

Update on Oxfordshire's strategic response to Domestic Abuse under Covid-19 restrictions

Purpose

This paper is to update members of the Health Improvement Partnership Board on domestic abuse work in Oxfordshire and, more specifically, on our multi-agency response to victims and families under Covid-19 measures.

Context

It was clear very early on that there would be increased risks for victims if restrictive measures were put in place to avoid the spread of coronavirus. Once measures were announced on 23 March we drew on the rich pool of knowledge and expertise within our Domestic Abuse Operational and Domestic Abuse Strategic Boards to act quickly to identify increased risks. Our "co-ordinated-community response" approach in Oxfordshire means that all key agencies work together to develop policy and practice and all agencies work with a view to ensure that the victim and their children are at the centre of all activity. In response to covid-19 we set up a multi-agency "cell", a group with members of our Domestic Abuse Boards including experts by experience, all key statutory, independent and voluntary and community sector agencies to meet on a weekly basis using a virtual platform.

Oxfordshire's Covid-19 Domestic Abuse Response Cell

Our Covid-19 DA group initially looked at what had happened for countries locked down earlier than us and saw the impacts being reported including a spike in incidents. There was initial understanding that restrictions on movement might enable perpetrators opportunities to exercise further power and control over victims and families which of course raises risk. There was also an understanding that such conditions make it much harder for victims to seek help or to disclose abuse and receive advice on how to keep themselves and their children safe. And of course much harder for people to flee. Victims would likely be afraid to leave (especially if they are included as one of the shielded or those at increased risk due to age or underlying health conditions). We were also aware that there may be new cases of domestic abuse that were in part triggered by the increased stress and anxiety of the current living conditions.

The focus of the weekly multi-agency meetings has been

1. To share and monitor any change in
 - service provision across specialist and core agencies as a result of the restrictions
 - patterns of referrals / police call outs for domestic abuse incidents
 - risk levels and covid-19 restriction impacts on the nature of incidents being reported / disclosed

2. Increase awareness of domestic abuse and the availability of services despite the lockdown, developing bespoke information using a range of media to target the following key audiences
 - Victims of domestic abuse – ensuring they know that they can leave, that services are available to support them and how they can get help / keep themselves safe
 - General public – advice to everyone on how to look and listen out for family friend and neighbours who may be experiencing domestic abuse and unable to seek help
 - Guidance for people delivering specific services who may have the opportunity to check if someone is safe, spot the signs of domestic abuse so that they know how to help if they have concerns or receive a disclosure of abuse.

3. Develop creative and proactive interventions to enable victims to receive help
 - Development of an app to increase access to support for victims during lockdown
 - Work to develop specific guidance for particular professionals (including children's social care and health professionals) who are in a position to give support and identify people at risk of abuse and make safeguarding referrals.

Current impacts of Covid-19

During the first 2 weeks of lockdown from 23 March all services had seen a drop in referrals / police call outs ranging between 30 - 50%. In week 3 there was an increase to more usual level. We will continue to track and share data comparing with the same period in previous years.

All agencies are reporting that they have capacity to meet the current need and many agencies have developed creative ways of responding to the current situation so that they can continue to support clients / adults and children at risk of domestic abuse.

All agencies are reporting that they currently have appropriate access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

There are also sub-groups reporting into the Covid-19 DA Response Cell one for development of communications during Covid, one looking at development of technological responses to DA under lockdown and another looking at the specific needs of victims of so-called Honour based Abuse, Female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Our highly valued core members of the Domestic Abuse and Covid-19 Response Cell **experts by experience** have played a key role in ensuring that information going out to victims, professionals and communities is fit for purpose and correctly targeted.

Updates from specialist domestic and sexual abuse services

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- The domestic abuse helpline and outreach and Independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA) services have been running as usual throughout with support workers delivering support by telephone / online remotely from their own homes.
- Refuge provision is currently being delivered as usual with support being given to families and referrals being accepted. Both refuges were put in social isolation for period of 14 days in March due to illness that was suspected covid-19. Referrals opened again on 1 April and 6 April respectively. There are currently spaces available.
- All clients have had support plans updated to take account of the current circumstances as would be the case when any significant change takes place for individual services users.
- Sexual assault and rape crisis centres and services for young victims of crime have seen a change in the *nature* of referrals that reflects impacts from some of the restrictions imposed and the impacts of the illness touching individual families
- Group work to support recovery is running in some services using secure virtual platforms while other services are in the process of adapting materials to work in this way.

Updates from core partner agencies

- Court services are functioning remotely with non-molestation orders being granted on application without the victim needing to be “present”. In the last 2 weeks we have seen an increase in the granting of Domestic Violence Protection Notices / Orders and no issues with perpetrators finding alternative places to be accommodated during the Order.
- Police have not seen an increase in new incidents of domestic abuse as compared to non-covid times.
- Our Thames Valley representative from the National Probation Service no changes in terms of perpetrators of domestic abuse and Covid-19 although recalls to prison for those in breach of their order are being actioned as usual.
- Local housing authorities are not currently reporting an increase in demand for accommodation as a result of domestic abuse during covid-19 restrictions.
- NHS and other health professionals are working well to identify and support patients/clients who may be at risk.
- Face to face visits on a risk assessed basis are being completed by adult and children’s social care services and PPE protection is being used as appropriate.

Domestic abuse information campaign

We know that a drop in domestic abuse referrals is not a good thing and we are very aware of the reduced opportunity for victims to reach help. There is clearly reduced "visibility" amongst agencies and professionals who might normally spot the signs of abuse during face to face interactions. Thames Valley Police have confirmed that the picture seen in Oxfordshire is replicated across the whole of the Thames Valley.

One of the ways in which we have responded to the drop in referrals / police call outs is by developing a range communications including television, radio and social media campaigns, posters in retail venues that are open to the public and dissemination of messages through a broad range of agencies.

Annex 1 is a message sent out by the Independent Chairs of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children's Board (OSCB) and the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board (OSAB). The message includes information and some links to key documents that have been developed and shared by our Covid-19 DA cell to raise awareness and support professionals identify and respond to victims and families. **Please can you look through the attached message from our OSCB & OSAB Chairs and the links to information and guidance included and share these within your networks and with your constituents where safe to do so (guidance on this is included).**

We are aware that a "spike" in cases is likely to come and in particular we expect to see referrals rise once lock down restrictions begin to ease. We are working to ensure all agencies are working together to prepare for that increase in need at the same time as developing as many alternative ways of working and communicating to ensure victims and families can get the support they need.

This is a very challenging time for all but we hope you will be assured by how impressively agencies have worked to quickly and creatively respond to changed needs and circumstances. We anticipate there will be much helpful learning on how we can most effectively support victims of domestic abuse and their families and enhance the way that we work to keep families safe in the long-term, post Covid-19.

Sarah Carter

Strategic Lead Domestic Abuse

Please contact me if you have any particular concerns or issues you would like to raise on any of the above or any other domestic abuse related matter.

Oxfordshire County Council | 4th Floor County Hall | New Road | Oxford OX1 1XD
07795061438 Sarah.Carter@Oxfordshire.gov.uk