, who the key agencies in attendance are and how case decisions are made;

- several observations of the local authority's VAWG Board¹⁶ meetings to gain a wider understanding of the strategic underpinnings of VAWG work and partnership working within the council;
- access to different systems and databases including children's social care, early help, records of case consultations held by the VAWG team and data relating to the council's in-house perpetrator programme.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address various aspects of perpetrator responses, highlighting the necessity to target improvements at multiple levels.

A. Enhancing engagement and intervention options for perpetrators

This set of recommendations focuses on the provision of direct interventions to perpetrators, emphasising the importance of offering the right support in a timely manner while also enhancing pathways to such interventions. Additionally, advocating for improvements in both the quantity and quality of data held on perpetrators to enable agencies to become better informed and more strategic in how they target direct interventions.

¹⁶ The VAWG Board is a strategic meeting held quarterly to provide leadership and strategic oversight over VAWG commissioning and service delivery.

Recommendation 1 – offering the right intervention at the right time

Interventions available to perpetrators are often fragmented and do not always consider the diverse needs they may present with. Much inconsistency exists across the country with interventions designed to manage perpetrators within the community currently being a “postcode lottery” (DAC, 2025a: 39). Research has found that responses which offer limited interventions and implement a one-size-fits-all approach lack effectiveness and do not account for the different experiences and motivations of perpetrators (Dutton and Corvo, 2006).

Practitioners interviewed shared examples of significant challenges in identifying appropriate services and ensuring perpetrators can access these at the right time. This issue was particularly concerning as many practitioners noted the considerable time and effort spent building relationships with perpetrators and obtaining their consent to signpost to specialist services. Such efforts were then undermined when practitioners were unable to locate suitable services or faced delays and obstacles such as waiting lists. The need to have tailored interventions that addresses the different needs and stages of a perpetrator’s journey was apparent in the data. It is essential to consider how a wide range of support can be offered.

All motivation levels

Perpetrators may present to agencies at varying levels of motivation, affecting the nature of engagement and interventions. When faced with perpetrators unwilling to acknowledge or address their behaviours, some practitioners reported feeling unable to progress their work. They felt that agencies overall are ill-equipped to respond to such perpetrators in ways that foster a desire to change. Perpetrators’ readiness to change, or the lack of, should not act as a barrier to working towards intervening with them (DAC, 2025a). It is crucial that practitioners feel confident to engage with perpetrators prior to them expressing readiness to change as this

can lead to positive outcomes in terms of their subsequent engagement with such programmes (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015).

All risk levels

Practitioners interviewed emphasised that interventions should be tailored to reflect the varying risk levels presented by perpetrators, noting that a single programme or service will not be suitable for all. To tackle perpetrators more effectively, approaches need to consider the “whole ‘continuum’ of domestic violence perpetrators, from early intervention to chronic and severe offenders” (Hester et al, 2006: 16). The daily MARAC data indicated that 58% of perpetrators within the sample had perpetrated abuse towards one victim, while 42% had two or more victims. This indicates an almost even split of serial and non-serial perpetrators; both of which may require different approaches. Practitioners also highlighted the need for interventions to be aimed at perpetrators not identified as high-risk to tackle their behaviours prior to any escalation.

“One service won’t fit all and there needs to be kind of support for all the different levels of risk”.

All types of abuse

Practitioners indicated the unique dynamics and challenges presented by specialist cases such as teenage relationship abuse, family abuse, and child to parent violence (CPV). Many noted that standard domestic abuse responses tend to focus predominantly on adult intimate partner violence (IPV) and are insufficient for addressing these cases, resulting in support and safety mechanisms being inadequate and agency responses to such perpetrators being limited. Practitioners felt that, as the dynamics of abuse, power and control in these relationships differ, so should the type of interventions offered and how agencies approach such cases.

All needs

Three areas were noted as evidencing significant gaps in responses to perpetrators - mental health, substance use and housing. The daily MARAC data revealed that 16% of perpetrators had an identified need solely around their mental health, 13% solely around substance use and 27% had needs related to both, collectively representing 56% of the sample. However, only 14.3% of these cases (eight cases in total) had action plans addressing these needs. This gap was echoed in the practitioner interviews where many reported facing challenges when addressing perpetrators' mental health or substance use needs. They described examples where funding limitations and long waiting lists resulted in perpetrators not being able to access the support needed.

Practitioners expressed concerns around responses to the housing needs of perpetrators, noting gaps in service provision which resulted in finding accommodation for perpetrators being described as nearly impossible. Many felt that this exacerbated risks to victims and children with agencies not understanding the value that housing a perpetrator can have on promoting safety. Furthermore, a discrepancy was noted between the reality of accessing housing support for perpetrators and recent shifts in practice where practitioners are encouraged to move away from an assumption that the default position should be for victims to leave their homes.

Timeliness of responses

The timeliness of responses emerged as a recurring theme in the practitioner interviews. Practitioners noted that agencies often missed vital, time-limited opportunities to engage with perpetrators. This was due to waiting lists, funding constraints or a perception by some practitioners that addressing the domestic abuse was not within the scope of their current work

with perpetrators. Examples included police not signposting perpetrators to behaviour change programmes while they are in custody and probation failing to address domestic abuse when working with perpetrators on a non-domestic abuse index offence¹⁷. Practitioners emphasised the importance of capitalising on the brief window of opportunity available and engaging perpetrators while they are a ‘captive audience’.

“You gotta strike when the iron’s hot. If they’re reaching for help at that point, that’s when you need to jump on it, because you might have a small window of opportunity”.

This recommendation aligns with national guidance on perpetrator interventions. Principle 3 of the Respect Standard¹⁸ highlights the need to “match interventions to the risk, needs and capacity of perpetrators, offering the right service to the right people at the right time, to optimise the potential for a successful intervention” (Respect, 2022). Additionally, Standard 4 of the Home Office’s standards for perpetrator interventions states “the right intervention should be offered to the right people at the right time” (Home Office, 2023)¹⁹.

Summary of recommendation

- Interventions should be comprehensive and tailored to address the diverse levels of risk, motivation and need that perpetrators present with. This is pertinent to those responsible for commissioning such services but also to those delivering these interventions on the ground.

¹⁷ An index offence is the offence that has led to the offender’s current conviction and sentence (Scottish Parole Board, n.d.).

¹⁸ The Respect Standard was developed by Respect to provide a framework for safe, effective, victim-focused ways of working with perpetrators (Respect, 2022).

¹⁹ The Home Office standards for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions were developed to offer guidelines and principles for commissioning and delivering perpetrator interventions (Home Office, 2023).

- The provision of interventions by any agency offering direct services to perpetrators should be timely with the aim of maximising the limited opportunities available to engage with perpetrators effectively.

Recommendation 2 – improving pathways into behaviour change interventions

The need for improved pathways was evident both in the daily MARAC data and in the practitioner interviews. Within the daily MARAC sample, records indicated that only one of the 100 cases involved a referral being made to a behaviour change programme. This is despite action planning for five cases recommending that a referral should be considered. At the time of analysis, data indicated that only one of those actions led to a referral being made. Practitioner suggestions focused on expanding referral pathways and increasing the number of perpetrators engaging in behaviour change programmes. Concerns were raised around the limited knowledge that practitioners and agencies may have around what is on offer within the local authority. One practitioner commented on having limited knowledge around options for perpetrators despite having specialised in domestic abuse work for many years. This highlights how promotion of domestic abuse services continues to primarily focus on victim support, underscoring the challenges in achieving real culture change around perpetrator interventions.

Recommendations made by practitioners focused on addressing such concerns through two specific avenues - police and self-referrals. Furthermore, the literature points to additional agencies, such as housing, health and adult social care, that can play a key role in facilitating access to behaviour change interventions.

Creating pathways for referrals from police

Recommendations were made to create a pathway for the police to refer perpetrators they interact with into programmes, particularly in cases where charges are not pursued and a decision of ‘no further action’ (NFA)²⁰ has been made by the police. Not offering this option to perpetrators at this stage was described as a missed opportunity to facilitate access and counteract the narrative that many perpetrators use this ‘NFA’ as proof they are not abusive. This tactic of denial was described by many practitioners as something which hinders their practice and ability to address the behaviours of such perpetrators.

