Nottinghamshire Women's Aid
Survive & Thrive

NTU Nottingham Trent University

Domestic Abuse Co-Production Service, NTU and NWAL

Report and Recommendations: Professor Loretta Trickett, Dr Kirsty Welsh and Dr Mahad Haq

Acknowledgements

The Domestic Abuse Co-Production Service was an innovative service, jointly run by Nottingham Trent University and Nottinghamshire Women's Aid and funded by Nottinghamshire County Council. It sought to provide a space in which survivors' voices took centre stage. But it would not have been possible without survivors being willing to engage with the service; share their experiences with us; and consent to the researchers from NTU including their testimonies in this report. We wish to extend our deepest thanks to all the survivors who trusted us with their stories; shared their experiences with us; and offered us their insights into services and interventions. Their openness, resilience, courage and commitment to achieving change for themselves and others are truly commendable and inspirational. We value the time and effort they have provided and, through the report and subsequent publications, will work to raise awareness and make recommendations for change, based on their contributions.

We do, of course, acknowledge that not all survivors have felt able to take part in the service. We understand that there are many reasons why survivors might not have wished to be involved in the past or would wish to be in the future. The co-production service has always been an opportunity and not an obligation and rests on a deep commitment to survivor choice. We endeavour to use the testimonies shared in the co-production work and from the findings set out in the service report itself to centralise survivors' stories and work for change that benefits all survivors.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all those staff working in organisations across the county which have provided physical spaces for us to conduct the co-production work. We thank them for their help with the service. To the researchers from NTU, these staff have shown nothing but warmth and hospitality (and a plentiful supply of tea and biscuits) and for that we are extremely grateful.

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1.0: Introducing the Domestic Abuse Survivor Co-Production Service

The Domestic Abuse Co-Production Service was an innovative service, jointly run by Nottingham Trent University and Nottinghamshire Women's Aid Limited (NWAL), across Nottinghamshire. The overall aim of this service was to centre survivor voices, embedding key learning into future design, commissioning and delivery of domestic abuse services and responses in the region. This report is based on research conducted by Nottingham Trent University researchers over a two-year period with domestic abuse survivors who have engaged with the co-production service. The service was commissioned by Nottinghamshire County Council.

The service sought to amplify the survivor voice by acknowledging participants as experts on their experience of domestic abuse. This stance is of paramount importance, given the coercive and controlling nature of domestic abuse offending, which is designed to deny those who are targeted their autonomy, agency and voice. Where agencies do not fully grasp the nature of this lived experience, it can amount to *'secondary victimisation'* which compounds the experience of domestic abuse and its impact, discussed throughout the report.

The report firstly focuses on the nature and impact of domestic abuse on survivors, before turning to an explanation and evaluation of the services accessed by women. Generally, these services were provided by organisations across Nottinghamshire but some survivors had accessed services in different geographical locations. It is important to note two points at the outset: the first part of the report covers the experiences of women, some of whom also discuss their children's experiences. In the main, women accessed services provided by Nottinghamshire Women's Aid but not all referrals came from NWAL and some women had been referred into the co-production service having used other services. There was a small number of men and LGBTQ+ survivors, who accessed services provided by Equation, discussed in those sections of the report. The report also considers survivor's experiences with other public agencies including interactions with housing staff, police, social workers, lawyers, judges and magistrates.

2.0: Methodology

The co-production service was run jointly by NTU and NWAL and developed in response to a funding call from Nottinghamshire County Council. Through amplification of the survivor voice, the Domestic Abuse Co-Production Service provided opportunity to survivors, helping them to gain confidence in themselves, through holistic acknowledgement, strengthened by connection to the service, and to other Survivors. The service supported Survivors to develop and exercise their agency, within a specialised space, where they come to view the co-production service as a space for action, for themselves, their children and their community, exercising choice, whilst helping to inform the development of services.

This particular co-production service was exciting in bringing, as it did, University researchers into this space. By working in partnership on the service, NTU researchers were able to use their extensive research experience to gather survivor testimonies from the co-production space. Whilst, survivors found simply the telling of their stories within this space a positive and empowering experience, the involvement of NTU was always intended to ensure a different dimension to the service.

Ethical approval was obtained through Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee. Over the course of Years 1 and 2, research data was collected through in-person focus groups and interviews, as well as online focus groups and interviews. Survivors were predominantly women, of these three of the Survivors who gave individual interviews were young women. Of these, two were cisgender and one was transgender. Additionally, there were three men interviewed, of these two had been in a heterosexual relationship and one had been in a homosexual relationship. A focus of Years 3 and 4 of the Domestic Abuse Co-Production service will be to include more young people, including LGBTQ+, as well as heterosexual men. Personal data was not collected by university researchers. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and any mention of names or locations were deleted.

Interview schedules involved open ended questions on key topics to enable survivors to speak at length and in their own words on their experiences. Informed consent was obtained from the survivors that took part, who had the research explained to them by NWAL co-production service lead, before agreeing to take part. Informed consent was also obtained by the researchers before focus groups and interviews commenced. Survivors were provided with a shopping voucher for their time in taking part in the research. The survivor voice topics that were covered included the nature and impact of domestic abuse and Survivors and their engagement with domestic abuse services within Nottinghamshire including housing, police, social workers, courts. The report outlines examples of good practice and '*what works'*, as well as detailing the barriers encountered by survivors' in terms of accessing services, before concluding with recommendations on how these might be overcome.

Whilst the service report provides data on survivors' experiences and perceptions of services, it is important to recognise limitations. Firstly, due to issues around confidentiality and the remit of the service, we had no case or background data on the wider context of survivor's experiences of domestic abuse, particularly their engagement with service providers, nor did we undertake interviews with VAWG support workers instead, housing staff, police, social workers, lawyers, judges or magistrates.

Whilst this was not the overall objective of the service, we do not have data from other stakeholders, so must make clear that the data consists entirely of Survivor testimonies on their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, whilst we have formulated some recommendations for different stakeholders discussed by Survivors, it is recommended that more longitudinal research is undertaken to provide a fuller account of Survivor recovery processes. Further research should also be undertaken with staff in all organisations that encounter survivors presenting with domestic abuse need to provide a more holistic account.

3.0: The Nature and Impact of Domestic Abuse on Survivors

Domestic abuse falls under numerous criminal offences. Section 76 Serious Crime Act 2015 was the first specific attempt to criminalise conduct as domestic abuse and introduced the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour, in an intimate or family relationship but did not define the behaviour in any context. It is widely accepted that domestic abuse covers a broad spectrum of behaviours including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse, underpinned by coercive control that usually builds over time. To reflect this, s.76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 sets out that the behaviour must be repeated and continuous and have a serious effect – on at least two occasions – on the victim. The offence has a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was another important development in policy and practice. Amongst several other significant contributions to the landscape, it offered, for the first time, a statutory definition of domestic abuse.

Understanding the nature and impact of domestic abuse, is essential. It is important to recognise that domestic abuse is continuous process, underpinned by control, and punctuated by abusive episodes; the precise timing of which is never known. Increasingly, it is seen as a *'liberty crime',* which rests on a systematic exercise of control and a sustained attack on a person's space for action, resulting in an ongoing loss of autonomy and a condition of unfreedom.

There are two overall points to make at this early stage of the report – domestic abuse involves extensive manipulation which can infiltrate all aspects of a person's life, destroying their sense of individual identity and autonomy. Trauma, from being constantly undermined, belittled and questioned, alongside significant limitations on a person's access to the outside world, through manipulation of the person, children, and other family members means that the behaviour becomes normalised. Coercive control through manipulative practices also extends outside of the home to the wider network around school, employment, and community networks. This combination of factors means that coercively controlling behaviour becomes normalised, often remaining hidden and unchallenged, for extended periods of time, often years. Yet, additionally, when domestic abuse is revealed, Survivors often find

themselves confronted by organisations and systems with their own set of criteria, and practices, which are often at odds with their experience of domestic abuse, its context, and its impact.

Whilst coercive control is understood to involve a pattern of events, in practice, there is often a focus on discrete incidents, or criteria, which require survivors to extrapolate examples of evidence, from the experience of living within *an overall climate of unsafety and threat*. Placing the onus on survivors who have been living in these circumstances, to map incidents into a pattern, remains hugely problematic.

