“Where else would we go?”

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Domestic abuse is a widespread phenomenon both on a global scale and at a national level in the UK. However, provision of services has always been patchy and relies on partnerships across the different sectors of the care economy, with the voluntary sector playing a pivotal role. The aim of this report is to report on the effectiveness of one small, local voluntary service, Springboard, in meeting the needs of the local South Lakes population who have been affected by domestic abuse.

Key Findings

The evaluation was overwhelmingly positive with Springboard characterised as a much-needed service to meet the psychological wellbeing of victims of abuse. It offers domestic-abuse specific counselling and group work, which fills a gap in the local provision. It does so sensitively and professionally. The rural nature and the wide reach of the service is reflected through the good practice of covering of travel expenses which means that take up of the service is high and that service-users feel that they are valued and entitled to help. Springboard works across the thresholds of risk and offers continuity of care across the patchwork of domestic abuse services.

Springboard have also been involved in the delivery of awareness raising with a local school. This was shown to be effective in producing an attitudinal change.

Through the evaluation process a number of recommendations have been made to improve information management, funding strategies and future service-development.

Key Recommendations

- To seek further funding to support the continuation and possible expansion of the service, with the emphasis on therapeutic support for individual and group work.
- To improve information management through the use of spreadsheets, to improve tracking and collation of data. To consider how to provide before and after evaluation of services.
- To continue and expand the schools liaison work and to include teacher support and training. Schools provide an ideal base for this work, but Springboard could also consider other avenues to meet the needs of harder-to-reach families.
- To raise awareness across the sector’s practitioners, commissioners and funders of the potential impact of the recent flooding on family dynamics, including the increased risk of domestic abuse.
- If possible, to develop in partnership with UCLAN’s Connect Centre income-generating packages of training about the impact of domestic abuse.
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Introduction

Following a successful application to the Department of Communities and Local Government, Springboard was set up to strengthen local domestic abuse accommodation-based services in the South Lakes area to implement therapeutic individual and group work programmes to meet the needs of those affected by domestic abuse, which supports strengths and resilience. The programme was also set up to spot-purchase places for non-convicted perpetrators of abuse. As the initial funding draws to a close, UCLAN’s Connect Centre has evaluated Springboard’s current provision to consider future service development. This document is the report of that evaluation.

Key Aims of the Project

In particular, the evaluation sought to consider the impact of services for service-users, the effectiveness of partnership working with the project and the development of work in schools to promote healthy relationships. The overall aim of the project is to provide a clearer understanding of the impact of Springboard’s services and to support future planning and evaluation of services for those affected by domestic abuse within the South Lakes area.

The objectives of the evaluation are:

- To map referral data and establish the reach and demographics of Springboard to date and to establish how to improve management of information to support service planning.
- To provide qualitative data on the impact of the school’s prevention work to support future planning and to produce outcome measures for future work
- To consult with users of domestic abuse services within South Lakes to gain an understanding of the impact of the work and to provide priorities for future services
- To consult with partners to determine gaps in provision to provide evidence to support local strategic planning priorities in relation to domestic abuse

This report feeds back the key findings in order to support service development and provide documentation to support funding proposals.
The Context of Abuse

Defining Abuse

Domestic abuse is a widespread phenomenon, both on a global scale and at a national level in the UK. WHO (2013) notes that 38% of all murders of women globally were reported as committed by their intimate partners. In the UK, in 2012, the Home Office estimated that 1.2 million women suffered domestic abuse. Both women and men suffer abuse, although women are more likely to have experienced physical injuries from abuse and repeated incidences of abuse result in two women killed each week in England and Wales (HO, 2006). Domestic abuse has been the recent subject of a Home Office consultation and the following definition has been agreed:

... any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender and sexuality. (Home Office, 2013: 2)

Although it is clear that the majority of domestic abuse is perpetrated by men on women, this definition is deliberately gender neutral. It also includes young people (aged 16 to 18) and places emphasis on coercive control as a behaviour that characterises abusive relationships. Indeed a specific legal offence of “controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship” came into force in December 2015 (Serious Crime Act, 2015, section 76).