This concern is supported by both the daily MARAC data and the pre-daily MARAC data, both of which revealed that 97% of cases and 100% of cases, respectively, had involvement with the CJS. However, none of these cases had been referred to the local behaviour change programme by any CJS agency. This indicates a missed opportunity by the one agency that has had contact with almost all perpetrators within both samples. Data provided by the programme around referrals into the service (up to June 2024) also indicated that none of the referrals into the programme have come from the police. National work indicates that interventions targeting perpetrators while in custody can encourage them to engage with behaviour change programmes, even for those who had previously declined a referral or were considered too risky or difficult to engage with (Drive Partnership, 2020).

Encouraging and promoting self-referrals

In a study interviewing perpetrators, many reported a lack of knowledge around behaviour change interventions which had prevented them from accessing such programmes (Harvey et

²⁰ NFA - indicates a decision made by the police to take no further action against the suspect following advice from the CPS (College of Policing, 2013).

al, 2024). This highlights the importance of ensuring perpetrators are aware of the options available to them. In May 2024, the local authority introduced a self-referral pathway for perpetrators to access the behaviour change programme. From May to December, 10 perpetrators self-referred with four deemed as suitable and successfully accessing the programme. While this number may seem small, it is important to consider the positive outcomes observed by the programme. These include 81% of perpetrators reporting a better understanding of domestic abuse and 41% of victims feeling safer within 3 months of the start of intervention. This underscores the value of every single referral into a programme, highlighting what can be achieved if the right interventions can be accessed.

Addressing gaps in key agency responses

The daily MARAC data revealed gaps in the involvement of some key agencies in addressing perpetrators. Health and housing can play a key role as they frequently come into contact with perpetrators (Home Office, 2022). Given that much of domestic abuse goes unreported, it is essential to broaden the focus beyond the CJS when intervening with perpetrators. The daily MARAC sample showed that only 3% of referrals came from housing providers and 4% from mental health services. In fact, data shows that victims are more likely to disclose the abuse to health practitioners than any other agency (DAC, 2022). This prompts a critical question as to why such disclosures rarely result in referrals to the daily MARAC. In relation to agency contact, only 1% of perpetrators had clearly documented contact with housing, 1% with mental health and 1% with a hospital. Moreover, data provided by the behaviour change programme (up to June 2024) indicated that no referrals had been received to date from practitioners working in health or housing. To address gaps in health responses, the local authority is currently in the process of embedding a domestic abuse specialist within a hospital setting.

The literature underscores the critical importance of direct enquiry with perpetrators within health settings ensuring that the right questions are asked and creating an environment that facilitates disclosures, engagement and access to support (Khalifeh et al, 2015; Morgan et al, 2014; Schalk and Fernandes, 2024). For housing, many perpetrators may encounter housing services in indirect ways and for reasons unrelated to the abuse (Henderson, 2019). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the need for housing practitioners to navigate such cases safely and ensure that referrals to specialist services are made as needed (ibid.).

A further notable gap in the data was observed in relation to the role of adult social care. Adult social care plays a central role in addressing domestic abuse, but research indicates a lack of understanding of what this entails (Robbins et al, 2016). The daily MARAC data revealed a complete absence of referrals from adult social care, no documented contact with perpetrators and no referrals made into the behaviour change programme. These gaps highlight the need for targeted efforts to support adult social care in fulfilling their responsibilities in responding to perpetrators. These responsibilities should encompass assessments of risk, holding perpetrators accountable, and making referrals to specialist services where appropriate (LGA and ADASS, 2015).

Summary of recommendation

- Routes into behaviour change programmes need to be improved. This can include creating pathways for police to consider a referral for every case that has received an NFA decision.
- Self-referrals should be promoted widely to improve access for perpetrators who may have limited or no contact with agencies.

- Pathways need to be developed for agencies who have regular contact with perpetrators, namely housing and health, to encourage their practitioners to identify perpetrators and refer them into behaviour change programmes.
- Work is needed to understand gaps around adult social care's response to domestic abuse and to promote their role in responding to perpetrators.

Recommendation 3 – improving documentation of perpetrator information

Effective responses to perpetrators require documentation of relevant data that can aid in efforts to directly engage with them as well as to disrupt their behaviours. Clear documentation can inform decision-making and counteract attempts made by perpetrators to manipulate systems (Mandel et al, 2020). It can also support practitioners' ability to assess their engagement more accurately and evaluate change (Mandel, 2020).

The daily MARAC data revealed some gaps in information recorded around perpetrators. For instance, 20% of perpetrators were known to have abused multiple victims but limited data made it difficult to determine the exact number. This highlights a gap around knowledge of their patterns of behaviours and whether further risk management was needed around additional victims. Additionally, 7% of cases lacked clarity on whether the perpetrator had additional needs, 13% had no known address on file, and 17% had missing or incorrect information around their date of birth. Four cases involved victims experiencing abuse by multiple perpetrators but information around additional perpetrators was minimal. For two of these cases, this included no details of their names. Information on these factors is crucial for support and safety planning and gaps in this data could lead to poorly informed decisions regarding interventions. Additionally, there was limited, documented evidence to suggest that efforts have been made, or are planned, to address these gaps in knowledge.

Practitioner interviews echoed these issues, highlighting the prevalence of outdated and insufficient perpetrator data. Additional concerns were identified including agencies failing to flag individuals as 'perpetrators' on their systems and not linking perpetrator case files to those of victims and children leading to gaps in knowledge regarding key risk information. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) identified similar challenges within policing, noting that a reliance on manual flagging processes can contribute to data inaccuracies (NPCC, 2023). Addressing these issues is essential as improving responses to domestic abuse requires consistent recording and improvements in systems used for documenting and managing relevant data (College of Policing and NPCC, 2024).

Ultimately, practitioners noted that the lack of comprehensive information on perpetrators undermines the effectiveness of interventions with two key issues contributing to this - a) limited access to information, and b) ineffective recording of available data.

Summary of recommendation

- All agencies, and the systems they use, need to be better equipped to record and flag perpetrator information in a way that is consistent, reliable and well-documented.
- Where gaps in knowledge exist, efforts should be made and clearly documented to demonstrate that this information will be sought.
- Where gaps in knowledge persist, efforts should be directed towards understanding the underlying reasons for these gaps and identifying strategies to address them.

B. Strengthening support structures for practitioners

Recommendations within this category focus on how practitioners can be best supported to enhance how they intervene with perpetrators. The focus here is on ensuring practitioners feel an increased sense of confidence and competence, and that they are supported around their wellbeing.

Recommendation 4 – upskilling the workforce

The need for comprehensive training to support practitioners in intervening with perpetrators was evident throughout the research. Many practitioners noted having had limited or no access to training around domestic abuse, particularly how to work with perpetrators. Many felt this contributed to fears and anxieties that impacted their engagement with perpetrators. Meanwhile, others reflected on observing a lack of curiosity around domestic abuse in the practice of other agencies, which they attributed to lack of training and skills around this area of work. In 2024, acknowledgement of this gap prompted the DAC to call for compulsory domestic abuse training to be embedded for those working within children and family services (DAC, 2024). In a recent report on children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse, the DAC stated that the continued absence of such training "can be tolerated no longer" (DAC, 2025b: 22). The report calls for comprehensive and standardised training to be implemented across all relevant sectors, including to every practitioner working across education, health, and children and family services.

Lack of training can be seen as contributing to practice that focuses solely on victims and leaves perpetrators invisible. Research has found that practitioners working with families often do not view engaging with perpetrators as part of their role, a situation which is compounded by

gendered assumptions around family dynamics that focus attention on female victims and shifts it away from male perpetrators (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015). The daily MARAC data resonated with this, with only 29% of cases indicating that at least one agency had direct contact with the perpetrator. While this low figure may be partly due to recording issues or incomplete information offered by agencies, it still highlights that many perpetrators evade contact with systems. Notably, only one case in the sample had clear documentation around direct contact being assessed as unsafe. Consequently, one can assume that contact should have been attempted with the remaining 70%.

“I think professionals who are working with perpetrators need to gain more confidence to be able to speak to them and name the abuse”.

Training is essential to enhance the level of skill within the workforce and to improve how practitioners work towards achieving the visibility and accountability of perpetrators. This could help shift the responsibility from victims onto perpetrators and counteract practice where agencies may still view perpetrator work as not victim-centred and not a priority. Addressing gaps in practitioner skills and confidence requires targeted training to support their efforts in rehabilitating perpetrators and preventing domestic abuse (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015).