Survivors are often unable to do this because the effect of systematic abuse and manipulation have destroyed their sense of selfhood and autonomy, whilst the compounding effects of coercive control and manipulation have impacted on their ability to trust their own mind and decision making, whilst reducing their contact with potential witnesses. The ongoing trauma involved in domestic abuse, both before and following exit, means that a survivor's engagement with public agencies often comes when they are experiencing significant trauma. This means that survivors are either in an early or later stage of some kind of recovery, ongoing for months, or sometimes years. These points will be revisited in due course, suffice to say here, that the impact of domestic abuse continues to resonate long past the so-called end of a relationship. Recovery from domestic abuse involves a long journey, which can be taken to broadly involve the following steps. Firstly, ensuring immediate safety from harm, secondly trauma counselling and thirdly rebuilding of selfhood (not always in that order).

Before considering these stages of recovery, the report will firstly turn to the nature and experience of domestic abuse on survivors. The next section of the report covers the experiences of women. As noted above, many of the women who entered the co-production space did so having interacted initially with NWAL. Much of this section, therefore, focuses on survivors' experiences of the services provided by NWAL but does also include accounts from survivors who, for example, accessed services in other geographical areas or from other specialist providers. Later sections cover survivors, namely men and LGBTQ+ people, who were supported by Equation. We have tried, as far as possible, to note to which organisations survivors were referring in the testimonies that we have included here.

The examples from survivor accounts make clear that living with domestic abuse is akin to *psychological terrorism,* with survivors describing a continuing cycle of abuse which had manifested in 'relation specific ways.' Domestic abuse survivors in the service had experienced a wide spectrum over domestic abuse, over months, or in many cases, years. We will firstly discuss women's experiences; within this section, we consider some experiences of young women and highlight any similarities or differences. This section also includes women's accounts of the impact on their children.

4.0: Survivors' Experience: Women

The range of domestic abuse experienced by women was extensive and included physical assaults, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and financial abuse. Whilst many of these activities are criminal offences in themselves, there is no specific offence of domestic abuse, as outlined above. Survivors had experienced different forms of coercive control over months or years, which was accumulatively affecting their quality of life.

4.1: Physical Assaults and Death Threats

Many of the women in the service had experienced physical assaults, including throttling, scalding, punching, kicking and poisoning; wherein use of violence towards them had become normal within their relationship:

"It would either be like I'd have a punch on my leg, and so I'd need to wear tights, punch on my arm so I'd need to wear long sleeves."

Women often provided graphic accounts of physical attacks, with descriptions of partners appearing as inhuman, as if they were completely divorced from the situation:

"Well, he just does this weird, like in horror movies, you know when they just smile at you, and you just know? And he was just dead behind the eyes."

As well as use of physical violence, threats to kill were also very common (sometimes involving threats with weapons):

"My ex threatened to kill me with a gun."

There were also more subtle attempts to harm women, by putting their lives at risk, and/or to make them seriously ill:

"So, he was trying to kill me He was putting stuff in my drinks."

Some women recalled that they felt they were 'going to die' either during an actual incident of violence, or whilst living in an environment of increasing threat:

"… honestly the last year was just, there was like a documentary made…based on the true story of something that happened in Nottingham, Murdered by my Boyfriend. And I watched it over and over again, because I was convinced that I was going to die, that he was going to kill me."

Some women also described sexual offences including examples of rape:

"He needed sex, he had to have sex…he raped me several times."

One woman described being kept in sexual servitude, where her former partner, for exchange of drugs, had regularly invited men to the family home to have sex with her, brought 'sexy' outfits for her to wear, insisted that she use make up and make herself look sexually attractive, using physical violence against her and keeping her a virtual prisoner:

"I was porn for drugs."

Other women described being unconscious and coming around to numerous men on top of them performing sex acts, where their former partners had exploited them for sexual gratification:

"…then finally he got me really drunk and took me to a sex club and allowed me to be raped, and I can't recall a lot of it."

Women also discussed having sex when they did not want to, as a behavioural strategy to offset arguments and to 'keep the peace'. These experiences often impacted on women's interest in having subsequent intimate relationships:

"…sex was horrible… I cried, during sex… having sex when you're just repulsed by somebody in itself … I've still not got a very good relationship with sex now. But then that's probably quite a big lasting thing."

"I don't want sex, I don't want anything, because obviously because I was raped … and made to do things I didn't want to do. And I'm good being on my own."

As well as sexual abuse, many of the women described sexual infidelity within the relationships, where partners had been unfaithful on numerous occasions and were sometimes in two or three relationships at the same time. At times, infidelity was flaunted and used to demean the woman. At other times, it remained hidden, constituting another form of coercive control. Some women found out that their partners had been living a 'double life' – carrying on a relationship with a woman or women outside of the home, often for months or years, and/or that their partners had a previous history of domestic abuse. Other examples of infidelity included men visiting prostitutes or sex clubs and having sex with men and women, connecting with others through social media sites to arrange dates/meet up venues; whilst some of these behaviours were disclosed, for the most part, they remained hidden.

Finally, some women also discussed their former partners making sexual passes at them, or making sexually explicit remarks, when they were visiting to collect their belongings or visiting their children. Women interpreted these as signs of disrespect and controlling behaviour, by letting them know that they were still not sexually *off limits*. These examples are illustrative of the different layers of coercive control and the emotional betrayals involved.

4.2: Living Within a Climate of Threat, Intimidation and Violence

Women described living with a climate of threat, intimidation and violence within the home. There were descriptions of 'treading on eggshells' when at home, with flashpoints for violence, threats of violence and/or verbal abuse, which would often erupt from 'nowhere' :

"…he never, he never hit me, but I used to have lines on my arms, because he'd pick me up and throw me. Scream in my face, slam on his hand on the leather sofa at the side to make you jolt."

"He was never normal. Even with a small thing he can lose his temper. And after kids, it was happening more."

"Um things like, if I went to the toilet, if he was talking to me and I went to the toilet for a wee or out of his way, he once kicked the door in, so the toilet door landed on my head."

The coercive control and constant demeaning and belittling practices exhibited meant women were made to feel worthless and dehumanised. The following account shows the repetitive process:

"…if he went to bed, I had to go to bed with him, even if it was like 8:30 at night… I was not allowed to sleep with any clothes on, because he needed to know he had access to me at any point…he did things without me knowing…. he took photos of me, when I was asleep."

These repeated and belittling behaviours show how abuse became normalised over time. Progressively, coercive control begins to intrude all areas of a women's life. As she continues to be bullied and belittled, her movements and activities become increasingly controlled; access to family, friends, work and social media all becoming heavily regulated. Women described a state of constant surveillance, where they come to internalize the potential for being watched, leading to self-discipline, control and questioning of their own behaviours:[1]

"…this then turned into him checking my social media, him having my log-ins to my accounts, like it was bit by bit, it was all progressive."

"So, everything in my life was sort of controlled by him and what he thought should happen……he made it impossible for me to see certain people, like friends, he isolated me quite a bit. There's a point where I didn't speak to my mum for two years."

Controls on women's movements and access to people are indicative of how coercive control spreads outside of the intimate relationship, this also involved manipulation of the situation to other people. Survivors described how their former partners would present within different contexts, providing varying accounts of themselves and their relationships through *Jekyll and Hyde or Janus-faced personas*. Through these practices, manipulation spreads into a web of coercive control around the woman, so she feels increasingly isolated and begins to question herself, internalise blame and become distrustful of others.

Manipulation was most frequently practised with extended family members, who either condoned the behaviour as being the woman's due, or fault, or who were themselves often totally or partially estranged

from the couple, through the man's behaviour against them and/or his depiction of his partner to them. In some instances, family members were also fearful of the man and/or consequences of getting involved. An example where there were additional cultural issues is provided by women living in extended families, where they had come to the UK, following an arranged marriage, and were living with the man's family. Here, reinforcement of the coercive control was practised by other family members. In the following quote, the woman explains how her husband's family blame her for not knowing her place and just being a dutiful wife, who puts up with what her husband does:

"I explained them everything and they were not listening. They were taking his side. No, no, no, it's your fault. So that's why. I said that I cannot trust his family."

Whilst this web of coercive control was a feature for all women, for migrant women, cultural and immigration issues often made them feel especially isolated:

"And I don't have any friends in this country because when I was living with him. It was just his family around me…. I was not allowed any to make any friends and to go and see anyone."

These issues are complicated still further by coercive control through financial exploitation. This was often part of the wider pattern of coercive control, to further isolate women from wider social networks including family, friends, and/or workplaces. Whilst access to finances was often policed by men who worked, numerous men had not worked or only worked sporadically but still exercised control over finances. In these cases, women had their earnings and/or benefits controlled, confiscated and/or used by the perpetrator, for their own use:

"When I met him, I had my own Land Rover as a deputy head of a primary school.… my first daughter was born, and I was stopped from going back to work. And then slowly the house was sold, put in an account, I was told, was in both our names. I had nothing. I didn't have a penny to my name."