Domestic Abuse Services

Domestic abuse can never be the remit of just one agency and skilful work within the sector will always require inter-agency collaboration. Different agencies will focus on different family members and different issues. Families do not experience domestic abuse as an isolated issue and it often overlaps with other concerns. Domestic abuse services have a complex history with a number of different approaches and sectors involved. Domestic abuse can be framed as a criminal justice, welfare, child protection, housing and/or health issue and is indeed all of the above. However, domestic abuse has struggled to find a place in relation to welfare provision for its victims and survivors.

The roots to support can be found in the feminist refuge movement of the 1970s which has led to a creeping recognition of the need to protect (predominantly but not exclusively) women and children from abuse in the home. The provision was firmly rooted in the voluntary sector, which continues to provide a wide range of services from a national network of specialist refuges to locally provided self-help groups and confidential helplines. The role of the voluntary sector is not, however, restricted to the provision of services; voluntary organisations have also played a huge part in putting domestic abuse on the UK political agenda and campaigning for progressive social policies ensuring that the wider societal impact of abuse is considered alongside the experiences of individual victims.

The requirement of voluntary sector providers and organisations to provide evidence of their worth to commissioners and funding bodies has become core business for some. Many voluntary organisations rely on statutory funding, so that the ethos of human rights or well-being underpinning provision is being balanced against value for money, and produces a silencing of criticism of policy makers or commissioners. This has become more pressing in the current period of austerity.
Statutory services, and in particular children and families social work have a different approach to domestic abuse. UK research into social services casefiles demonstrated that until recently there was little consideration of violence towards mothers (Humphreys, 2000 and Maynard, 1985). However, once a direct link between domestic abuse and child abuse was established and the potential damage of children witnessing domestic abuse acknowledged (Brandon and Lewis, 1999) domestic abuse became mainstreamed into child protection practice. It is now regularly referred to as part of the “Toxic Trio” (Ofsted, 2010) alongside mental health and substance misuse. It has also become part of the child protection legal framework with the new category of harm: ‘impairment from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another’ being introduced in the Child and Adoption Act 2002 and forms a wider practice as an item of consideration in the Common Assessment Framework. Therefore, domestic abuse is situated in public law for with an emphasis on intervention in families to ensure that the child does not suffer significant harm.

These different histories and approaches mean, especially in a period of limited resources, that risk management, child protection and adult safeguarding overtakes the welfare and support of those affected by domestic abuse and longer-terms needs can remain unaddressed. Thresholds for statutory services can be very high as a way of prioritising resources (Two of the service-user respondents noted that they had not met thresholds for other services). Whilst statutory services have an important role to play in the screening and assessment of risk, voluntary sector organisations such as Springboard provide the ongoing support and assistance with recovery. However, as this evaluation showed relationships across sectors are currently being maintained in difficult and uncertain circumstances:

“I believe services in South Lakes work well together, although with the nature of third sector organisations, projects can lose funding and then not be available.”

Living with Abuse

Evan Stark (2007:4) argues that a common mistake when working within domestic abuse is to concentrate on physical harm and violence which is not necessarily the major characteristic of abusive relationships and argues that coercive control is “an offence to liberty that prevents women from freely developing their personhood, utilizing their capacities, or practising citizenship, consequences that they experience as entrapment.” Coercive control is a useful framework that examines the processes of abuse and its impact on victims. It grants an understanding of how victims (both men and women) can appear complicit in their abuse, placing them in a position of isolation, disempowerment and constraint.

Whilst the respondents in this evaluation were not asked directly about their experiences of abuse, the impact of living with abuse, as a force of control, leading to isolation and lack of self-esteem permeates many of their responses as can be seen in the quotes below:

“And, you know, there’s only so much you can tell friends and family. And do you what, I lost so many friends because it was like I was depressed and people think you know, I just lost people around me.”

“To sit in the house on your own and dwell over this, is not good, it really isn’t good. And I was really feeling quite low.”