This recommendation is consistent with national guidance. Principle 5 of the Respect Standard recommends that organisations should “have a well-trained and well-supported workforce and provide staff with ongoing professional development activities to fulfil their role and be culturally competent” (Respect, 2022). Additionally, Home Office guidance highlights that “interventions should be delivered by staff who are skilled and supported in responding to domestic abuse” (Home Office, 2023).

Summary of recommendation

- Practitioners should be equipped with appropriate, standardised and mandatory training designed to enhance their knowledge, skills and confidence in engaging effectively with perpetrators. Such training is essential for any practitioners likely to encounter domestic abuse concerns within their roles, even if infrequently.
- Improving documentation of efforts to directly engage with perpetrators, irrespective of the outcome, is essential for evidencing practitioner efforts to intervene with perpetrators. Clearly recording all attempts made and the reasons for non-engagement can support the establishment of a consistent practice standard whereby engaging with every perpetrator, where it is safe to do so, becomes a minimum professional expectation for all domestic abuse cases.

Recommendation 5 – access to case support

Practitioner interviews highlighted significant benefits from access to case consultations with the VAWG team as well as from the presence of co-located domestic abuse specialists within different teams and agencies. This model allowed practitioners to seek expert advice on their work with domestic abuse cases, offering valuable opportunities to discuss complex cases and receive tailored case guidance. They felt this enhanced their ability to make informed decisions as well as increased their knowledge and understanding of how to work with perpetrators more effectively. Establishing a space where practitioners can discuss cases and explore support options with more experienced colleagues can facilitate the development of their skills and knowledge, while also enhancing their ability to manage risks more effectively (Robb and McCarthy, 2022). Consequently, access to such mechanisms can improve how agencies respond to perpetrators.

“Case consults [...] really offer a lot of direction and support to the social workers to hold perpetrators accountable and challenge them on their actions and their words”.

Providing guidance to practitioners around the role of language was a specific element considered essential as part of case support. One practitioner reflected on support from the VAWG team that has influenced their use of language in both their own work and the work of practitioners they supervise. They shared examples of how this support allows them to challenge victim-blaming language and ensure that perpetrators are made visible and held accountable. Choices made around language can significantly impact who is visible and who is not (Boyle, 2018). The use of language that avoids naming or addressing perpetrators is often associated with a lack of accountability (Romito, 2008). Offering guidance to practitioners on language is crucial as it helps them navigate this area of practice effectively and make informed decisions around language and terminology.

Finally, findings underscored the importance of case support for situations where agencies receive complaints from perpetrators. Efforts to challenge the ‘status quo’ of perpetrator invisibility and lack of accountability can lead to perpetrators making complaints to agencies (Kelly and Garner, 2023). Such complaints serve as a tactic that can undermine practitioners’ identity and credibility (Humphreys et al, 2024). Practitioners interviewed shared instances where complaints had been made by perpetrators who objected to being labelled a perpetrator, their behaviours being named and not being seen as a victim following counter-allegations they have made. This is a challenging area of practice that organisations are often ill-prepared for, leaving practitioners feeling unsupported and without sufficient backing from their agencies

(Humphreys et al, 2024). Therefore, providing case support in these instances is essential to ensure that such complaints do not succeed in serving as a deterrent or a distraction tactic.

Summary of recommendation

- Continuing and promoting access to expert advice from domestic abuse specialists to provide valuable support for practitioners in how they manage their individual cases.
- Practitioners need to be supported to better understand the critical role that language can play in tackling victim blame and promoting perpetrator visibility and accountability.
- Offering case guidance and support to manage complaints from perpetrators is essential for ensuring a better understanding of how these can serve as a tactic. This can involve collaboration with complaints teams across agencies to improve responses to these complaints.

Recommendation 6 – mechanisms to support around practitioner safety

Intervening with perpetrators can have consequences and implications on practitioner safety which, in turn, can affect the quality of interventions. Research shows that practitioners who feel unsafe and unsupported in their work with perpetrators can become dangerous workers who minimise the abuse, collude with perpetrators or avoid working with them altogether (Humphreys et al, 2024). These concerns are also gendered in nature with more female practitioners reporting greater worries around both their physical and emotional safety (Tsantefski et al, 2023). Unaddressed safety concerns can result in systems becoming vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation and practice where victim blame is more evident (Mandel, 2019). Consequently, it is crucial to recognise the need for tailored approaches that

prioritise the physical, emotional and professional safety of practitioners (Humphreys et al, 2024).

The daily MARAC data revealed no substantive indication of whether practitioner safety was assessed at these meetings. Only one case briefly noted that working with the perpetrator would be unsafe but offered limited information around how this conclusion was reached. This does not necessarily imply that safety assessments were absent in the remaining 99 cases, but rather that such discussions were not documented. In the interviews, one practitioner did indicate that practitioner safety discussions take place at the daily MARAC but are not always recorded. Further practitioners reflected on how relying on information held on their systems for such assessments is not helpful as many case files contain information and warning flags that are outdated and inaccurate.

Practitioners who shared examples of safety measures they implemented when engaging with perpetrators recalled often relying on informal arrangements and limited resources. Many also reported how these concerns constrained their ability to address issues with perpetrators, an impact which they felt more significantly at the early stages of their careers.

“Maybe I feel like I have to be more careful in the way that I talk or act, which I think is the result of people being intimidating or controlling”.

Practitioner interviews also revealed a gap in support for emotional safety and managing the impacts of working with perpetrators. A particular concern was shared around the emotional and physical safety of practitioners who have their own personal experiences of abuse, with some indicating that they know this experience can be the motivation for many of those working in this sector. Such experiences can influence how practitioners view their own safety,

leading to skewed assessments of the risks they face (Mandel, 2019). Research also indicates the important role that supervisory support and access to case guidance can have on practitioner safety (Humphreys et al, 2024). Incorporating questions around practitioner safety in supervision discussions should be standard practice for all domestic abuse cases (Mandel, 2019). This can serve to support practitioners as well as emphasise the message that their safety is a priority for agencies.

Summary of recommendation

- Practitioner safety assessments should be consistently integrated into domestic abuse practice, particularly when working directly with perpetrators. For instance, including this as a standing agenda item in various forums such as the daily MARAC and in supervisory meetings.
- These assessments should be clearly recorded and documented along with relevant warning flags updated on systems. Warning flags or markers should also contain dates where relevant to ensure they can be updated accordingly.
- Consideration should be given to the varying support needs of practitioners with personal experiences of abuse, ensuring ease of access to additional support where needed.

C. Improving effectiveness of local processes

The following recommendations emphasise the need for locally commissioned work to adopt a proactive, rather than reactive, approach underpinned by robust and consistent monitoring

and evaluation. Furthermore, the dissemination of successful outcomes is identified as a key mechanism that can foster a positive shift in practice across the local authority.

Recommendation 7 – prevention

A key recommendation consistently emphasised in the practitioner interviews was the need for more preventive strategies that address the root causes of domestic abuse and focus on shifting societal attitudes that normalise VAWG. Societal attitudes in the UK continue to reflect a perspective that places the responsibility for ending the abuse on victims, while rendering perpetrators invisible in the narrative (Respect, 2024). The government's VAWG Strategy details a commitment to prevention and outlines attitudes toward gender roles, misogyny, condoning and normalising VAWG as risk factors that contribute to male perpetration of violence (Home Office, 2021). There is emerging evidence suggesting that interventions targeting these areas have the potential to change beliefs and attitudes, particularly if initiated early in schools and among children and young people (Home Office, 2021; Respect, 2024). As such, a critical element to addressing domestic abuse more effectively is to shift from a reactive approach to one that is more proactive and aimed at prevention (Respect, 2024). Wolfe and Jaffe (1999) highlight how responses to domestic abuse primarily focus on intervening when the harm has occurred as opposed to preventing it. This remains the case today. They advocate for a more comprehensive strategy that targets three levels - “(1) primary prevention to reduce the incidence of the problem before it occurs; (2) secondary prevention to decrease the prevalence after early signs of the problem, and (3) tertiary prevention to intervene once the problem is already clearly evident and causing harm” (Wolfe and Jaffe, 1999: 133). This model is a useful one to adopt as it approaches domestic abuse from multiple perspectives and at every level.

