



The police response to domestic abuse is not good enough and must be improved, finds HMIC inspection

The overall police response to victims of domestic abuse is not good enough and police forces need to take decisive action to rectify this, a report published today by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) finds, following an inspection of all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

In September 2013, HMIC was commissioned by the Home Secretary to inspect the police response to domestic violence and abuse. The report, *Everyone's business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse*, found that while most forces and police and crime commissioners have said that domestic abuse is a priority for their areas, this isn't being translated into an operational reality. HMIC is concerned to find that, despite the progress made in this area over the last decade, not all police leaders are ensuring that domestic abuse is a priority in their forces – it is often a poor relation to other policing activity.

HMIC found alarming and unacceptable weaknesses in some core policing activity, in particular the quality of initial investigation undertaken by responding officers when they are called to a scene. The report also identifies that officers may lack the necessary supervision, knowledge and skills effectively to tackle domestic abuse, and some have poor attitudes.

The inspection also found that:

- The victim's first contact with the police is the most positive part of their experience and that most call handlers understand domestic abuse and can identify it, and send an officer to the scene.
- Victims' experiences of attending officers are mixed. Nearly four out of five victims HMIC surveyed were satisfied with the initial police response, but a third said they felt no safer. Victims told us that they didn't always feel they were being taken seriously, or believed.
- The issue of risk assessment requires urgent attention - HMIC found inconsistent approaches to this. There is a confused approach to arrest, and the term 'positive action' is poorly understood.
- Victims who are assessed as at high-risk of serious harm or murder generally attracted a high level of multi-agency support.
- Specialist domestic abuse units have been centralised and restructured as a response to austerity. In some forces there are risky gaps in capability and capacity of specialist units with unsustainable workloads, and lack of specialist support and supervision.
- There is an inconsistent approach to how criminal justice sanctions are pursued, and how perpetrators are targeted is underdeveloped in most forces.

HMIC has developed a set of recommendations for the police service, Home Office and College of Policing. These recommendations aim to make a long term difference to the way the service prioritises and responds to domestic abuse, and implementing these recommendations requires concerted effort at the local and national levels.

HM Inspector of Constabulary, Zoë Billingham, said:

“It is the view of HMIC that the service provided to victims of domestic abuse by the police is too often unacceptable. Police leaders told us that tackling domestic abuse is important, but in the majority of forces it is a priority on paper only and not in practice. It is deeply disappointing that the stated intent is not translating into an operational reality. Domestic abuse must be seen as everyone’s business in a force, rather than someone else’s problem.”

“Although this report identifies the need for the police service urgently to improve its overall response, we recognise that there has been considerable progress over the last decade. Our inspection found committed and dedicated police officers and staff who work tirelessly to keep people safe and bring offenders to justice – sometimes with limited support from their own organisations. They should be commended for their work.”

“The extent and nature of domestic abuse remains shocking. It can have a devastating effect on people’s lives. Every 30 seconds the police receive a call for assistance relating to domestic abuse. We believe that the findings of this report should be a wake-up call for the police service; domestic abuse must no longer be the poor relation to other policing activity. Police leaders can and must make the changes that we have identified in this report; it is an opportunity that cannot be squandered.”

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Tom Winsor, said:

“Domestic abuse casts a truly terrible blight on the lives of very many people, and can have tragic consequences. In too many police forces we found there were serious weaknesses in services, which are putting victims at unnecessary and avoidable risk, and failings in some core policing activity.”

“Domestic abuse is not only about violence; it is about fear, control and secrecy. It is essential that the police make substantial reforms to their handling of domestic abuse, including in their understanding of the coercive and psychological nature of the crime as well as its physical manifestations. They must create the conditions so that victims have the confidence to call for help, in the knowledge that they will be believed and kept safe. Domestic abuse is a volume crime, and a serious one. The police must accept that and act on HMIC’s recommendations for urgent and material improvements.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. A copy of the full report *Everyone’s business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse*, along with individual force reports, can be found at www.hmic.gov.uk
2. Positive action means that when there is evidence of an offence and it is appropriate to arrest the perpetrator, then this will be carried out.
3. In September 2013, the Home Secretary commissioned HMIC to conduct an inspection on domestic abuse. We were asked to consider:

- the effectiveness of the police approach to domestic violence and abuse, focusing on the outcomes for victims; whether risks to victims of domestic violence and abuse are adequately managed;
- identifying lessons learnt from how the police approach domestic violence and abuse.

We were also asked to make any necessary recommendations in relation to these findings when considered alongside current practice.

4. To answer these questions, HMIC collected data and reviewed files from the 43 Home Office funded forces. We spoke to victims of domestic abuse who took part in focus groups throughout England and Wales (and a number of other victims in one-to-one interviews) and surveyed over 500 victims online. We also surveyed 200 professionals working with victims of domestic abuse.
5. HMIC inspected all police forces in England and Wales, interviewing senior and operational leads, and held focus groups with frontline staff and partners. We carried out visits to police stations (which were unannounced) to test the reality of the forces' approaches with frontline officers.
6. Our inspection teams were supplemented by experts in the field of domestic abuse. These included public protection experts from more than 15 forces and those working with victims of domestic abuse in voluntary and community sector organisations.
7. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) is an independent inspectorate, inspecting policing in the public interest, and rigorously examines the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces to tackle crime and terrorism, improve criminal justice and raise confidence. HMIC inspects all 43 police forces in England and Wales together with other major policing bodies.
8. For further information, HMIC's press office can be contacted during office hours from 8:30am – 5:30pm Monday – Friday on 0203 513 0600.
9. HMIC's out-of-hours press office line for urgent media enquiries is 07836 217 729.