“Domestic abuse affects all areas of a victim’s life and rebuilding each area all at once can feel daunting and overwhelming.”
Methods

The research was conducted between January and April of 2016 and received ethical approval from the university ethics committee. As with all studies looking at domestic abuse there were concerns about the safety of those who used the services and the utmost care was taken to ensure confidentiality and security in contacting service-users. The evaluation methodology began with discussions between Springboard and the Connect Centre and the methods and areas of research reflect the priorities of Springboard. A full before and after survey approach would not have been possible in the timescales and budget available. The methodology takes into account the constraints on time and budget and limitations caused by safety concerns. Given the particular circumstances of delivering domestic abuse services within a rural area, questions were asked of all groups about rurality and the recent flooding. They were also all asked a “Magic Wand” question to support creative thinking.

- Collation and analysis of referral data – Referral information has been used to provide descriptive statistics of the reach of the services. The data also highlights the need for a more strategic approach to the collection and management of information to support future service development.

- A focus group with young people who have experienced preventative programmes through Springboard – A focus group approach was considered preferable as the young people were used to working in this way. Questions for the focus group built on the findings of the PEACH study and considered issues such as: engagement, responses to disclosures and authenticity. Springboard’s school prevention programme has been concentrated on sixth form students and a key consideration is whether and how to provide services at a younger age. Young people were asked about their perspective on the timing of the intervention in terms of their own development and understandings of healthy relationships.

- Telephone interviews with a small number of service-users (5 and 1 email conversation) to gather their views and experiences of using Springboard services and any other experiences of services relating to domestic abuse. They were also asked about what worked well, what could be improved and about their ideas for the future.

- Consultation with key partners – alongside the views of those who use the services, it is important to understand the perspectives of those who commission, refer to and provide services. Views were gathered from a small selection through email (3) and telephone interviews (6).

- A focus group with attendees of the Recovery Toolkit – the focus group was considered the most effective way to gather these views as the women were used to working in this way. It was also an expedient method to ensure that women who attended the group would not be inconvenienced as the focus group took place following their usual meetings. Focus group questions considered understandings of domestic abuse, knowledge gained through attending the programme, the role of group working in supporting their recovery and their wider experiences of domestic abuse provision.

- Analysis is concentrated on drawing together the above strands to ensure that all perspectives gathered are balanced, compared and contrasted to produce a picture of the needs of those experiencing domestic abuse within the South Lakes.

1 http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/explore/groups/assets/PIS_A4_PEACH.pdf
Limitations to the Methodology

This evaluation can only provide a snapshot of the services and consultation has not been as wide ranging as first hoped and the difficulties contacting both service-users and practitioners/partners highlights the complexity and busyness of people’s lives. There are also problems with evaluating a service in isolation from the wider sector and so mistakes or misunderstandings may occur.
Referral Data

Findings

Referral data was provided by Springboard through the scanning of referral documents. This was then collated onto a spreadsheet.

From the scanned documents there appeared to be 63 unique referrals covering the period from June 2015 – February 2016. 6 of the 63 referrals were for males (F = 90%, M= 10%). This is in line with national trends.

Whilst a significant number of the referrals were from Kendall (n = 28, 44%), there was wide distribution across the area as shown in the map below:

![Map showing distribution of referrals](image)

This highlights the geographical issues of delivering domestic abuse services in a rural area and the potential travel costs incurred either by service-users or providers.

Referrals were received from a range of agencies. The highest number of referrals came from Letgo IDVA service (19%), followed by Children Services (17%)
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It was known at the time of referral that at least 16 (25%) of the service users had been referred to MARAC. This indicates that Springboard is operating across risk thresholds, including working with those at significant risk. This ability to work across thresholds could offer some service-users greater continuity of service and support.

**Recommendations**

- Improvements to management information. It is obvious that Springboard collect relevant information on each referral and service-user for the purposes of case management. However, alongside case records, Springboard needs to develop a means of tracking and collating data. This could be easily achieved through a spreadsheet application and support in this task could be provided by UCLAN Connect Centre. Particular consideration should be given to the priorities of potential funders and outcome measures.