Practitioner interviews highlighted a good practice example in relation to ongoing prevention work within the local authority with suggestions that this needs to continue as well as expand further. This work focuses on education settings, offering training for school staff on gender inequality and recognising signs of domestic abuse as well as delivering sessions to students on healthy relationships and factors that can contribute to domestic abuse such as toxic masculinity and gender stereotyping. Additionally, this work involves reviewing curriculums to address issues such as gender inequality and to improve the representation of women in what students are taught. To counteract these gaps in the curriculum, school staff are supported with resources they can share with students to complement the national curriculum.

Further practitioner recommendations included standardising practice to ensure that practitioners working with children and young people consistently address the abuse and its impacts. This includes the recognition of how experiencing abuse can impact how they view what is healthy and acceptable behaviour in relationships. Currently, significant gaps exist in responses to the needs of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse as well as those exhibiting early signs of harmful behaviours which emphasises the need for early intervention to prevent further harm (DAC, 2025b). With the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) now recognising children who experience domestic abuse as victims in their own right (Home Office, 2024), the importance of direct work with these children is further underscored.

“Let's go and prevent it from happening. Go and teach the younger generation how it shouldn't be”.

Summary of recommendation

- Proactive strategies that can facilitate earlier interventions to domestic abuse need to be adopted. A coordinated effort by all agencies within the local authority is needed to achieve this.
- The existing prevention work within the local authority is valuable and should be expanded to include more schools and with increased resources.
- Support for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse must be provided consistently and effectively, particularly when early indicators suggest the development of harmful behaviours. This is relevant for any agency that has contact with children experiencing domestic abuse.

Recommendation 8 – monitoring and evaluation

The shift in prioritising work with perpetrators was largely welcomed by practitioners who recognised the potential for meaningful change in domestic abuse prevention and intervention. However, concerns were raised regarding the implementation of this shift, particularly around ensuring it is more than a superficial, ‘tick-box’ exercise. Practitioners expressed the need for this shift to translate into tangible outcomes, emphasising the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of intervening with perpetrators. This could ensure that work remains purposeful and adaptable while reinforcing the commitment to achieving long-term, sustainable change.

“...continually analysing and checking and monitoring the progress of these systems to see if they're working rather than just saying that we have them in place”.

Analysing outcome data for the daily MARAC sample presented some challenges. Of the cases examined, updates were recorded for only 54% of the identified actions. Moreover, even where updates were available, the information provided was limited which hindered an assessment of what has been achieved in relation to these perpetrators. The practice of recording actions and outcomes appears to be evolving with ongoing improvements in the level of detail being documented within the local authority.

This recommendation is in line with national guidance that underscores the importance of this process. Principle 6 of the Respect Standard emphasises the need for agencies to “monitor and evaluate the interventions they offer on an ongoing basis, so that they can evidence their effectiveness, impact and outcomes and help expand the knowledge base” (Respect, 2022). Home Office guidance echoes this in Standard 7 which suggests that “monitoring and evaluation of interventions should take place to improve practice and expand the knowledge base” (Home Office, 2023).

Summary of recommendation

- Establishing robust mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of perpetrator interventions is needed across multi-agency systems.
- Outcomes must be systematically tracked and recorded within the daily MARAC, with specific attention to perpetrator-related data to enable effective evaluation of practice.

Recommendation 9 – dissemination of outcomes

Practitioners often encounter limited positive outcomes in relation to perpetrator interventions and agencies providing short-term interventions may lack knowledge of any long-term outcomes. Practitioner interviews highlighted the value of sharing successful outcomes across

teams and agencies and using case examples to share learning and to demonstrate that effective and meaningful practice with perpetrators is possible. Such practice was seen as being beneficial to frontline practitioners, particularly those whose morale or motivation for this work may be undermined by repeat referrals and cases with few tangible results. Sharing stories of success can serve to inspire and motivate practitioners by enhancing their belief in the potential that well-implemented interventions can have on achieving meaningful change. Developing processes for sharing knowledge around good practice can facilitate learning from past experiences and improve future practice, while ensuring practitioners have access to the necessary resources needed to do so (Serrat, 2008).

Summary of recommendation

- Creating processes for dissemination of good practice examples and positive outcomes in a manner that upholds confidentiality and adheres to relevant data protection guidelines.
- Sharing of outcomes can provide practitioners with valuable opportunities to learn from the practice of others, while also serving as a source of motivation to enhance their own.

D. Promoting systemic improvements on a national level

These recommendations emphasise the need for improvements in national processes and systems which directly influence the effectiveness of local interventions as the national agenda will invariably impact the local. As part of its commitment to halve VAWG, the government asserted that achieving this “will require a national effort” (Labour Party, 2024: 67). These recommendations which are needed on a national scale focus on improving processes for how

information is shared, strengthening legal accountability for perpetrators and creating perpetrator data to shine a spotlight on them.

Recommendation 10 – improved information sharing

Collaboration between agencies is essential for ensuring cases do not slip through the cracks by facilitating the sharing of information pertinent to identifying and assessing risks, decision-making, and coordinating agency responses (College of Policing, 2015a). Effective sharing of information also serves to support safeguarding responses and the early identification of VAWG concerns (College of Policing and NPCC, 2024).

Practitioners interviewed reflected on challenges in obtaining critical information around perpetrators residing in other local authorities. This was noted in relation to information on risks, patterns of abuse in previous relationships, and details of incidents that occur in other areas. Concerns were noted by 13 out of the 14 practitioners, highlighting this as a major obstacle that hindered how they intervened with perpetrators and planned around victim safety. Practitioners spoke of challenges in obtaining information due to the lack of a dedicated Single Point of Contact (SPOC) in local authorities or a dedicated email inbox they can use to direct their queries. One practitioner noted a concerning example where they were waiting for details of a high-risk incident that took place in another local authority for over four weeks and still have not received a response to facilitate their work on this case.

This issue is exacerbated by the fact that a considerable proportion of perpetrators identified in the daily MARAC sample resided outside of this local authority. According to the data, 37% resided in other local authorities. One can conclude that planning for these perpetrators could have presented significant challenges for practitioners. A notable example within the daily

MARAC sample was the case of a 16-year-old victim whose perpetrator lived outside of London. This created a barrier in the level of information available about this perpetrator at the meeting with the only known detail being that he was 18 years of age. No name was known and no agency had any relevant information to share regarding him. Despite the victim being a young person who also had additional vulnerabilities, this lack of information hindered efforts to address the abuse with no actions noted around the perpetrator and no documented efforts around the need to rectify these gaps in knowledge.

Effective information sharing is vital for risk management (Respect, 2022). Something which appears to not be facilitated by systems for perpetrators residing outside of the local authority where victims reside, indicating that local authority borders act as a barrier. This recommendation is needed in relation to improving current processes, as MARAC information sharing agreements should have facilitated the seamless sharing of information in the two examples provided above. Additionally, it relates to the need to create new processes that standardise sharing of relevant information across agencies and local authorities without being hindered by geographical borders.

Summary of recommendation

- Pathways that facilitate information sharing across local authorities need to be developed within each agency on a local level and then nationally to facilitate communication across local authority borders, ensuring timely and effective sharing of perpetrator data.
- Building processes and systems that facilitate information sharing across agencies and local authorities can be achieved by having dedicated SPOCs or email inboxes within

agencies and in each local authority to respond to information requests routinely and efficiently.

- Timely and consistent communication across local authorities is essential when incidents occur outside of a single locality. This needs to include proactive sharing of information by an agency that becomes aware of perpetrators or victims residing elsewhere.

Recommendation 11 – improved legal accountability

A strong, robust justice system can deter perpetrators and protect victims, whereas a weak one discourages victims and fortifies perpetrators (Respect, 2024). Responses of the CJS towards perpetrators were commonly cited as a significant concern with the lack of legal accountability hindering practitioner efforts to address perpetrators. Many shared examples of perpetrators who use the fact that they face no criminal justice sanctions as a tactic to undermine and disrupt practitioner efforts to engage with them, often arguing that agencies have no basis for their concerns since they have not been convicted.

Despite the government committing to halving VAWG in the next decade, the previous decade saw worsening responses to it – a 43% reduction in the last decade in the number of suspects referred by the police to the CPS for domestic abuse-related offences and a conviction rate that currently stands at 5% for domestic abuse flagged offences (DAC, 2025a). Issues within the CJS in England and Wales have been attributed to its gender neutrality, lack of understanding of power and control dynamics and a reliance on prosecution legislation developed over 150 years ago primarily to address physical violence among strangers (Bishop, 2016).