"I was on benefits, and he kept me on benefits, it was a guaranteed income for him. While he could go out and do whatever he wanted."

"It was a combination of all of it really. I mean I've got debts of ten grand… that he ran up in my name, which I'll never clear."

Other ways of using women for beneficial gain included examples where some men had gained access to the UK through marrying their partner, using their qualifications, citizenship and money, only to begin abusing them upon arrival. Additionally, men also took possession or used their partner's personal property and/or controlled residential spaces that were in women's names, where they had either moved in with the woman, or where the woman was sharing the space with the man through a tenancy or a mortgage. Some women had lost their employment due to the controlling behaviours of their partner, including, on occasion, men turning up to women's places of work. Other women had lost their homes through having to leave or because men refused to leave.

The extent of financial control meant that women described frequently not having money for common necessities including food, household items, medical supplies, clothing and nappies for children, sanitary items for themselves, bus fares or fuel, to pay rent or utility bills. The use of financial control compounds other aspects of coercion, increasing women's dependency, reducing their engagement with the external world, preventing their access to practical and everyday items, and preventing their escape. All thereby increase feelings of hopelessness and, often, shame.

The coercive control and constant demeaning of these women meant that they often had little to no self-esteem, constantly doubting themselves, and becoming unused to being believed or exercising any agency. The following quotes capture the process of coercive control and the accumulated impact on loss of self-esteem and agency, resulting in a death of the self:

"I didn't, I wouldn't, I couldn't govern, even if I was on a period, if had done a bad job the day before, I weren't allowed money for sanitary stuff. I had to get the toilet paper, wrap it round and I were punished in that way as well. I couldn't wash, because I didn't have time for a shower, because he needed me to do something.… if somebody had said you know, well he didn't put a gun to your head for you to do it did you? No, but he made me so miserable and coerced me, and controlled me in such a way, I was literally just a puppet on a string."

"…he'd got quite physical at times, but more mental cruelty than anything. He belittled me… he literally broke me. Made me feel like I was worthless and took all my confidence out of me."

Repetitive use of gaslighting behaviours meant that women are made to feel that *they* are the problem, that they are provoking the behaviours, they are not normal, paranoid, mentally deficient, that they are making things up, or imagining things – in short, that their version of events is simply not real:

"I'd ask a question he'd turn around and snap at me like with his answer. .so, I'd just walk off and like question myself in my head and be like, did I say something wrong, did I do something wrong?"

4.3: Coping Mechanisms Used by Women

Women often hid the impact of their partner's behaviour through shame, self-blame and/or fear of abuse escalating, if they attempted to get help and/or exit. Examples included women hiding their injuries when physical violence has been used:

"And it was on my mum's birthday, and I had a massive black eye. And I had to pretend that… But then having to go to my mum and… and I never let anybody down. So regardless, what was going on in my face, my arms, my legs, like I'd always just find a way to cover it up. That, there was no covering up that black eye, I had to make out I was in a car accident to my mum and dad."

Coping mechanisms used by women, involving attempts at mediation and use of drugs and/or alcohol, serve to complicate matters still further. Here, attention often becomes focused on their behaviour, rather than that of the perpetrator, feeding into their feelings of isolation and shame:

"And it also made me very vulnerable, because I was almost alcohol dependant… And it made me so depressed about myself….I'd gone from being …beautiful….to now being a fat, ugly slag, bitch, whatever. And those words hurt more as well, because I had turned into something that I didn't like. Um and it almost made it harder to leave, because I didn't feel like anyone would want me. None of my friends wanted to talk to me … and my parents was hating the relationship, they hated him obviously, but I felt like at the time, they hated me because I was with him. So, I felt so isolated."

"But I think that was probably my lowest. Because like I'd started taking like cocaine just on my own, and yeah, I suppose just being terrorised."

The pattern of coercive control involves repetitive bullying and isolating behaviours. As the abuse becomes normalised, women learn to endure it, attempting to limit its occurrence and effects by co-operating, following the perpetrator's rules and making themselves and their world smaller. They do this, often unsuccessfully, by not drawing attention to themselves, learning *to make no noise, to not question, to not challenge, to not tell.* The complexity of domestic abuse and the behaviours behind it means that it often takes considerable time and effort to identify and escape it.

4.4: Coercive Control: Psychological Injuries and Trauma

Many women had long lasting physical and psychological injuries, including PTSD and other psychological conditions:

"I was getting …dissociative identity disorder…they referred me to this psychologist…. I ended up having to stop work…and I was mute during that time and stuff. So, I had to relearn whilst I was in that

state how to physically talk, and sort of grow up a bit so that I wasn't doing activities that six-year-olds did, I was doing more adult like things."

"I'll just start stuttering and my body will just shut straight down, and sometimes it looks like my whole body switches off. Um and so I've had a couple stints in hospital with that since."

The following quotes capture examples of self-harming and addiction:

"Like obviously my self-harming got worse throughout the relationship, because… you've got the self-blame."

"My anxiety I couldn't sleep. But I was exhausted. I couldn't eat because it'll make me sick. And I was just smoking cigarette after cigarette, because it was the only time that I felt like I could stop mentally."

It is important to note that, due to the abuse, some women indicated that they had not entered a subsequent relationship and wished to remain alone, due to the impact on their psychological health and ability to trust. Notwithstanding, other women had entered a new relationship. Whilst, for some of them, their new partners were not controlling, others had entered into relationships with men who 'love bombed' them, describing themselves as seeking out validation externally due to low self-esteem and being susceptible to manipulation. Some of these men then gone on to exhibit controlling behaviours.

Women's experiences of 'love bombing' and whether the result of abuse is to make them susceptible to it is something that has been underexplored in literature and policy. Yet, women themselves were clear that their low confidence and self-esteem were hugely relevant factors in them being 'love bombed' and then moving into future manipulative and, ultimately abusive, relationships. That said, there were also some parallels that can be drawn with the experiences of the three younger women who accessed the co-production service. These parallels suggest that 'love-bombing' is a complicated process, which warrants further exploration.

All three of these younger women had been in a relationship with a person who was older than them by a few years or, in one case, by a person who was significantly older. One of the issues identified by younger people is that their lack of experience in relationships made it difficult to identify and understand coercive control. Many of the adult women in the service had also entered their abusive relationship at a very young age. Whilst this was not the case, of course, for all the survivors, young women did suggest that there was a clear need for work in schools, colleges and universities to help young people to spot the signs. Indeed, one young woman who had escaped an abusive relationship and was now a youth worker discussed abuse amongst young teens in early relationships. She noted that she was now able to spot abuse but only after she had existed the relationship and engaged with specialist services. Certainly, this is an area that requires significant focus in research and policy. As indicated by the young people here, educational development and delivery would benefit from input from other young people, who can understand the experience of domestic abuse within formative intimate relationships, including the use of technology.

5.0: The Impact on Children

Both physical violence and emotional abuse against women was common, during pregnancy, following childbirth, and in the longer term. Some woman had abortions due to living within the context of domestic abuse, whilst others had considered it. In these ways, the targeting and impact of domestic abuse on children often began before they were born. Women described physical attacks against them whilst they were pregnant, such as being scalded with hot water, and/or being subjected to threats of violence:

"I was in a women's refuge when I was having a pregnant with my first son because his dad threatened to kick him out of me. And they have been violent before. So I was really grateful [for refuge]…*I didn't return to my flat*."

Physical and verbal abuse of mothers was often witnessed or heard by children. Women described taking beatings and abuse to divert their partner's attention from their children. In the following account, a pregnant woman gets out of the car, during a car ramming incident:

"…., it was just like this red mist, and I'd never seen him so mad…. So, I started walking [leaving kids in car with friend] so my kids could be safe. And he's literally kerb crawling alongside me the whole time, it's like eight miles. I didn't get to [nearest town] till 3 am. So, I was walking pregnant. Um there's no pavement either on a 60 mile an hour road…. and we stopped, and there's like this little … slipway. And he came at me…. he pushed me over, and I fell in mud, and I wet myself, and I stood up I'm like, oh my god, and I don't know what, it's fight or flight…., and he threw me on the floor, and he was on top of me, and he was choking me, and I genuinely thought I was going to die, because I couldn't breathe."

Abuse of children by the former partner was also common, often involving physical violence and threats of violence:

"My ex-husband had tried to kill my son, so the police had become involved."