- Increasing the range and number of referrals. Given that domestic abuse is a widespread phenomenon, it is likely that many families are not receiving the necessary support. The range of referring agencies is impressive. However, to continue developing the service, Springboard could consider how to increase referrals. Many of the respondents discussed the need to raise awareness of domestic abuse generally and also of Springboard in particular. Two respondents in the qualitative study mentioned gaps in health services, with one citing GPs specifically. Working with the health sector could increase referrals and provide opportunities for further commissioned services. The recent RESPOND² study found that two thirds of GPs interviewed had no knowledge of local Domestic Abuse services or described their relationship with such services as distant. GPs may be unwilling to discuss domestic abuse with a patient unless they also have knowledge of where they can receive support.

- Continue to offer services across the risk thresholds. Statutory and IDVA services currently have time constraints on their abilities to work with families once immediate risk has been reduced. Therefore, contact with other services for such families becomes important, especially in the context of changing circumstances and taking difficult decisions. In particular, the contact with services at the point of separation can be highly significant for their safety given the evidence that leaving can increase threat, violence and harm.

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Consultation with Service-Users and Partners

It has been decided to report the consultation with service-users and partners together as many of the questions asked were similar and many themes overlapped. This allows for a thematic, qualitative approach to the data and supports anonymity. In the discussions about rurality/flooding and the magic wand some responses from the Recovery Toolkit focus group participants have been included. Again, this supports anonymity and provides a fuller qualitative exploration of these themes.

Positives

“To be honest without them, I don’t think I would have got through it. They’ve been absolutely amazing because it was just an opportunity to, just to feel like there’s people who understand”

It should be stated that the response to questions about Springboard’s performance and impact were overwhelmingly positive. All the service-users contacted would recommend the service to a friend in a similar situation.

“I would absolutely recommend it because I think it’s just having somebody acknowledge that what you’re experiencing is actually domestic abuse and not in your head.”

There were also ringing endorsements from partners such as:

“To be honest with you, Springboard has been the best service that I personally have come across in terms of being the right service at the right time for our clients because until their psychological needs are met then I don’t think that they can cope with all of the aftermath of leaving an abusive relationship”

The benefits of the service that were singled out included:

- Travel costs being covered by the service. This enabled service users to access support on their own terms and also gave confidence to referring agencies that the service would be used.
- Being given a choice of counsellor, including access to male and female workers
- The welcoming, empathic and professional nature of the staff

“When we had our initial meeting just the fact that she understood completely what I was going through”

- Only one service-user could give information about the Recovery Toolkit and again their response was positive. However, partner agencies also valued this service as it is the only one of its type delivered locally

Gaps and Challenges

Respondents were asked if they could identify any gaps in current domestic abuse provision in the South Lakes and what could be improved within the current provision. It should be noted that for
some respondents Springboard was considered to be the service that filled a previous gap, particularly in relation to the long-term psychological support of people affected by domestic abuse:

“Springboard filled a gap and I would want this service, in part or whole to continue.”

Professionals noted three key problems associated with working with the domestic abuse sector: engaging with services for those living with abuse, the challenging financial climate and the complexity of interagency work. Addressing each in turn, first, respondents noted that there are no quick fixes for the problems that domestic abuse can produce and that domestic abuse impacts upon the ability of service-users to engage with services especially within regulated timescales or because of constraints on resources.

“It can be difficult for clients to attend when they need to attend and sometimes when they don’t attend after a couple of times, they end up being dropped from the service because of their constraints. Three strikes and you’re out, which is quite difficult if you are working with someone with drugs or alcohol issues and the aftermath of DA. They have also had to relocate and have lost all their support networks. And their children aren’t behaving the way the clients want them to behave, because they are traumatised as well.”

This quote from a practitioner highlights that domestic abuse is often inter-linked with other disadvantageous issues. This means that case management is complicated and hampered by policy procedures with an emphasis on compliance. From the perspective of the service-user, the emphasis on a time-constrained interventions interferes with their own timetable for recovery.

“You see my counselling stopped and that stopped and it feels like the end. But it doesn’t mean, you know, I don’t still need support. Even if it was like they came, I don’t know, even they came for a home visit a month, I don’t know something to keep in touch.”

Alongside psychological well-being, there are practical issues to be addressed. Service-users also highlighted the need for more flexibility in services to support domestic arrangements or childcare.