Legal accountability is particularly crucial for this local authority as evidenced by data

indicating that 97% of perpetrators in the daily MARAC sample and 100% of perpetrators in the pre-daily MARAC sample were known to the CJS. Practitioners interviewed advocated for improvements in CJS responses to perpetrators at multiple levels. They emphasised the need for timely access to behaviour change programmes for those in prison or under probation supervision. Additionally, they called for the implementation of more severe sentencing that appropriately reflects the gravity of domestic abuse and the severity of what perpetrators subject victims to in their own homes. Linked to this was a recommendation to introduce minimum prison terms to be served for those convicted of domestic abuse-related offences. Finally, practitioners highlighted the importance of ensuring that criminal justice outcomes accurately reflect the considerable time and effort invested by agencies into bringing cases to court.

A further issue highlighting gaps in CJS responses was in relation to cases where counter-allegations are made by perpetrators against victims, whether these are false allegations or relate to victims acting in self-defence. Within the daily MARAC data, 14% of cases involved such dynamics with this figure increasing to 30% for the pre-daily MARAC sample. Analysis of these cases revealed practice outcomes that included victims being denied support around safety measures as well as actions taken against them such as being arrested or issued with protection orders against them. Meanwhile, the perpetrators for such cases faced no equivalent or parallel consequences. Additionally, the data revealed no efforts made to modify recording on the daily MARAC case listings regarding who the perpetrators and victims were once an assessment was made at meetings that this differed from what appeared on the initial referral information. Practitioners noted that while some agencies may update systems to accurately reflect the nature of these allegations, the police often fail to do so. This led to practice where victims were criminalised, ultimately losing their status as victims whilst perpetrators gained

it. Literature indicates this to be a significant concern in practice (CWJ, 2022). For cases involving self-defence, the DAC (2025a) report makes a recommendation for the Ministry of Justice to introduce legislation that ensures victims are not criminalised for acts of self-defence.

Various guidance documents are available for practitioners around adapting their approach to cases of counter-allegations. This includes guidance for police²¹, CPS²², and detailed guidance developed by SafeLives²³ that can be used by any agency.

Summary of recommendation

- Additional training and support could benefit practitioners working with perpetrators who use CJS failings as an excuse. This should be targeted at ensuring practitioners feel equipped to challenge such claims and persist in their intervention efforts.
- Comprehensive reforms are required nationally to address existing failings in how the CJS responds to domestic abuse and sanctions perpetrators.
- Improving processes for recording and flagging of cases involving counter-allegations. This should include ensuring practitioners feel adequately prepared to assess such cases and supported in making determinations regarding the identification of the primary perpetrator.
- A specific focus should be placed on improving practice around cases involving false allegations made by perpetrators or where victims have acted in self-defence. There

²¹ Section on 'Determining the primary perpetrator and dealing with counter-allegations' by College of Policing (2015b) - <https://www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/first-response>.

²² Section on 'Self-defence and counter allegations' by CPS (2024) - <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/domestic-abuse>.

²³ 'Responding to Counter allegations: Guidance: A review of practice' by SafeLives (2023) - https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Responding_to_Counter_allegations_Guidance.pdf.

needs to be accountability for CJS agencies when their guidance has not been adhered to and where this has resulted in victims being criminalised.

Recommendation 12 – national perpetrator data

Currently, significant gaps exist in relation to perpetrator data in the UK, with domestic abuse reporting by the ONS focusing primarily on victim data (Respect, 2024). While statistics on CJS outcomes are easily accessible (Godfrey and Richardson, 2024), less than 24% of perpetrators enter the CJS indicating a clear need for data beyond CJS outcomes (Respect, 2024). Furthermore, no data appears to be collected nationally or at a local level on repeat offenders to support responses to those causing the most harm (Godfrey and Richardson, 2024). The lack of perpetrator data contributes to their invisibility, allowing systems and processes to remain focused solely on victims, those who we can easily count. Concerns around data collection are echoed by the NPCC who acknowledge that gaps and inaccuracies exist in police data emphasising that improving the quality and consistency of data is a priority for policing (NPCC, 2023).

Implications on funding

Having limited data around perpetrators has significant implications for practice. Data influences policy, funding decisions and the commissioning of services (Respect, 2024). This absence of perpetrator data hinders agencies from fully understanding the scope of domestic abuse perpetration, resulting in ill-informed practice and policies (ibid.). The DAC (2025a) report highlights funding disparities for perpetrator interventions where decisions are left to individual agencies and local authorities.

Practitioners interviewed noted that although expectations around perpetrator work have increased, the necessary funding for training and resources to facilitate this remains insufficient. A sustained financial commitment is essential for embedding cultural shifts and achieving consistent national practices regarding the identification and management of perpetrators. Robust and comprehensive data can help address some of these issues by ensuring that funding decisions are better informed by data that provides insights into prevalence and need.

Summary of recommendation

- National data collection and reporting on perpetrators is essential to ensure their visibility in domestic abuse responses and to achieve consistency in the identification and management of perpetrators.
- National data can ensure agencies are effectively resourced and able to implement the right interventions that can achieve visibility and accountability of perpetrators and enhance victim safety.
- Robust data is critical to evidence the need for increased funding for perpetrator interventions and for elevating prioritisation of this work, with the goal of achieving meaningful, long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined in this chapter aim to enhance the efficacy of interventions with perpetrators of domestic abuse, while also strengthening the systems that underpin these efforts. This includes improving the availability of direct interventions and referral pathways

alongside ensuring that agencies have robust mechanisms in place for effectively and consistently obtaining and recording perpetrator information. Equally, it is essential to ensure that practitioners are supported and equipped with the right tools, guidance and resources to address perpetrators in environments that prioritise their safety and overall wellbeing. A strong emphasis on preventive measures and ensuring this work is consistent and widespread appeared to be of high importance. Measuring effectiveness of practice and processes as well as sharing good practice outcomes with practitioners across the local authority can motivate practitioners and reinforce the value and potential impact of perpetrator-focused work. Strengthening processes and responses to perpetrators on a national level is also imperative and will have local implications for any local authority. This should start with enhancing communication and coordination across local authority borders, strengthening what legal accountability can be achieved through the CJS and collecting perpetrator data nationally, ensuring this results in adequate and consistent funding commitments.

Collectively, these recommendations constitute a comprehensive approach to tackling domestic abuse fostering both immediate improvements and sustained, systemic shifts in practice. They demonstrate the need to ensure that efforts address every type of perpetrator, every level of intervention and within every agency if meaningful progress is to be made in enhancing the visibility and accountability of perpetrators.

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Conclusion

Approaches to address domestic abuse have undergone significant evolution over time. While historically the focus has centred around victims, there has been a growing recognition of the need to tackle perpetrators directly. This shift has brought about heightened expectations on systems and practitioners to adapt their frameworks and interventions accordingly. This thesis sought to explore whether practice has kept pace with these evolving expectations. The research was guided by questions designed to examine the experiences of individual practitioners operating within the paradigm of this shift, as well as the institutional processes and systems they operate within. In particular, the emphasis has been on assessing the notions of perpetrator accountability and visibility, explored through an analysis of relevant theoretical perspectives, practice approaches and practitioner reflections. The study examined these two objectives from multiple angles, using these as key concepts that can help evaluate responses to perpetrators.

Within the context of this study, visibility refers to the degree to which perpetrators are rendered present within systems. Specifically, whether they are recognised and acknowledged in how the abuse is referred to and how information is presented and documented. As for accountability, this pertains to the way responsibility for the abuse is assigned as well as the decisions made regarding interventions. This includes an evaluation of the decision-making processes related to the provision of services with a focus on how they aim to change their behaviours, reduce harm and address the risks they present. The study offered a critical analysis of the effectiveness of efforts to achieve visibility and accountability and sought to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder these outcomes. Focusing on the challenges associated with visibility and accountability, the study critically examined their conceptual meanings, explored their interrelationship, and identified key obstacles to their success. The overarching goal was

to generate insights that could inform and support future practice in addressing these challenges in meaningful ways.

To facilitate this research, full access to data was granted by a local authority in London, which acted as a partner in this collaborative project. Unrestricted access was provided for all daily Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and pre-daily MARAC data and additional systems including children's social care and early help databases, records kept by the violence against women and girls (VAWG) team on their in-house perpetrator programme and consultations held to support practitioners in their casework. Moreover, several meetings were attended to support this research and to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis that considers how processes and systems function within this local authority.