As well as physical abuse against children (chastisement, biting and worse, from toddlers to adult children), emotional abuse of children was common. Sometimes there were also suggestions of sexual abuse. Escalation of abuse or sudden targeting of children was often the trigger for women attempting exit. Another issue was favouritism and repeated targeting of a particular child for ostracism and abuse, or transfer of the target of abuse as children matured. Some of these children were not the child of the man himself but even where children were the biological child of that parent they were targeted. Accounts included the targeting of girls for not being boys, the targeting of children for being neuro-diverse, and/or the targeting of children for their personality. An additional factor here was having different standards for the man's own children, compared to those of the women in blended relationships.

A common issue was fathers having no empathy at all with their children and/or using children in manipulative practices to control and/or emotionally hurt the mother. In these ways, within these domestic environments, abuse against both women and children had become normalised.

Women discussed constantly treading on eggshells at home, trying to offset men's behaviours, thinking it was their fault, that they were not a good wife, had done something to provoke it, and that they were not a *'good mother'* – these perspectives were often internalised following abuse by their partners.

Mothers were often incredibly isolated as men's control of women, including contact with family and friends and financial control, also affected children's engagement with the outside world and sometimes affected their socialisation. Manipulation around children was frequently used to control women, within and beyond the relationship. Despite women repeatedly raising these domestic abuse issues, contact with fathers was often still granted, which will be examined in more detail at a later stage in the report, as this was often a major factor compromising the safety of women and children and preventing recovery from trauma.

5.1: Further Impact on Children: Psychological and Emotional Harm

The impact on children of domestic abuse was profound. There was long-term emotional and psychological damage. There were numerous examples of children developing behavioural disorders, becoming withdrawn, or acting out behaviour against their mother, other siblings and/or children/teachers at school, being diagnosed with a psychological condition and/or compounding of neurodiverse conditions, issues around attending and benefitting from schooling/obtaining employment. Many individuals continued to be affected into adulthood.

Children often blamed themselves for their father's behaviour/issues/separation, internalising blame and shame. Some children attempted to explain their father's behaviour through some internal condition

of his or an external mishap, thus absolving him from fault. At times, women were blamed by their children for breaking up the home, choosing the wrong man/men, being dependent on drugs/alcohol:

"Both my kids used to hate me…because of my choices with men."

Women were also often blamed for breaking up the family and/or ruining the man's life by their former partner and/or his friends/family. Some men went missing, self-harmed and/or threatened suicide. In these examples, the man's family were often involved, also blaming the woman. Sometimes children had often heard/witnessed these behaviours and exchanges.

Whilst women tried to protect children, they sometimes struggled to cope. This was particularly true when children themselves were acting out abusive behaviour towards the woman and/or siblings. Some women admitted struggling when their children resembled the abusive partner in their mannerisms or physical appearance (especially true for sons). Physical and emotional abuse against women by their children often increased as children matured. Other children became very withdrawn in their social relationships and some children began to seek attention from others to bolster their low self-esteem. This potentially made them susceptible to domestic abuse from others, including intimate relationships, as they matured.

Another here was that in circumstances where men continued to have contact with children, women had to endure continued abusive and manipulative behaviour from the man, and sometimes from his new partner. Questionable practices included fathers and/or new partners sharing beds with children. Some children returned home with bruises and/or were emotionally distressed. Women described how emotionally drained they felt when men collected and took their children; often worrying about what state their children would be returned in and/or whether they would be returned at all. Women also described how some children did not want to visit their fathers, and varying levels of engagement between their ex-partner and their children on these visits. These issues were extremely distressing for women, particularly when they were dealing with their own trauma:

"I've been diagnosed with complex PTSD. I'm on tablets as well. Medication. I'll never ever be the same person. Ever. And to know that I've got to co-parent with him. I mean, you know, like [child] was in the bath the other night, and said, mummy. I don't want to go to daddy's anymore."

A final issue was that some women were no longer living with their children, when fathers had gone to court, and children were subsequently living with them. These women discussed having their children turned against them and worries about losing their children altogether. This issue will be revisited at a later point, as it was a very prevalent fear around children more generally:

"The only fear now is like he will take my kids. So, I hope that will not happen, but that's the fear inside me the more they grow, the more he can control."

6.0 Nottinghamshire Women's Aid and other specialist providers: Women

This section of the report discusses women's experiences of specialist services, with a heavy focus on the interventions provided by NWAL. Of course, NWAL is the commissioned specialist domestic abuse service in North Nottinghamshire (Bassetlaw, Mansfield and Newark and Sherwood) so many women had accessed its services. But the particular nature of the co-production service, as a partnership between NTU and NWAL, meant that many of the women who took part in the service were already known to NWAL, having used or were using its services. We cannot guarantee that survivor testimonies are absolutely accurate in identifying NWAL as the source of the service described. Inevitably (and especially when women had moved into the county for emergency refuge), survivors had encountered a range of specialist services on their journeys. We have tried, as far as possible, to reflect this proviso in the accounts presented here.

Largely, the work of NWAL focuses on supporting women to establish immediate safety from harm, often through accessing emergency housing, alongside offering practical support to help with finances and helping with engagement with different agencies. Survivors can make contact with NWAL themselves or they might be put in contact with the organisation through other agencies by phone, email or via the website. They provide emergency housing in refuge for women, children and young people facing domestic abuse, including specific refuges in Bassetlaw and Mansfield, as well as satellite properties for women requiring lower-level support. The service also provides one-to-one support for women to help them to work through their experiences including exploring what has happened to them, providing emotional support, and helping survivors to make informed choices to achieve independence. The IDVA service supports with risk assessments, assisting with safety planning, legal issues around housing, finances, child arrangement orders, and legal remedies (including protection orders), whilst liaising with police, social workers, and other professionals. Where necessary, the court IDVA service supports women going through the criminal justice process. NWAL also provides guidance for other organisations responding to domestic abuse Survivors, including information on their services.

As previously indicated, domestic abuse Survivors often develop trauma including hypervigilance, flashbacks, PTSD, anxiety, depression. Support to process the trauma including counselling, trauma focused therapy and opportunities to understand and reframe the experience, to build self-esteem and increase independence, are often necessary. NWAL provides trauma informed counselling. Additionally, they provide trauma informed structured programmes like the Freedom programme or recovery toolkit to assist survivors to understand abuse cycles and build resilience. Courses designed for women and children include the Freedom Programme (designed by Pat Craven) and Hands Are Not for Hurting too, to complement the adult Freedom programme. The latter, delivered by trained facilitators, designed to complement counselling and/or practical advice, usually involves group sessions, where peer support helps reduce isolation and shame, although it is delivered as one to one, if needed. The aim is to help Survivors to make sense of their experiences and to reduce the risks of domestic abuse reoccurring. Topics covered include what abuse is, different forms of abuse (physical, emotional, psychological and financial), how abusers use tactics to gain and maintain power and control e.g., manipulation, isolation, threats and emotional abuse, the dominator contrasted to healthy partner behaviour. Survivor focus includes self-esteem, confidence, rebuilding choice and autonomy, addressing guilt, shame, self-blame, rebuilding confidence to make decisions, knowing rights, gaining a sense of self, support and mutual sharing with other survivors, signposting to support. Additionally, for those with children, courses highlight how children are affected through experiencing/witnessing abuse, what happens when abuse is removed.

Additionally, NWAL provides therapeutic play and counselling for children and young people, designed to help recover from witnessing and experiencing domestic abuse. Child versions of the Freedom programme include Hands Are Not for Hurting. Children undertake this programme, at the same time as their mothers.

6.1: Feedback on NWAL: Women

There was considerable praise from survivors for the domestic abuse services they had received from specialist services. As noted above, many of the testimonies focused on the services of NWAL but some stories included interventions from other groups and organisations. Numerous women talked about such services as quite literally saving their lives, referring to the likelihood that, without such services, they would either have been killed, taken their own lives, or become unable to cope. Of key importance to the women was that staff at the organisations had believed their accounts without judgement, the importance of this, after being repeatedly bullied, belittled, judged and disbelieved, was life changing.

There was considerable praise also for case workers in helping women to navigate complex systems to access public services and justice. Domestic abuse survivors often struggle to exercise their autonomy, including articulating themselves clearly, and making choices. Having to recount their

experiences on numerous occasions to different people across organisations, attempting to fit their experiences to align with different organisational criteria and priorities was experienced as secondary victimisation by women in the service.