The second issue is the challenging financial context for domestic abuse services.

“The services are there but their capacity to cope with the numbers – it is a knock on effect of funding”

It has been noted that there is currently a campaign to reverse cuts that will lead to the loss of refuge accommodation. However, lack of resources has an impact on service-users and that restriction of finances is part of the lexicon of abuse.

“And sometimes, just to help them like financially can make, because people who are, we tend, we suddenly are at a loose end, you now, we don’t know sometimes where we’re going to live, we have to change our circumstances.”

Here the value of travel expenses is emphasised as good practice. Access to funds, or the lack of choice in spending resources can be a characteristic of abuse and services tailored to redress this are particularly valued.
The third issue is the complexity of working across agencies with different agendas and understanding of the issues. The MARAC was cited as an example of good practice, but there was an evident concern about lack of understanding in some areas:

“I am horrified at how the courts tend to rule in favour of the father and how little understanding they show of the women’s situation”

This was echoed by service-users experiences within a range of services, including social work, health and the courts.

**Rurality and Flooding**

All respondents were asked about the rural nature of the catchment area. This was considered important, as to date, most domestic abuse research has been conducted in urban areas. In 2002, the Countryside Agency and Save the Children conducted an assessment of children and domestic abuse services in rural areas. Their findings suggested that access to and awareness of domestic abuse services were limited in rural areas; that rurality can exacerbate feelings of isolation; and that there were problems for women and children escaping domestic abuse in accessing appropriate, child-friendly housing.

This was echoed in the interviews with professionals and service-users. In particular, there was an emphasis on the practicalities of accessing support across a wide geographical area.

“And it’s funny because when you’re in the city, you realise how quick, or how much money is invested in transport and here there isn’t. It’s not like a regular service. It’s just you know. You know, you’re in a rural place”

So, for service-users there is a consideration of access and for providers there is the wide geographic spread to cover.

“I work from Dent in the East to Conniston – so huge rural geographical spread. So trying to access families who are isolated both rurally and socially is quite difficult.”

This has been exacerbated by recent cuts.

“Losing the magistrate’s court in Kendall – which I use a lot to help and support victims – now they are all going to have travel to Lancaster or Barrow, and if they are not driving they could be travelling with the accused, if they don’t have a car.”

There was also mention of poor mobile signals, the isolation and responsibilities that come with living in farming communities and the added expense of getting around. As one practitioner reflected:

“The rurality of the environment made recovery much harder because they were in a small community”

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However, two of the respondents also suggested that not just the rurality of the area could be problematic, but also the perceived nature of domestic abuse as not being a problem for the area also meant that issues get overlooked:

“South Lakes is middle class area and they think it doesn’t happen here”

“One of the main things is that people think that in rural areas, things like that don’t happen. Kendal is very middle class – I don’t think it is appreciated in Kendal that there is such a thing as domestic abuse”

Questions were also asked about the recent flooding. Again national literature on the impact of natural disasters on domestic abuse is scarce. However, from an international perspective it has been demonstrated that the stressors following disasters can impact upon family life, including mental health, child abuse and domestic abuse. Findings from these reports suggest that violence prevention should be considered as part of the intervention during natural disasters and that health and social care workers need to be aware of this potentials.

Findings from this study were inconclusive as few of the respondents had had direct experience of the floods whilst within an abusive relationship. However, the immediate aftermath of dealing with the floods can mean that domestic abuse was lost as a priority (one respondent discussed how an email to a local MP about domestic abuse coincided with the timing of the floods and she has never received a response, despite the good reputation of the MP for responding to constituents).

Practitioners, however, had more experience and could point to examples:

“We’ve had two clients who have had to be rehoused. Fortunately, they had ended the relationship before the flooding but for one of them it was the last straw. She had been referred to Springboard, but she was distraught and upset. She’d lost her home, her relationship, but she’d also lost her furniture, every single thing you could think of and so she didn’t attend any of the welcome sessions”

“Difficult to say – but my numbers have certainly increased in the last couple of months, but I can’t say if this is related to the flooding, it did restrict being able to see people. It did impact on the support that myself and presumably other organisations could give.”