The study adopted a feminist, power-based theoretical framework which informed both the research design and interpretation of the findings. The analysis contributed to these theories by emphasising the central roles that gender, power and control play in obstructing efforts to achieve visibility and accountability. The data revealed examples of this in relation to female practitioners experiencing more significant safety concerns when attempting to challenge perpetrators and in how victim-blaming attitudes disproportionately impact female victims. Furthermore, the dynamics of power and control were evident in perpetrators' use of control and manipulation tactics such as filing complaints against practitioners, making false counter-allegations to portray themselves as victims, and employing denial and justification tactics to minimise their actions. These responses represent efforts to reassert their power which they may feel is being threatened by practitioners and agencies working towards making them more visible and accountable.

It is evident that perpetrators succeed in remaining invisible and in evading accountability, a pattern that systems have both enabled and perpetuated. While this is not a new discovery, this study has provided comprehensive empirical evidence that explicitly outlines the importance of pursuing visibility and accountability and an in-depth analysis of where the challenges persist. The findings presented underscore the importance of striving towards both visibility and accountability. A critical element of this involves cultivating a clear understanding within practice of how these two concepts differ as well as the ways in which they impact one another. Such an understanding is essential for developing a fully perpetrator-focused approach. This remains a complex and underdeveloped area of practice with significant progress evidently required.

A review of the literature on these two concepts reveals gaps in the academic discourse. In particular, the focus on accountability has predominantly centred on legal frameworks with limited exploration of its broader implications. While the Home Office (2022) statutory guidance assigns striving for perpetrator accountability as the responsibility of all agencies, the existing literature remains narrow and primarily confined to the realm of the criminal justice system (CJS). Moreover, there is a vast gap in the literature on visibility, particularly beyond children's social care, leaving this area of research largely unexplored. These are gaps that the findings of this study hope to address while also reinvigorating engagement with these critical topics.

Although advancements can be noted in relation to policy and practice, such as new strategies, revised processes or additional funding, the reality remains unchanged – a greater proportion of perpetrators continue to remain invisible and unaccountable than those who are effectively identified and held responsible. Government strategies consistently emphasise the need to

strengthen approaches to perpetrators, yet their commitments are often vague, lack concrete measures for assessing outcomes and result in minimal changes observed in practice. When metrics are provided for assessing practice, there is an overreliance on CJS data and victim numbers, neither of which effectively measure perpetrator outcomes. This study offers a significant contribution to the academic field by advancing the understanding and examination of perpetrator responses, particularly by proposing visibility and accountability as concepts that can help evaluate practice. To my knowledge, these measures have not previously been used to assess perpetrator-related practice, and their inclusion could greatly enhance our understanding of existing gaps and challenges. These two objectives could serve as a foundation for driving change and improving responses in this area of work. If used, alongside well-established victim-focused measures, these can offer a more holistic framework for evaluating domestic abuse responses. Additionally, an overwhelming gap persists around the absence of perpetrator data at both national and local levels. To date, no comprehensive data exists that reflects the number of perpetrators nationwide or by region, their demographics, their offending patterns, what services or interventions they access and to what outcome. By utilising the concepts of visibility and accountability as measurable objectives and outcomes, as presented in this study, it is possible to generate much-needed perpetrator data to address this gap that continues to exist across the field.

Reflecting on the local authority in London used as a case study for this research, it is encouraging to note that practitioners interviewed demonstrated a strong commitment to this shift and recognised the value of engaging with perpetrators. However, despite this dedication, numerous gaps and challenges persist which continue to impede progress. It is also commendable to observe processes such as the daily MARAC that agencies have heavily invested in. Nevertheless, challenges remain regarding what is known about perpetrators within

this process and the action planning that practitioners and agencies feel equipped to implement in response to them. The implementation of various processes and initiatives is essential, but it is evident that a foundational step must involve equipping the minds and skills of those responsible for executing this work. There is a pressing need to shift mindsets at all levels – within and across local agencies and nationally – to ensure that this work is prioritised and integrated into every aspect of practice. The overarching goal, irrespective of the individual practitioner, agency or sector, is to safeguard victims and children. Victim-focused approaches have yet to yield the desired positive and meaningful changes systems strive for and it is now clear that this can only be achieved through perpetrator-centred approaches. It is essential that this approach is implemented consistently and that practitioners receive the support needed to achieve this. Such efforts can be further supported by addressing the existing disconnect between the theoretical foundations, the ambition of policy, and the everyday realities of practice.

Summary of individual chapters

The overall findings were presented in four distinct chapters.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 addressed the question of ***what*** the concepts of accountability and visibility are and how they manifest in practice. Crucially, it emphasised the relationship between both concepts with examples that evidence how they impact on one another or where gaps in one aspect alone undermine the overall effectiveness of practice. It adopted this approach with the aim of constructing the conceptual framework essential for advancing this study, while also providing a deeper understanding of the goals that should underpin perpetrator-focused work.

Additionally, the chapter explored the relationship between language and the concepts of visibility and accountability, demonstrating how choices made around language can either hinder or support efforts in these areas. The chapter adopted a reflective perspective, highlighting the tensions that emerge from working in this field and attempting to enhance perpetrator responses. It concluded by underscoring the importance of promoting visibility and accountability, while also recognising the inherent complexities involved in balancing working towards these goals with maintaining engagement with perpetrators and ensuring the safety of those around them.

While some literature addresses the concepts of visibility, accountability and language in the context of domestic abuse, much of it is outdated with notable gaps in visibility-related research. Furthermore, few studies effectively explore the interconnectedness of these concepts with none that appear to examine their implications for perpetrator-focused practice in depth. This chapter therefore provided a comprehensive overview, contributing updated insights of relevance to all agencies, policymakers and academics. Having acquired the necessary conceptual tools and frameworks, along with a nuanced understanding of the constructs of visibility and accountability, the thesis advanced to an examination of their practice manifestations exploring the tensions that arise in working towards these objectives within multi-agency processes and systems.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 examined the local authority's daily MARAC as a case study to assess *how* effectively this multi-agency process achieves accountability and visibility for domestic abuse perpetrators. It focused on addressing research questions concerning the daily MARAC's ability to achieve visibility and accountability for perpetrators as well as to implement

processes capable of effectively tracking and monitoring outcomes. It found that clear gaps remain in the daily MARAC's ability to achieve these objectives. At present, it appears that even with coordinated, multi-agency processes that are resource intensive, the primary focus remains on victims. This is not to suggest that victims should not remain central, but that it is imperative to balance this with an equal focus on perpetrators who are the root cause of the harm. However, as it stands, systems appear to operate in ways that view victims as both the problem and solution.

The implications of the findings presented in this chapter are substantial. Following a review of the literature on daily MARACs, no evaluations or studies of this approach were found. Therefore, to the best of my knowledge this is the first research to examine a daily MARAC process in such detail. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of research focusing on perpetrators as highlighted in the critical gap in studies exploring MARAC as it relates to perpetrators. The study is also the first to analyse and categorise action planning within a multi-agency meeting to this level of detail and to attempt to establish consistency in how outcomes from these meetings, with a particular focus on perpetrators, are measured and monitored. Lastly, to my knowledge, this is the first study to analyse and track outcomes of each individual action with access to data that allowed for these to be reviewed more than three years after cases were discussed. With data indicating that only half of actions had updates that were tracked and recorded, implications for practice are significant. This evidences a critical need for improvements in the overall assessment of the effectiveness of multi-agency processes, and particularly around how they respond to perpetrators, as well as in ensuring the implementation of processes that enhance agency accountability.

With this analysis identifying where the gaps exist, the subsequent task was to investigate the underlying causes for these gaps and the factors contributing to their persistence. To address this, it was crucial to understand the challenges encountered by practitioners in their efforts to intervene with perpetrators.

Chapter 3

For Chapter 3, the aim was to explore *why* intervening with perpetrators remains a persistent challenge, ultimately contributing to their lack of visibility and accountability. In summary, the chapter argued that practice still has a considerable way to go in aligning with any policy shifts. While some examples of good practice were shared by practitioners, these were limited, sporadic and inconsistent. There was also a sense that achieving success in this area of practice was only possible for those who have overcome the gap in training through experiential learning, often depicted as years of practice filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Additionally, good practice appeared to depend on individual practitioners taking initiative to go beyond the available resources which further emphasised the inconsistencies in practice. Overall, it was evident that the practitioners interviewed recognised the importance of working with perpetrators directly in ways that keep them visible and accountable. However, this mission was not reflected in practice which remains heavily characterised by systematic and workforce gaps and challenges.