In this way, having a case worker as an advocate was an important part of helping women to navigate different obstacles, and to begin to support them in beginning to make choices, for themselves and their children:

"No. I can say one thing hand on heart, if it wasn't for Women's Aid, I would not be alive…he'd have killed me 100% with how many attempts he had on my life."

"…it's really helped….it made me feel like it wasn't my fault when it was more his, because that was a big thing for me. He said if I had done things differently then it wouldn't have happened, but I know now that it wouldn't have changed anything."

Counselling services provided by organisations had been very helpful for some women in processing the trauma and making sense of the abuse. It is important to note that there are a wide range of counselling services provided across organisations (including those beyond the specialist sector) and that women were not always specific about which type of counselling they had experienced:

"…I don't think I'd be here without them. So, I did the counselling, and I've done the two programmes they run, and they were amazing…and you meet other women…, it's just nice to know you're not alone, and other people have gone through it, and got through it, and it gives you a bit more of an inner strength."

"… it was amazing to be fair….and they're not judgemental, they listen to you, they don't speak at you, they advise you…. they just understand… they will get you information to help you with whatever you've had an issue with. They ask you if you're taking drugs, or you're drinking, do you need help with this, do you need help with that. So, it's not just about the abuse, it's about the things what could roll into your other life."

Although there was often praise for counselling, there were some issues overall. There is not a one-size-fits all type of counselling for Survivors of domestic abuse. Crucially, women need to be receptive and ready for counselling. Finding out what works is sometimes trial and error. Notwithstanding, offering counselling of the wrong type or at the wrong time, might make matters worse, rather than helping women to recover:

"I had counselling. Problem is, I was still in the thick of it. So that was more of a therapy session, I was just like ranting about everyday life, it wasn't really counselling. I didn't talk about any past trauma really, because everything was just so relevant and happening."

Sometimes women found that retelling of trauma compounded it. Others felt that they were not fit for counselling, or the counselling was not right for them, or not the right type of counselling. Some women felt judged in counselling, whilst others felt that the counselling had not challenged them. We cannot be sure, given the way that survivors were referred into the co-production service, where these more negative experiences of counselling occurred. However, what can be said with certainty is that all counselling on and around domestic abuse should rest on approaches pioneered by and embodied by the specialist sector.

In contrast, there was mostly praise from the numerous women who had undertaken the Freedom programme, who highlighted how it had helped them to rebuild their self-esteem. Some of these women had undertaken counselling, whilst others had not. High value was also placed on the exposure to other domestic abuse Survivors, helping women to realise that their experiences were not unique to them. This exposure also helped women to question their treatment, the normalisation of the abuse and the self-blame that had dominated their existences and to realise that their behavioural strategies were

understandable in the context of domestic abuse (i.e., myth busting, why don't you leave, you're a bad mother for exposing your kids to him):

" ..when I attended Freedom Programme I realised … my ex-husband… I was thinking ...he's just not in a good mood… But through in that course I learned that these are the tactics that they use. So, I was thinking that's just him. he's he has ...job stress... And I realised those things were not normal. So yeah, that that was a good programme."

"…. it was very eye opening yeah, it was great the Freedom programme… I got loads from it."

It was apparent that, through the Freedom Programme, women were able to reframe their narratives as survivors of abuse and to put the blame on their former partners through coming to recognise coercive control and its impact on their self-esteem:

"I think he made me feel worthless, ugly, fat, nobody else will want me. I'm a horrible person, you know; they make you feel so low. And then you go to these places, and you start learning your self-worth again. So, you know, you are not a horrible person, what's happened to you isn't your fault, you're not shallow, you're not ugly, and you know, unattractive to people. People would want you again, and just that people will be able to love you unconditionally, without anything else in it for them Or they don't want to tell you what to do, they like you as you are, not as they want you to be…it's a bit like your self-worth."

Overall, the Freedom programme was highly praised for providing peer support and helping women to realise that they were neither alone nor to blame, spotting red flags and signs of abuse and helping women to find themselves again and to begin building boundaries.

"Yeah, I did the Freedom programme, and then the second one…there was a lot of useful information, lots of tools moving forward so you can spot things before you get into a relationship. You can spot where I should have picked up on it, the red flags, the different behaviours…and that it's not normal to put up with… them, and then all the different places you can go to for help. Just lots of things where each week you'd do a different part of the course and think, 'Gosh that happened to me.' So, you know it's not right, just helpful hints and just talking to other people in the group, being there for each other. Because each one of us will have different triggers in different areas, and we'd just help each other through, and yeah, it's just nice."

Women also commended the specialist services, including NWAL, for the way they had supported both them and their children, through counselling, the Freedom and Hands Are Not for Hurting programmes. All were seen to have helped women to better support their children, whilst enabling both themselves and their children to begin the process of healing at the same time.

As a result of their engagement with such services many women had regained confidence and were back in education, training and/or employment. Describing their empowerment, numerous women wanted to give back by volunteering; many were already doing so, and that had also been a motivation for getting involved in the co-production service:

So yeah, I owe Women's Aid a lot, which is why I don't mind doing things like this."

Whilst women wanted to give back, they do have to be ready to do so and need to hear back about how they are making a difference, which did not always happen. It is important also not to overstretch survivors, many find the process of recounting experiences exhausting and some just want to put it behind them. This will be revisited in later accounts from survivors at Equation.

Finally, there were some issues around timing of engagement. Some women had only recently completed the Freedom programme, despite exiting the relationship many years earlier. Others stated that they had not been ready for a long time to engage with either the programme or counselling.

Recommendations for improvements to the service were context specific given women's awareness of funding issues. Women strongly believed that much more funding should be made available to NWAL

and other specialist providers, to extend their work with domestic abuse survivors and to educate young people. Several women stated that the Freedom Programme should be shared as part of educational resources in schools, colleges and universities to help young people recognise coercive controlling behaviour, learn how to gain help to escape and overcome it, and or, recognise it in themselves. Women with teenagers, and young women who took part, believed that there are issues around young people not knowing about domestic abuse, or not thinking it will happen to them. There were examples of young girls and women telling their mothers, 'this happened to you, but it won't happen to me', even when there were flags in their own early relationships. Consequently, educational approaches and use of the Freedom Programme were considered essential for younger people.

A key issue going forward, therefore, is the very real need to share findings from what the coproduction service has revealed about survivors' experiences with, and the work of, NWAL and other specialist services. This sharing could be done as part of outreach work with other organisations, including housing, police, social workers, lawyers and court personnel, and arguably schools, colleges and universities. Whilst NWAL and others continue to engage with other organisations, there is scope to utilise their work and key learning from the Survivor accounts to come from this co-production work, into training, educational and practical toolkits. This will help to inform awareness raising, prevention and responses to domestic abuse.

Finally, some survivors, despite support from NWAL and other specialist providers, often still felt very alone, both during and after exit from the relationship. Whilst survivors realised that there were funding issues which limited how much NWAL could do and there was a realisation that these services could not do everything women wanted them to, some women felt very alone even after they had been resettled. These women realised that the resources of the service were finite but felt there should be more government support to enable checks on them after their involvement, and/or to provide drop-in opportunities, when services had finished. However, overall, as the following quotes have indicated, women who had received support from NWAL and other similar services believed that they were doing commendable work and had the potential to help more women, also through educational initiatives, but could not do so due to limited funding:

"But … I think Women's Aid in general can do no more. They need to not be a charity, …the government needs to be pumping money in, it needs to be a mandatory service that anyone can access. And then maybe the little branches of other things can come on….and the other thing is, I followed them on Facebook…and I know they're always fundraising and things like that, but it's still not enough, for people that go through it."

"But technically, …Women's Aid have got to have more funding to be able to help people fleeing, to be able to put a deposit down for a house rental. …so that Women's Aid can talk directly to the Council on behalf of said person to say right, they'll come to us…they need a property, they need somewhere safe, whether it's a two bedroom or three bedroom, to be able to get their kids away. So there needs to be more funding for Women's Aid to be able to help…. But Women's Aid can't because they don't get the funding for this. So, …if it …said right, we're going to give each department each region of Women's Aid funding to help people fleeing, it'd help."

7.0: Women's Experiences of Safe Accommodation

From the data with survivors, it is important to stress, that safety is not a linear experience. Rather, it can be explained as a work in progress for many years following the abuse, where physical safety and psychological feelings of safety continue to fluctuate.

Survivor's domestic abuse experiences were often echoed in and compounded by their experiences of accessing 'safe' accommodation, in terms of having their actions and choices controlled and their 'accounts' scrutinised.