As one practitioner noted:

“The longer term impact of the flooding is still unknown, but it is likely to impact on emotional resilience. Local services anticipate a rise in referrals to mental health services... So far, I’m not aware of a rise in DV incidents because of the flooding. I’ve spoken to professionals and they think that abuse will be taking place, but victims will not make service requests while their lives overall are in turmoil.”

Another practitioner highlighted a school that has had to support 64 children who have had to be relocated and the pressure that this must put on families who can’t be in their own home.

There were clear examples of how the flooding had impacted upon service access and provision, with one service-user having lost her car to the floods and another discussing different routes that were needed.
Commissioning

Partner agencies were asked about the commissioning of domestic abuse services and the priorities for strategic partnerships in the area. Many felt unsure how to respond. This should not be seen as a reflection of a lack of knowledge, but rather an issue of the complexity of the terrain of domestic abuse services. Those who felt able to comment did so for a number of different perspectives, citing different structures for commissioning such as the Local Authority, the Local Strategic Partnership, the Crime Commissioner and Mental Health Trusts.

Magic Wand

All respondents were asked what they would do if they had a magic wand and could use it to support those affected by domestic abuse in the South Lakes area. The purpose of this question is to try and encourage some creative thinking, which is difficult to find time for within a beleaguered sector and busy lives. As would be expected, given the current funding cuts many respondents simply wanted more of what is being lost, but there were also a number of useful suggestions which support future planning, including:

- Hostels equipped to take children
- For perpetrators with children to be offered or steered to receive education on the damaging impact of control and violence on child witnesses as part of perpetrator programmes
- Specific budgets to assist victims and families flee domestic violence
- Improved services for male victims
- More continued support beyond the point of crisis
- Crèche available for Recovery Toolkit sessions and counselling
- Free legal services for everybody who receives the domestic abuse leaflet.

However, the over-riding response was to increase awareness among professions (with GPs, social workers, police and the courts singled out for special attention):

> “Because my experience of dealing with professionals and their understanding of domestic abuse is absolutely shocking”

There was also a general consensus that there needs to be a better understanding of domestic abuse within the general population, and for this to start from within schools.

Recommendations

- To continue to source funding for services that fill gap by providing for the psychological welfare of those affected by domestic abuse. In particular, a high value was placed on domestic abuse specific counselling that emphasises the particular circumstances of living with the impact of abuse. At the moment no other services in the south Lakeland area provide such services and knowledge and skills that have been developed within Springboard should not be lost.
- The contribution of providing travel costs should not be under-estimated given the rurality and geographical spread of the service. This also ensures attendance and reassures service-users that they are valued.
• To consider how support for those affected by domestic abuse can be extended to ensure further skills development. A mentoring scheme by survivors for newer referrals may be one option.

• The flooding has been disastrous within the area for individuals and their loss, for the impact on the local infra-structure and potentially on long-term tourist, agricultural and business income. It is likely that these additional stresses will play out in family dynamics, as suggested by the international research literature. This is something that social care, health and welfare professionals need to be alerted to and should form a part of the flood strategy. Local domestic abuse providers should ensure that this concern is heard and lobby local politicians about the potential problems.

• It is recommended that Springboard’s management and trustees should provide a local information sheet about services and commissioning processes. Undoubtedly, this knowledge is held and it needs to be documented.

• There were a number of ideas raised by the magic wand questions which highlight imagination, creativity and the need to keep developing flexible domestic abuse services. Unfortunately, there is no magic wand and resources are currently limited. Funding when it does become available is often at short notice and with specific remits. Therefore such ideas need to be documented and discussed with partners so that Springboard can produce off-the-shelf responses to funding calls. There is also a need to develop an income-generation strategy which builds on the strengths, skills and knowledge within Springboard.

• Given the concerns about the lack of understanding in some agencies around the impact of domestic abuse, one income-generating idea would be to develop training packages that could be delivered in the area. This could be a useful enterprise partnership with UCLAN’s Connect Centre, using the university’s experience of delivering Continuing Professional Development and the local networks from within Springboard. There should be scope for developing specific packages around the delivery of domestic abuse services in rural areas.
Focus Group – Recovery Toolkit

The Recovery Toolkit is a 12 week programme designed for anyone who has experienced domestic abuse, could attend a group and is no longer living with the perpetrator. The aim of the programme is to work with victims, without victim-blaming, to build self-esteem and more resilient coping strategies.

