



I welcome the report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) 'Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic – 2021' published on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021.

Home should be a place of safety, however during lockdown it became a place of risk for domestic abuse victims, with many unable to distance themselves from their abuser to obtain help. Policing had to adapt quickly and as domestic abuse is a high priority in my Police and Crime Plan this is something I continually discuss with the Chief Constable to ensure that vulnerable victims have, and will continue to be protected from harm, along with effective management of perpetrators.

Domestic abuse is a complex crime and policing is just one part of the jigsaw. Throughout my term I will be working with not only the Constabulary, but with partner agencies, local authorities and charities to improve outcomes and ensure all victims are supported, even those who do not seek a judicial outcome. Cheshire's four domestic abuse partnerships are supported to deliver a range of services to support those who suffer domestic abuse and to tackle perpetrators, including funding for Independent Domestic Violence Advocates. A Cheshire wide initiative, 'Open the Door', has also been developed. This is a collaboration between my office, Cheshire Constabulary and the four local authorities in Cheshire, where all agencies have joined forces to provide information for residents around what help and support is available to them locally.

I am committed to driving a modern police service and am looking at ways technology can support victims using mobile devices to safeguard and capture evidence, so we can prosecute if it is in the victims interest even if they withdraw support. Criminal justice support teams are now supporting all staff with the transfer of digital evidence including body worn video. This increases the opportunity to achieve "in custody" charging decisions and to safeguard victims and witnesses. This reduces the number of suspects on bail and delivers swifter justice.

HMICFRS recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should immediately introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework which assesses the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.

My office, assisted by an independent research consultant, completed a full victim needs assessment, including detailed analysis of domestic abuse victim's feedback. Overall, the feedback gathered suggested that many processes are working well and there was positive feedback from agencies and victims about the range and delivery of support available. The Constabulary is working in conjunction with my office on an action plan which includes initiatives to increase awareness of the support available and improvements in training for police officers and staff in how to assess victims needs and the referral processes.

Cheshire Constabulary continue to adopt online contact methods for victims of domestic abuse. In 2021, Cheshire Constabulary were one of five forces chosen to pilot domestic abuse reporting on Single Online Home. This has been successfully introduced into the Force Control Centre and has become business as usual.

I have been reassured that when the Constabulary receives a domestic abuse online report, it is immediately documented on a dedicated email system which is triaged and risk assessed by trained call operators. This process is undertaken within the Force Control Centre where supervision and escalation is undertaken 24 hours a day. The Constabulary will review all Single Online Home referrals within 24 hours however, I am pleased to hear a review of a domestic abuse referral is normally undertaken within 1 hour (or less).

In response to the recommendation that forces immediately review their use of a telephone-based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing, Cheshire Constabulary are not undertaking desk based investigations instead using a response that is driven locally and through the local policing response model. However, recognising the importance of online/phone support, the Constabulary is piloting a Vulnerability and Safeguarding Team who are proactively contacting victims of domestic abuse during the deployment process. The objective of the team is to support an effective referral/engagement as near to the first call as possible and prior to an officer attending at the incident.

Despite the lifting of restrictions, the Constabulary have recognised where things have gone well. Weekly online Q&A session continues which is supported by partners and has secured significant engagement throughout the lockdown period. This chat is linked to our 'Cheshire – Open the Door' website, which again saw an increase in usage during this period. The number of online chats has increased during key dates – for example, Christmas and recent European Championship Football.

I want to understand why incidents are not solved. Where a victim does not support a prosecution or there are evidential difficulties (known as outcome 15 and 16) I will be giving this area significant focus. The Constabulary manages performance through the new "Raising the Bar" performance framework which includes a suite of domestic abuse performance indicators including use of outcome 16. Scrutiny and oversight on all issues regarding the standard of domestic abuse investigations and the quality of service provide to domestic abuse victims in Cheshire in governance meetings. The Constabulary have provided officers with training regarding Evidence Led Prosecutions which has seen an increase in these investigations.

The introduction of the Vulnerability and Safeguarding Team (VaST) also ensures that we engage quickly with victims to establish early contact as this helps to provide the best evidence and also ensures that the deploying officer is fully aware of the circumstances in order to obtain the best outcome for that victim.

The Constabulary have also refreshed their standards with officers and supervision which ensures attending officers speak to their supervisor prior to leaving and finalising an incident to ensure that there is sufficient supervisory oversight. The Crime Investigation Team regularly take the majority of domestic abuse perpetrators taken into custody for frontline officers ensuring that there is some continuity with conducting investigations and allowing good liaison with Crown Prosecution Service and improved files.

I do remain concerned about the low charge rate and how long victims have to wait before their cases are being heard. I recognise this is an issue nationally and will continue to monitor this through

the Criminal Justice Board. I will be ensuring the Constabulary are doing all they can against the recommendations in the report and will hold the Chief Constable to account to deliver. Domestic abuse is a key topic in my scrutiny programme where performance is examined at least once a quarter. In these meetings I will seek reassurance that the Constabulary is providing the best possible outcomes for victims and ensure domestic abuse is kept at the forefront of the Constabulary's agenda.

I do not underestimate the commitment officers, staff, volunteers and partners in Cheshire have given to vulnerable people during the most challenging of times. I would like to thank them for their innovation during this period which has no doubt saved lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Dwyer', with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

John Dwyer  
Police & Crime Commissioner