While studies interviewing practitioners within the context of domestic abuse practice are extensive, those specifically focusing on perpetrators and involving a multi-agency spectrum of practitioners are comparatively limited. In addition to highlighting the numerous issues and challenges in practice often discussed in the literature, this study sought to extend the conversation by soliciting practitioners' perspectives on how improvements can be made to

progress perpetrator-focused practice. Those involved in engaging with perpetrators as well as providing strategic oversight over this work are best placed to provide valuable insights into possible solutions. Consequently, using insights from these interviews and informed by the findings of Chapters 1 and 2, the subsequent chapter was created with the aim of translating this knowledge into practical applications that can assist agencies and practitioners to move their practice forward.

Chapter 4

Building on the findings of the previous three chapters, Chapter 4 was developed in the format of a practice guidance document with the aim of utilising the findings to inform and guide practice. It integrated key insights gathered thus far, including the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter 1, the daily MARAC findings from Chapter 2, and the challenges and suggestions identified by practitioners in Chapter 3. This document was created to bridge the gaps between theory, policy and practice, ensuring that this study generates actionable insights for agencies, in particular the local authority under study who will be renewing its VAWG strategy in 2026. The intent was to address all the gaps, challenges and issues identified throughout the research and create constructive guidance that can help agencies move forward and see that change is possible. This is not to suggest that implementing these changes will be simple or rapid as it was evident that change is needed on every level and across all agencies. The chapter presented 12 recommendations organised into four key areas - improving engagement and intervention options for perpetrators, enhancing support structures available to practitioners, refining local processes, and implementing wider systemic improvements at a national level.

This chapter represents the culmination of theoretical and empirical evidence, combining these into a policy-style guidance document that focuses on practical, real-world recommendations and implications. This approach hopes to ensure the study feeds into practice in a well-informed, carefully considered manner that addresses the disconnect between theory, policy and practice.

Thematic conclusion

To provide a thematic conclusion for this study, it is beneficial to consider where theoretical and empirical findings aligned across the chapters to demonstrate what the key practice gaps are and where efforts should be dedicated. The emerging themes pertained to - practitioner training, resourcing, data and information, and legal accountability.

Training is key to ensuring practitioner confidence, competence and safety

The lack of targeted training has been identified as a significant factor contributing to many challenges faced by practitioners and agencies. This issue can result in practitioners engaging with domestic abuse cases in ways that fail to account for the patterned nature of the abuse, power and control dynamics, and perpetrators' manipulation of systems. It can lead to practitioners experiencing anxieties and safety concerns or avoiding this work altogether. Additionally, it can foster a diminished understanding of the importance of perpetrator-focused interventions. A lack of training that nurtures a gendered understanding of domestic abuse can also perpetuate practices that align with the gendered double standards prevalent in society.

These issues were clearly highlighted in both empirical studies and are consistently supported by existing literature (e.g. Donovan and Griffiths, 2015; Hester et al, 2006; Humphreys et al,

2024). Chapter 2 revealed limited direct engagement, interventions and action planning around perpetrators while Chapter 3 outlined practitioners' concerns regarding the lack of curiosity, missed opportunities for engagement, safety implications, and negative perceptions of perpetrator programmes and their practitioners. With training remaining a challenge, it is easy to see why these issues continue to persist.

Training is a critical need across all agencies and sectors, and it is important to recognise that working with perpetrators demands a specialist skill set required to navigate the multiple complexities involved. Even practitioners who do not work directly with perpetrators would benefit from a deeper understanding of perpetrator patterns and their impacts on those around them, including victims, children, practitioners and agencies. This can address various areas such as identifying and managing risks (Respect, 2022), centring practice around victim safety (Home Office, 2023), adapting interventions based on motivation levels and needs (DAC, 2025; Hester et al, 2006), understanding patterns and tactics of manipulation of systems and processes (Mandel et al, 2020), addressing how perpetrators justify or deny their actions (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016) and confronting deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs (Dempsey and Day, 2010). Training needs to address these key areas of skill and knowledge, while also shifting mindsets towards a better recognition of the value of perpetrator work to tackle practices that solely focus on victims. Comprehensive, gender-responsive training can challenge gender biases and offer practitioners an opportunity to be thoroughly equipped with the confidence, competence and specialist skills necessary to undertake this work. Incorporating feminist and power-based theories into the design and delivery of training is critical to ensure that practitioners can respond to the complex dynamics involved in engaging with perpetrators.

Resourcing must reflect an investment in perpetrators and the practitioners responding to them

Resourcing and funding limitations contribute to gaps noted in relation to services designed to intervene with perpetrators, mechanisms available to support practitioners and the limited scope of prevention work. In relation to perpetrators, concerns emerged regarding referral pathways into services for additional needs, such as mental health or substance use, and behaviour change interventions. These findings were prevalent across Chapters 2 and 3 with significant gaps noted around accessibility of such interventions and the range of interventions offered.

Findings regarding support for practitioners indicated both gaps and opportunities within the empirical research. Chapter 3 revealed that practitioners found case consultations with the VAWG team particularly helpful for improving their approach to perpetrators. In contrast, both Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted limited resourcing dedicated to addressing practitioner safety with minimal evidence of such discussions taking place or being documented. Further examples presented in Chapter 3 highlighted practitioners needing to exercise caution when speaking to perpetrators due to safety concerns and a lack of consistent resourcing to support around this. These findings advance feminist and power-based theories by emphasising the importance of integrating these frameworks into the resourcing of support for practitioners. They offer insight into how perpetrators' efforts to reassert their power leave practitioners feeling unsafe as they struggle to effectively respond. Furthermore, the findings suggest that these issues are experienced more acutely by female practitioners, further emphasising the need to ground responses to perpetrators within a feminist framework. Returning to the issue of visibility and accountability, one must question how these goals can be achieved if practitioners feel

compelled to soften their approach and are left to manage their safety with a lack of consistent, standardised access to resources needed to ensure their emotional and physical wellbeing.

The shift towards a perpetrator-centred approach requires a sustained commitment demonstrated at all levels of practice and across all agencies. This commitment must be accompanied by a national investment in funding to enhance resources and interventions for perpetrators as well an expansion of preventive efforts which are currently limited across the country. Practitioners must feel supported in this area of work with access to emotional, practical and case guidance support where needed without the expectation that they must navigate these challenges alone or wait to learn from years of experience. Moreover, special consideration must be given to female practitioners and those who disclose a history of trauma to ensure that appropriate support is offered to mitigate the potential impacts they may experience in their practice.

High quality, comprehensive information must be the standard with national data guiding prioritisation of this work

Processes and systems remain highly susceptible to perpetrator manipulation and control. They often hold minimal, and at times inaccurate, information around perpetrators, hindering effective planning and intervention. This issue is consistently highlighted in the literature (e.g. Davies et al, 2024; Kelly and Westmarland, 2015; Olszowy et al, 2020) and substantiated in both Chapters 2 and 3. In the interviews, practitioners reported concerns regarding reliance on outdated information, the incorrect flagging of cases and the complete lack of information on perpetrators in some cases. The data from the daily MARAC reflected these concerns with numerous examples of minimal, missing and incorrect information on various aspects related to perpetrators' demographics, risks and needs. An example where the systems' vulnerability

is further exacerbated arises in cases where perpetrators, or the abuse they perpetrate, are associated with other local authorities resulting in systems losing track of them. With Chapter 2 evidencing that a significant proportion of perpetrators reside outside of the local authority, Chapter 3 demonstrated the substantial challenges that this presents to practitioners in obtaining and sharing the necessary information to inform their response. The findings illustrated how this issue impedes efforts to make perpetrators visible and hold them accountable. This issue is not only pertinent for this local authority but is also likely to be encountered by all other local authorities.

Systems must be enhanced to better address perpetrators with a focus on the way information is obtained and recorded. A more consistent and standardised approach is needed to routinely capture perpetrator data. Effective perpetrator-centred documentation should be the standard and not reliant on the motivation of individual practitioners. An example of such a shift can be seen in another London local authority that has embedded a standard template²⁴ that records engagement with perpetrators as part of its implementation of the Safe and Together Model. Furthermore, practitioners require access to comprehensive information around incidents, patterns of behaviours and any other relevant factors that contribute to their assessment and management of a case regardless of which local authority perpetrators have ties to. Local authorities must explore and improve data sharing mechanisms to facilitate communication and coordination beyond their borders.