The focus group was facilitated by a lone researcher and audio-recorded. It was a lively and engaged session. It comprised of six women who had just completed session 10 (on loss) of the Recovery Toolkit with Springboard and Barnardo’s workers. Given the busy lives of the women, not all could stay for the full time after the session, so analysis here is concentrated on the first half hour of the focus group. Questions that were put to the group included:

- How did you find out about the Recovery Toolkit?
- Before you came to the group, what opportunities did you have to discuss domestic abuse
- How would you explain/define domestic abuse? (Has this understanding changed since attending this group?)
- Have you changed the way you think/act because of coming to this group? What would you say is the biggest change?
- Have you used the knowledge gained from the group in any aspect of your lives?
- What do you think about the support from the group?
- Do you think there are any gaps/negatives about the group? Is there anything you would change?

By the time I could ask questions about flooding, rurality and the ‘magic wand’ only two women were remaining, so those responses have been analysed and included within the previous section.

The women involved had been referred through a number of routes: IDVA services, social work, psychiatrist, health visitor and Barnardos. However, all were clear that before attending the group they had had limited opportunity to discuss their experiences of domestic abuse:

“You just thought it was you. Didn’t think anyone else would go through it.”

This speaks of the isolation of the experience of domestic abuse and the curious mismatch between the general knowledge of the subject and the lived reality. There were also examples of stigma and concerns for others, which meant that women kept their experiences quiet.

“You don’t want people thinking bad of your situation, because the social is involved”

“You don’t want to worry your family. Just didn’t want to worry them.”

Understanding and Change

“I didn’t realise I was going through domestic abuse, even though the police kept sending me these leaflets saying ‘domestic abuse’. I could tick them all off except the violence.”

This statement highlights the inability to name the experience of domestic abuse from within it. Group work offered the participants a chance to reflect on, and name their experiences. All group members expressed that since attending the group they could now define and recognise domestic abuse. However, they also agreed that since attending the group that the biggest change was:
“It’s not your fault”

This is a significant change in attitude and moves participants on from self-blame. Other changes in attitude and understanding within the group included:

- “You are not alone”
- That talking about the experience was helpful
- Improved mental health and psychological well-being
- The need to focus on other things in their lives
- The realisation that it is their life and that they can make decisions

From within the context of coercive control, these are important changes. Alongside improved psychological well-being and understanding the group also discussed ways in which this has impacted upon their behaviour. One respondent was very clear that attendance of the group had had a major impact on her ability to reengage with social life, including taking her son to school. Another spoke about feeling empowered in relationships with professionals dealing with the impacts of domestic abuse.

**Groupwork**

“Outside of this group, I don’t have any support, so it’s really nice to have that space to express feelings”

Group work has a long history in the support of women experiencing domestic abuse and it is generally recognised that the group environment can be useful in helping participants share experiences in a safe, therapeutic environment. The women in this group highlighted particular aspects of the group experience that they found to be useful. These included:

- Access to different knowledges and coping strategies
- Encouragement
- Re-socialising after isolation
- Increasing the network of support and social networks

They all expressed the desire to meet outside the group. Much of this was related to the atmosphere of the group produced by strong, empathic facilitation:

“When I first came I dreaded crying and just being on the verge of tears, but now it’s like – nobody laughs at anybody”

Comments were also made about the resources available to the group such as handouts and information to support understanding of parallel or overlapping concerns, such as Child Protection and the courts. All would recommend the group to a friend in similar circumstances and one had already done so.

**Challenges and Gaps**

All participants were asked whether there were any negatives in relation to attending the group. However, this produced little response.