There are numerous issues that influence when and whether a woman tries to exit and, consequently, how she finds 'safe' accommodation. Women had often exited following a 'tipping point' where violence towards them or their children/pets had escalated or where there was a 'final straw' moment. At this point, either they had contacted the police or NWAL, for example, or someone else (neighbour/teacher/family member) had reached out on their behalf. In some cases, the woman had simply got up and left. Most instances involved having to grasp or plan an opportunity to leave quickly, meaning that women who left the family home often did so only with the clothes on their back and what they could ram into a bag or, in some cases, a car. Of these women, some went to family or friends, and others went to refuge. The following three examples are illustrative of various escape situations:

"I mean it was the scariest thing, I think I've ever, done in my entire life...my heart wouldn't stop racing...I was so panicked, and I ran with four bags of clothes… even though I knew I was putting myself in more danger by waiting... I remember just holding her [cat] and just whispering to her whilst crying, I'm so sorry, I can't take you with me, but I need to go, this isn't OK."

"He doesn't know where I am. I basically did a flit. Um he went away one weekend, and I just packed everything and left…Um there's not many people that know where I am at the minute. It's only my mum and dad, probably my brother."

"I started packing up and selling things, I started packing up all my shoes, all my clothes and things like that…and he thought I was just being neat and tidy. But my plan was… the morning that he left, I made sure I got up early, the kids were ready dressed, washed, doing homework, playing. He came downstairs, I had washed, dried and ironed everything he owned to make sure there was no problem that day. Gave him a kiss to work, he had a fry-up, I was the ultimate perfect wife so that he could go. I took the kids to school and told both teachers, I'm going home now, but I'm going to pack, I'll be back as soon as I've done, but then they won't be coming back here again. So, I picked both the kids up. They knew that I was leaving, because as soon as [children] got in the car …they saw that the Dyson Hoover and the George Foreman grill, and my colour changing kettle."

Women's particular experiences of domestic abuse often followed them into their attempts to escape it. For example, those women who had sustained physical violence and/or threats to kill had to find accommodation at least an hour away – further severing their ties with existing neighbourhoods, jobs, schools and other networks. Additionally, these women needed to find accommodation that couldn't easily be viewed from roads or which had physical characteristics that made it unsafe.

Women had to navigate considerable barriers to gaining access to refuge spaces, including issues around geography, visa/language, restrictions on how many children, sex/gender/ages of children, and being unable to take pets.

7.1: Refuge

Some women and children who managed to access refuge did well there – particularly when they had experienced threats towards children in the family home:

"I was in a women's refuge when I was having a pregnant with my first son because his dad threatened to kick him out of me... And they had been violent before, so. I was really grateful for that…I didn't return to my flat."

The following woman discusses how her toddler, who was very frightened of her father and withdrawn at home, begins to thrive in the refuge:

"I feel like she's so confident, she's so clever now. She's socialising with everyone…she's doing everything perfectly day by day…she learns new words."

However, some women had found living in refuge very difficult. Ongoing background issues with perpetrators outside of the refuge (including harassment and abuse of the woman's family), in addition

to psychological ‘flashbacks’ to and ongoing trauma from the abuse, mean that women still feel very unsafe, despite being in refuge.

Others found the lack of privacy very hard, including sharing space with others who they did not know or trust:

“I felt a bit unsafe…there were women on drugs in there.”

“It was quite hard because I cannot leave my kids with anyone. It’s not safe to leave your kids in the living room and other people are there.”

Additionally, it is important to recognise that survivors also faced challenges in finding a place in a refuge due to issues pertaining to lack of availability:

“But when I spoke to social service and all that they said, you have no other option. You have to go to refuge…they will help you. You cannot do everything by yourself. It will be too much…. they took me to their office and then they were trying …and every refuge was full. They were saying no space.”

Other women had various reasons for not going to a refugee. A major concern was that their children would be separated:

“I couldn't go into a refuge because my children were slightly older than my youngest son and they said we can't house you. We will split you up and we've been through too much.”

“See, mine would have been split up …because mine at the time were 15 and 12.”

Further reasons for not going to a refuge included concerns pertaining to the welfare of their children due to health conditions and/or psychological needs:

“So, what happened was my son had had viral meningitis, and they wanted me to go into refuge. And I said no way because his immunity is so low… I'm not willing to do that.”

7.2: Private Rental

Outside of refuge, there were numerous barriers to women gaining safe accommodation either through private rentals or council housing. This was true whether they had entered refuge or were living with relatives. For example, financial control of women continued to impact in various ways – women who were still on mortgages could not get private rentals. Women who did not work and were on benefits often could not get references for private rentals. Several women needed their parents to act as guarantors on tenancies. Even when parents were supportive of women, they described feelings of shame and worthlessness, letting their parents down and sometimes feeling controlled all over again. Some International women in refuge were troubled by asylum and visa issues, often worrying about what would happen when they could no longer stay in the refuge.

In the following quotes, women talk about some of the financial barriers to obtaining a private rental property:

I didn’t have any funds; I was working but I didn’t have any funds. And obviously I was so much in debt, I didn’t think I’d have enough credit rating to…rent somewhere else of my own.”

“You are seen as a risk even though you've got your name on a mortgage... You're seen as a risk on private property, private rental and without someone being a guarantor for you. You wouldn't get a house.”

“So… finding somewhere to privately rent was really hard, because obviously you have to have the deposit. But then you also have to have a month in advance, and then a lot of places won't take people that the main income is benefits. So, you don't actually pass the checks as such.”

Therefore, the impact of domestic abuse on the subsequent experiences of survivors is long lasting, including the financial implications. As stated earlier, women often *'…leave with what's in the bag or the car…'* – meaning they often do not have either furniture or white goods for a new home. Some private rentals are unfurnished and/or some private landlords often require new white goods, which are unaffordable for some of these women. Having to 'scrabble around' to get money for such items was experienced as stressful and degrading by many women.

7.3: Council Housing

The waiting list to obtain council housing is often lengthy and qualifying criteria can be onerous. Sometimes women could not get council housing if they were working but they needed to work to support themselves in other ways. Restrictions on the number of bedrooms a family fleeing abuse needs, on whether women have pets, alongside the ages of children can all serve to severely limit women's options.

The following quotes provide an indication of some of the barriers experienced by women who had tried to obtain a council house, in particular the stringent criteria and lengthy waiting times:

"I was on the list; it took me four years…to get a council house…Because there was four of us, we would be overcrowding."

"And then …their assessment time- period is 2 months and after two months it will take three to four months. So, it will be long."

Many women were planning to uproot and move to entirely different parts of the country because they had heard that it was easier, in these locations, to obtain a council house. Clearly, some women need to move away for safety reasons but several described having made friends, developed support networks and had their children in schools in the local area but choosing to go on waiting lists literally miles aways just to get their own place.

Because women are waiting for council housing alongside people who are homeless, they genuinely felt that the process impliedly requires them to decide whether to make themselves and children homeless. This was a real problem for women who had remained in the family home, following abuse. They almost perceived there to be some sort of hierarchy of need and this perception was confirmed by judgement that were made about their applications:

"…and the [housing officer] said, but it – your situation – doesn't make you any better than anyone else and I said (sic) I'm not asking to be better. I asking to be safe."

As women pointed out, you are not a priority for a council house if you are in refuge:

"…. And when you are living in a refuge, it's not a priority because you are not homeless, you still have a place to live…. They have their rules. Yeah, they have their rules. They don't listen. They straight away say that. No, this is the rule we can't do."

Overall, many women described refuge and housing processes which involved them being constantly judged, scrutinised and potentially *'disbelieved'* at different stages of the process, having to negotiate every step and retell their life stories. What is clear from women's accounts here is that some of their experiences of domestic abuse in terms of control, restrictions on choice and disbelief follow them from their relationships into their engagement with agency staff. Having to keep proving that they met the criteria around 'need' for help, whether that be refuge or housing, is experienced as mentally and physically exhausting.

For example, women explained how suggestions that women should have taken furniture, if they'd really needed it (when they had fled in their cars or on foot), echo their experiences of domestic abuse:

"…You leave. You flee, fearing for your life. You leave that situation and then you're still being controlled by other organisations as to what help you can have; when you can have help; if you're going to have help."

Restrictions on agency/choice/blame/questioning/scrutinising accounts/narratives and control of resources serve to explain why some interventions are experienced as secondary victimisation. We argue here, as we do at a later point that, just, as in the criminal justice system, what being *'vulnerable'* means according to housing criteria is often outside at odds with a woman's 'lived experience' of domestic abuse and own definitions of vulnerability. Moreover, having to prove you are *'vulnerable'* according to these restrictive definitions, conceptions and perceptions, can be both devastating in the short term and deeply damaging in the long term.