Moreover, there is a significant gap in national data that exists around perpetrators, further compounding this issue and hindering efforts to evaluate and shape practice. Without data

²⁴ Pages 65-69 in 'Beyond Training: The Safe & Together London Partnership Model' (Kelly and Garner, 2023) - <https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/london-partnership-model/>.

available for benchmarking and to help create key metrics to monitor progress, practice will remain ineffective in achieving visibility and accountability. This gap in data also has major implications for understanding the needs, demand and funding requirements of responding to perpetrators. On a national level, if the ONS can report on victim numbers and what support they access²⁵, it is not unreasonable to expect that comparable data can be obtained and reported around perpetrators. This would contribute to a better recognition of domestic abuse as a male violence issue as argued by many feminist scholars (e.g. Romito, 2008). It can also improve the allocation of resources by relying on comprehensive data that supports a clearer understanding of the need (Respect, 2024). Good, robust national perpetrator data will only serve to reduce the perception of perpetrators as a hidden, hard-to-tackle problem.

The CJS requires a comprehensive overhaul reflecting the gendered and patterned nature of domestic abuse

While some of the challenges raised around the CJS can be addressed through enhanced training and resources, the concerns extend far deeper. A persistent theme throughout the literature and this study is the systemic gaps within the CJS highlighting significant shortcomings in how these processes tackle perpetrators. In interviews, many practitioners emphasised that improvements in the CJS were essential to enhancing practice. They offered many examples of how CJS failings hindered their work such as the response to cases of counter-allegations or instances where perpetrators receive an NFA²⁶ decision, equipping them with the ammunition needed to deny their actions. The daily MARAC data revealed that nearly all perpetrators had contact with CJS agencies, yet the lack of legal accountability emerged as

²⁵ Domestic abuse victim services, England and Wales 2023 (ONS, 2023) - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimservicesenglandandwales/2023>.

²⁶ NFA - indicates a decision made by the police to take no further action against the suspect following advice from the CPS (College of Policing, 2013).

one of the most significant issues throughout the study. This clearly illustrates how the absence of perpetrator accountability within one agency can undermine the wider 'web of accountability'. This issue is further exacerbated by the lack of agency accountability for agencies operating within this web, in this instance the CJS, that appear to be the weakest link.

Overall, the findings regarding the CJS from the literature and Chapters 2 and 3 can be summarised into three key issues - 1) the majority of abuse remains unreported meaning that most perpetrators do not enter the CJS, 2) for those who do enter the CJS, they face no legal accountability, and 3) for this local authority, where are the perpetrators who are not known to the CJS whose invisibility from the daily MARAC sample was noteworthy - a significant concern given that the literature indicates that most perpetrators who commit homicides are not known to the CJS (Hoeger et al, 2024).

A CJS that comprehensively understands three critical factors is vital - the patterned nature of this form of abuse, its gendered dynamics, and the need to consider domestic abuse offences more seriously. Without these elements, this CJS will continue to allow perpetrators to remain invisible and evade accountability. The findings presented in this study contribute to and reinforce the importance of integrating both feminist and power-based theories to improve the functioning of the CJS. A deeper understanding of the gendered dynamics of domestic abuse as well as how perpetrators utilise power, control and manipulation tactics is essential for creating meaningful changes in how this system operates. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) report in 2025 outlines many recommendations including delivery of specialist training for all CJS staff and for this training to be consistent, thorough, and regular. However, beyond training, only a comprehensive review and overhaul of the system will achieve these objectives. Drawing lessons from initiatives such as Operation Soteria, which has successfully increased

arrests, charges and prosecutions of sexual violence offenders (Home Office, 2024) is crucial. This initiative has combined extensive training with a reorientation of CJS processes towards offenders and the implementation of mechanisms that target repeat offenders (Stanko, 2023). With such a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach, it becomes possible to identify how changes can be made to the way the CJS responds to domestic abuse offenders.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge some of the overarching limitations of the study beyond the work presented in each chapter. The local authority in London whose data was utilised served as a good case study for this research, particularly due to its implementation of innovative approaches and significant investment in its response to VAWG. However, this may also mean that it cannot be fully representative of practice in other local authorities. The lack of data from other local authorities as well as nationally complicates efforts to assess the positioning of this local authority and to draw meaningful comparisons that could enhance understanding of the data. While many gaps have been identified here, this local authority's approach still stands out as one characterised by a commitment to continuous improvement. Therefore, it may be outperforming other areas in certain aspects, a view widely shared within the sector. This does not suggest that no further improvements are needed, but merely that it would be beneficial to evidence the impact that their efforts and investments are making. Local authorities can use national MARAC data to assess case and victim data for their areas and compare it to others. Similarly, it would be useful if comparable data was available to facilitate such comparisons in relation to perpetrator practice.

Overall, the Daily MARAC and MARAC processes across the UK remain inherently victim-focused. While this local authority introduced a perpetrator panel, it was implemented too late in the study to be able to incorporate it in detail. This panel could have served as a valuable case study for investigating what it achieves regarding perpetrators and could have complemented the daily MARAC data. However, approximately a year after its implementation, the panel was discontinued. The decision stemmed from the panel's inability to reach its full potential of functioning as a perpetrator-focused process. Instead, it was perceived that the panel replicated the daily MARAC's victim focus, with practitioners and agencies failing to fully grasp the aim of the panel. This is indicative of the broader challenges associated with shifting the focus of agencies and practitioners towards perpetrators, even when new processes are designed to facilitate this. Crucially, the local authority attempted to facilitate engagement by replacing one of the daily MARAC meetings each month with the panel so that practitioners are not asked to dedicate any additional time or resource to engage with the panel. However, the removal of logistical barriers did not ensure the panel's success, suggesting that the underlying challenges are more deeply embedded. It is evident that deeply ingrained attitudes and practices are difficult to change (Myhill, 2018). This highlights the need for a more fundamental shift in attitudes and organisational cultures to effectively prioritise perpetrator-focused practice.

Finally, although the study attempted to encompass all relevant agencies within the 'web of accountability', there was a notable absence of key agencies in both the interviews and the data accessed. Examples include probation, adult social care, mental health and substance use services. This absence may, however, in itself, be further evidence of gaps in their involvement in responding to perpetrators.

Recommendations for further research

The themes outlined above were consistent throughout the research and indicated various areas of practice where continued progress is needed. Further research can specifically address some of these aspects. For example, lack of training emerged as a key concern. Mapping current training across agencies and sectors would help identify gaps and target efforts to address this. If effective training models exist, particularly those integrated early in practitioners' careers, these could enhance practice. If none exist, piloting new initiatives would support in addressing these gaps. Possible options could include the Safe and Together model or delivery of specialist perpetrator training by organisations such as Respect. Evaluation of the Safe and Together implementation in London showed evidence of practice that disrupted perpetrator invisibility, increased practitioner confidence in engaging with perpetrators and tackled victim-blaming attitudes (Kelly and Garner, 2023). Respect's expertise also positions it as a valuable resource for delivering effective perpetrator-focused training more widely.

The study identified agency responses to counter-allegations as a significant concern, irrespective of whether these involved fabricated claims made by perpetrators or instances where victims had used self-defence or violent resistance. Despite existing guidance and legislation, adherence to these in practice is limited and examples of good practice are scarce. Research is needed to identify barriers and support practitioners in responding more effectively by holding perpetrators accountable without penalising victims. The DAC (2025) report recommends ensuring victims who act in self-defence are protected under relevant legislation. Further exploration is needed to operationalise this recommendation and identify strategies to achieve it.

Future research on multi-agency responses to perpetrators should include an in-depth analysis of perpetrator panels to assess their effectiveness. Such panels can offer valuable insights into perpetrator-specific responses, including how to define, categorise, and monitor their outcomes and their impact on visibility and accountability. Where successful, it is crucial to explore factors that contribute to this, including what motivates the practitioners and agencies involved. This would improve understanding of the variables influencing the effectiveness of perpetrator-focused multi-agency processes.

Finally, the study found that practitioners often face challenges due to the practices of other agencies, notably the CJS. Investigating the role of agency accountability within Spencer's (2016) 'web of accountability' could be of great value, particularly highlighting how one agency's failure to ensure perpetrator visibility and accountability may impede others. This could reveal a 'domino effect' in agency accountability and offer insights that could strengthen multi-agency collaboration and coordination and enhance mechanisms that target perpetrators.

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