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“No – can’t fault them at all – always caring and understanding”

The only gap that the participants discussed in relation to the programme was to expand attendance to other professionals with social workers and the police given particular attention:

“It would be good for them [social workers] to attend just one lesson – or the whole course – so they can see what it’s like”

As group work is usually highly valued by people who experience domestic abuse, most published evaluations are positive. However, a criticism that is occasionally levelled at group work in this context is that the content can feel over-whelming in terms of volume and emotional impact. This was put as a direct question to the group. Many of the group admitted to feeling overwhelmed, but this was not necessarily considered negatively, as it was handled with sensitivity and could be supported by:

“...more time to talk as a group”.

Recommendations

- This was a valued intervention by the women who attended the group and efforts should be made to find continued funding for this practice.
- The findings of the focus group were demonstratively positive. Focus group methodology can be a useful way of gathering the views, opinions and talk about domestic abuse for this kind of intervention, but Springboard and partners should not be complacent about the findings. There are limitations to the focus group approach. It could be, for example, that a woman might feel excluded from the group and that this sense of dislocation could carry through to the research activity. There is also less opportunity to delve deeper into individual responses when managing a group. Therefore, it is recommended that alongside the qualitative evaluation, it would be useful to collect before and after outcome measures (such as the CORE OM for counselling)
- Given that group work can be particularly successful in working with those who have been affected by domestic abuse and that many of the women who participated here and in the service-user telephone interviews have suggested that more time would be useful, expansion of group work services could be considered beyond the initial recovery toolkit.
Young People Focus Group

The young people focus group was facilitated by 2 researchers and included 8 young people (four female, four male). All students had received input from Springboard about healthy relationships. They were all in Year 13 (17 – 18 years old) and taking A-Levels. All remember the input and the most remembered aspect was the use of the video detailing a controlling relationship. The use of leaflets and group activities discussing what is and isn’t domestic abuse we’re also mentioned. The issue of control within relationships was discussed and in terms of change the group highlighted that they “look at relationships differently” and see “control as a form of abuse”.

This suggests an attitudinal shift, but there was less consensus on whether the input had had an impact on their behaviour:

“It hasn’t changed the way I act – but more noticing other people”

When asked about accessing help for themselves they talked about teachers, school nurses and peers, rather than specialist services:

“It would be easier to find friends rather than professional help. I mean, I wouldn’t know where to go for professional help, but friends are easier to talk to and ask them about it.”

They also demonstrated an awareness of how technology could help them source help and there was a general agreement that they would use google searches for information.

There was some reticence about how they would react to domestic abuse if they suspected it amongst their friends:

“You shouldn’t necessarily get involved in someone else’s relationship. It’s comfortable to talk about your own, rather than talk about someone else’s”

When asked if they would change the input in anyway, the only suggestion was about gender balance in the examples.

They were asked about the timing in relation to their own development. For this group, they felt strongly that they were the right age and that it would not be appropriate at a younger age:

“If we were slightly younger, we would just brush it off”

“Sixth form is a good idea because it’s before we get into a serious relationship and also before we leave to go to university where this information might not be so easy to find out.”

Recommendations

Given the curriculum demands, there did not appear to be much option to expand the teaching. However, given the lack of expressed knowledge about help-seeking avenues work with teachers might be useful. One respondent said, “I’m confident that there are services out there and I would start by asking a teacher.”

- Discussion followed about how teachers may or may not be helpful but they were the preferred route. Therefore alongside teaching input for children and young people, it is suggested that close links between the school and support services should be fostered to
respond to disclosures of abuse. In line with the findings from the PEACH report, improving the readiness of schools to deliver programmes should include training and information reporting on current evidence for the school’s leadership, governors and parents.

- PEACH also suggests that the values and attitudes of the peer group emerged as a crucial mechanism for change and it is therefore appropriate to continue to deliver interventions to whole populations of children and young people. While schools provide a natural choice of setting for programme delivery, young people outside mainstream schools should not be omitted, as this group is likely to include young people at high risk who may require additional services.

- In terms of the age of delivery, the young people themselves felt their age to be appropriate and currently there is little evidence about effectiveness of school interventions at any age. However, it would be useful to try and develop an age appropriate resource for younger age groups that can be evaluated with before and after surveys and a longitudinal follow up to assess impact. As one of the young people said:

  “It could be just too late – once you’ve developed the habit of controlling and abuse”.

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