The range of organisations that women encounter in the aftermath of domestic abuse often fail to grasp its complexity, including its ongoing effects and consequences. Alongside, the processes that women have to navigate are often not framed with this complexity in mind. Organisations working to their own institutional agendas and criteria, coupled with processes that pertain to a wide-range of (sometimes competing) need affect the availability of services on one aspect of abuse/need. Not addressing this aspect in turn limits women's options in others. This, at times, serves to compromise their safety.

For example, women suggested that financial assistance was often unavailable to them, when trying to sort housing issues. Yet it was available in terms of obtaining parental orders, residence orders, child arrangement orders, and for deciding issues around children's passports. At a later point, we consider the impact of domestic abuse on children and women's engagement with civil courts in more detail. Suffice to say at this point, that legal issues and policy criteria around the housing topics, not only amplified difficulties in women accessing accommodation, but often enabled the perpetrator to continue to exercise coercive control over them and their children.

7.4: Staying in the Home

Due to numerous barriers around obtaining refuge and alternative accommodation, and/or other factors such as having to *'uproot'* children away from schools, some women stayed in the family home. For some of these women, the home was in their name, as men had moved into their home. For others, the home was either in a joint tenancy or remained under a mortgage obtained with the man. There was clearly often considerable overlap here with financial issues.

The legacy of domestic abuse was very noticeable when women remained in the home, with survivors still feeling *'unsafe'* in the immediate aftermath of the man leaving and/or for many months/years subsequently. Some women had installed surveillance and hardware like locks, secured letterboxes, and panic buttons, either with assistance from the police or with their own finances. Whilst some women did feel safer following installation of these measures, others described feeling like they were living within a fortress – which often compounded their anxiety.

Feeling safer was also inevitably related to the behaviour of the man. Whilst the man was outside the previously shared home, he was often still living in the neighbourhood or not far away. Sometimes he was living with other relatives, including those of the woman, and some men had threatened either their own family or that of their former partner. Some women described the anticipation of what a man might do as being worse when he was not in the family home – as they could never know when or what happen next. Slashing of tyres, stalking type behaviour were all very common experiences:

"Initially I stayed in the family home. But that put me at even more risk. [Former Partner] Peering through windows at 7:00 o'clock in the morning, going through bins. It was just horrific…. I actually made us homeless. We were homeless for eight weeks. And it took that long because again, I didn't have a bank account."

"He walked away, but then … he'd say, well it's my house…. So, I did change the locks, which he said, if he wanted to, he could break in through the window, because I'd locked him out of the house.… he always said he'd seen a solicitor, and he knew his rights and everything. At one point, he knew everything what I was doing because…he was listening to me through the Alexa. So, every conversation I had in the house, he'd heard."

It was notable that some women, who had moved out as a temporary measure, continued to struggle to get men out of their former home, even though it was in their name, often for months or years. Yet, even those who had managed to achieve a physical removal of the man were less successful in effecting his elimination more generally. As alluded to in the quote above, technology was often used to maintain surveillance over the house and the woman, even when physical surveillance had been restricted. Women described men using cameras and listening devices to record and monitor their every move whilst inside the house. This surveillance through technology is an area of increasing concern in relation to domestic abuse and everything we heard confirms the concerns here. Even when men were not physically in the home, their presence continued to be felt long after the relationship had ended:

"…although he's not there, he would have been there."

Indeed, for some women, coercive control had continued, long after exit from the family home/the relationship and often for months or years. This happened, despite some of their former partners having quickly moved in with another woman, through meeting someone new, or through existing infidelity. A number of these men continued to live relatively close to their former partners and continued to exercise some level of control through surveillance, social media, and, more frequently, through visitations with children, which is discussed later. A key finding was that contact with children and worries around security continued to be an issue for many women, often years after separating from their former partner and despite living with a new partner through cohabitation or marriage.

Finally, some women went to their parents or other family members. However, this put considerable strain on them and their families due to issues around space, financial burden, shame and guilt, often compromised the safety of extended family and caused issues with children's education and engagement with public services. It also interrupted women and children's informal and formal support networks.

8.0: Women's Engagement with the Police, Courts, Judges, Lawyers and Social Workers

The following sections will now discuss women's engagement with the police, courts, judges and social workers, including positive and negative experiences. Based on their experiences of policing, survivors were asked whether they had any specific recommendations for improvements. Where possible, these are contextualised within the wider domain of responses to domestic abuse within the criminal and civil justice systems.

8.1: Women's Experiences with the Police

Regarding engagement with the police, there were a wide variety of accounts across the women who took part in the service of their encounters with police at various points in time.

For many women, decisions to involve the police had come at a tipping point:

"… he'd gone to the pub, I walked down to the police station, …told them everything. ..we'd split up, he'd gone back to his, and he was still ringing and texting me, wouldn't leave me alone. Turning up at my workplace, turning up at the house. Said that he was going to go and get by two kids from school, and that I'd never see them again…. I walked into the police station and just broke down, told them everything….in the space of a week, he'd rang me 752 times. Even though he was blocked, it was still

coming through as private numbers…there were texts, voice notes, video's, all sorts…. and that's what made me go to the police, because I just realised, it's just going to get worse, it's not going to stop until probably the point that I'm dead."

Some survivors describing positive encounters of policing highlighted that the police had treated them courteously, that they had listened and that they had taken what action they could:

"I mean I think they've got a tough job, and they were lovely, they were respectful and everything and listened to me. they came all the way from [a city miles away] and interviewed me at [local] station so I didn't have the upheaval."

"He took …my car off the insurance….so I was driving my [children] to school …and I got pulled up by the police. I was like…it's Domestic Violence. Because they needed to take my car and impound it, and I was like, no, you can't take this; this is all I've got. And bless this other policeman, he went on the laptop, and he went, actually what she's saying does read true. So luckily, they did believe me, and they drove me home. He said, insure it in your name… now. And I was like, thank you so much."

Sometimes police officers had been instrumental in helping women to get to refuge or a place of safety or getting them referred into NWAL or another specialist provider. In other cases, the police had removed offenders and helped some women to get the home fitted with locks and surveillance devices:

"I went back to my house and that's when the police stepped up the support…. the police alarm, the injunctions and I had alarms on the windows the doors…the letterbox."

What is important in these accounts is the quality of the engagement and interactions with officers, alongside their actions in being courteous to and respectful of the women in these encounters and in seeking resolutions where possible. It is important to note, therefore, that positive perceptions of the police are not simply premised on whether there is a prosecution or not. Some Survivor accounts where there was not a prosecution, due to lack of evidence and case being historical, still demonstrated some level of satisfaction with the police who had interacted with the Survivor. Women were often positive if the police had treated them well and/or where they realised that there was insufficient evidence, due to the historical nature of the report and/or because it had not been possible to obtain evidence for another reason.

It is clear, however, that there are some key differences in the responses of some officers and forces that make a difference to survivors. In contrast to positive experiences described by some women, for example, others were very critical of the police, recounting instances where police had failed to turn up in response to calls or were slow to come even when violence was occurring and/or in progress. Women were also critical where police took little action even when there were physical injuries. There were also examples of failure to arrest or take any further action, even where evidence of harassment and abuse was available. An example of this is given below:

"… He was aggressive, he was the suicidal threats were just through the roof. I ended up calling the police on him. Police were absolutely useless. They came about 3 hours later, when he had knives out and he was trying to cut himself and he hurt me in the process. Kids are sleeping upstairs."

Numerous women discussed the police being dismissing or disbelieving of their accounts and/or appearing disinterested during their encounters with them:

"Well yeah, because he was trying to kill me, so you know. Because I was divorcing him at the time, the police don't sort of really take much notice, because you're in divorce proceedings, so they just say, oh you've got a solicitor who can deal with it…but what good is that? You know, at the end of the day."

“I don’t know what you would call them, like officer in charge of the case…she wasn't really approachable. I didn’t feel very supported by her, and I didn’t have like any liaison officer or anything that would make sure that I was alright, or…let me know where the case was at.”

Numerous women discussed the issue of police not updating them sufficiently:

“…so things moved quickly at first, where the only things they got me to do was the initial police visit, and then the video recorded interview, and then they took my phone as well…..but then after that, I didn’t hear anything for months…They didn’t tell me when they were interviewing my ex-partner or anything.”

“…then from that, when he got arrested it was just like a waiting game, because… I only got updated if I rang the police and spoke to the one dealing with it… I remember the day he was in court; it was me that rang them to find out what had been said, they didn’t get in touch with me.”

A significant issue around dissatisfaction with policing concerned perceptions of men getting away with continued abuse and harassment for many months or years without legal prosecution:

“Because I've been let down through system massively and I've got it in black and white in paperwork that there's been a long line of domestic violence. For many years…and he's never been prosecuted for it, even though they've had evidence.”

“He's always seemed to have got away with it…. never took a punishment for it, just got away with it…. It would just like everything would pretty much dismissed.”

Women often referred to police being reluctant to get involved, for example, with men having to come to the property to collect belongings, which women were often left to sort out and supervise, even though they remained afraid of the offender. A reoccurring issue was the frequent breaching of bail conditions or injunctions, where officers indicated there was nothing that they could do and where action was often lacking. Therefore, even where legal restrictions were in place, women described how no action would be taken by police for infringement of them:

“He doesn’t follow them restraining orders…he breached the non- molestation 22 times, and the restraining order 14, and he got away with a community order.”

“….so, every time he was breaking it, there was some sort of evidence. It was messages on my phone. I’d took a video out of my bedroom window when he was outside my house, CCTV from work. Then it got to the point where I would literally leave the house at 7-8 o’clock in the morning, and me and my kids wouldn’t go back home till as late as possible, so I weren't in the house just in case anything happened. It was literally living a nightmare.”

In the following quote, a woman describes how the police were unaware of which restraining order was being breached:

“I rung them up when he'd done something on the restraining order, and I’d had two restraining orders. They were looking at the wrong restraining order, and they were point-blank saying to me, no you’re wrong, he hasn’t breached his restraining order…and in the end I had to go back with the right restraining order, and they went, ‘Oh yeah sorry, we didn’t know there were two restraining orders.”
In the following quotation, the woman describes how the police imply she is a nuisance, for calling them about a breach of an injunction:

“When we started with the injunctions and the police alarm because there was a point where I pressed the police alarm because he was at the top of the street and he was threatening to kill me, that I pressed the alarm and the policeman said don't ring us again. We've had a really busy night….And then I contacted Women's Aid. Hysterical, saying he's at the top of my street, he said. he's going to kill me and the kids. So she sent the police to the house and I got an official letter of apology.”

Overall, as indicated in this section, there were key differences between positive and negative experiences with the police, which will be revisited in the conclusion and the recommendations.

8.2: Women’s Experiences with Courts, Judges, Lawyers and Social Workers

It is important to note that social workers were often involved with women and children in services and child protection orders were sometimes in place. Whilst some women felt that abuse against them was, to a certain extent, understood, other women did not feel that the professionals in their case really grasped what was going on. A frequent criticism from women was that family judges and lawyers, did not understand the context of domestic abuse, which women felt was evident in their legal arguing and decision making:

“Domestic abuse isn't as serious as what they make it out to be. The judge …haven't got an understanding. I think they all should be made to do the Freedom course….and I don't think any professional has got a true understanding of the impact of domestic violence. The levels that they go to.”

“… You don't think anyone's going to believe you. But then when I sat in front of the judge and my solicitor was ready to say, look, we've got stalking proof. We've got harassment proof. We've got threats of life proof …The judge turned round and said, …if she's really scared, she wouldn't let him see her son. And I was like, speechless. And my solicitor, God bless her. She did turn around and say, well, that's the coercive control. She's scared that if she doesn't let him see his son, what the repercussions will be. He went, but… she's letting him see him. So, thrash it out and let's get something sorted today. Bish Bash Bosh done. And it's the worst order in the whole entire world. And that used up all my legal aid. So, I'm out.”

As the woman in the previous quote indicates, there are restrictions on legal aid, meaning that taking court action was not always possible:

“…it's legal aid. You're only granted so much, but the cost of the cost of the car, the cost of the solicitors, it's soon all adds up and it's like I'm stuck… there's always a barrier trying to stop you from moving forward when you do actually come to leaving at this the person that's abusing you.”

“Yeah, it's pretty sad…legal aid because they only grant you so much.”

This presented difficulties as issues around children were a continuing source of stress for women, often over many years. Women often described their former partners as manipulating police, judges, and social workers:

“I just constantly obsess over research and trying to get as much knowledge as I can because if he does take me this time. I need to I need to be prepared. Because it's so manipulative and he can act, like a knight in shining armour. Do you know what I mean? So, I know that I'm going to have my work cut out…But even the court orders…there's no repercussion from it…, talk about if you don't stick to child arrangement order, you go to prison. No, you don't.”

“…he started taking courses on autism, kids and learning about that. And he showed in the court that I am doing all these things, and I was like, he is doing all this to show the court because …before that he

was thinking my son is a douche…other kids are better than him and he was comparing all the time, it was stressful, even now it is stressing me because those type of anger management courses… I can't understand within a one month he started in December, he completed in December I cannot believe that in with those 4-5 video calls, he has changed."

Contact with children was often permitted, even years after separation, based on a supposed presumption that: '*contact with the parent [father] was in the best interests of the child.'* Women described men using visitation to continue to perpetuate abuse and control, raising numerous issues of concern around the safety of their children. Women were very worried, particularly where men had mental health/drug issues or had been previously abusive towards children. Women alleged that men often hit or emotionally harmed children, when they had visits, with some children returning distressed or with minor injuries, describing their children as frequently not wanting to go. Yet women indicated that often the presumption that it, was 'in the best interests of children to see their fathers' prevailed, even though, in the mother's opinion, there were substantial risks towards the children.

"The judge didn't believe it was Domestic Violence, so I was forced to make an order on the same day, even with a Section 7 Report, because CAFCAS let me down….my son actually sat in the room with this woman doing the Section 7 report and said, 'Daddy hits me. And she'd assured me that if my son says that, they'd put things in place, and nothing would get passed. And she said, [ex-partner] is still a fit parent. So, the judge went, this is tit for tat, sort it out…the court order happened that fast, and because it was the back end of Covid, Women's Aid couldn't have a representative for me in court. I was on the list, but I didn't have one, so it all got done and dusted. I went back to court, and it wasn't a big enough thing for a judge this time. So, I got three retired [magistrates]…and this battleaxe in the middle has decided that I only get every other Christmas with my six-year-old."

Social workers, magistrates and judges were therefore often stated to be a cause of frustration for many women, who felt that they often failed to listen and continued to support a man's version of events or conclude that there was simply disagreement, to be resolved by the court. Often women were disbelieved or painted as the protagonist:

"So that's what you're getting in every kind of meeting you go into, if it's social services meeting, if you're going to court, everything's about him."

When child arrangement orders with children were approved, women explained how they were simply expected to police the contact (or sometimes another family member was expected to do this i.e., the woman's parent/s). This was often a considerable and ongoing source of stress for the woman. Indeed, some women were extremely afraid of what might happen to their children during contact with their fathers:

"But if you don't send them [children], then you're breaking the court order and then you have to pay the legal aid to fight it all…don't get me wrong…if [child] did turn around to me and just literally completely refused breakdown to go because she's scared of him too… I would then be her voice …But I've spoken to social services myself….. even CAMS are like, this is just terrible…we're referred but then they're just like, 'Well, there's a court order.' That doesn't mean there's no abuse going on just because there's a court order."

A related issue was that, with parental responsibility, a man could just take a child from school, despite women informing schools that children were not to be released to the father. Other women were worried where men had children's passports, believing that they might choose to disappear with their children. These were very real fears and many women further worried that children might be harmed or even killed. One woman, crying about the persistence of this worry, in her life, asked:

"How many times can you allow a man to mess up, and to mess his kids up?"

In contrast, some women were not residing with their children, due to alcohol or drug dependency, which had begun as a way of coping with the abuse. They could only have supervised access with their children, often online. These women felt that this was at odds with their ex-partners, who were still able to have access to children, despite allegations of previous abuse in the home.

Overall, it was clear that issues relating to children were a problem for many women, meaning that their feelings of safety continued to be compromised for many years. During the writing of this report, a change in the law will mean that the presumption of contact with parents will no longer be paramount in family legal proceedings, where allegations of domestic abuse exist.[2] Whilst this is a very welcome development, Survivor input into training for legal personnel will be imperative.

9.0: Men's Experiences of Domestic Abuse including Negative Engagement with Services

There were only three men who took part in the coproduced work but the accounts that they gave in the qualitative interviews provided some key insights into the nature of their experience, providing a foundation for years three and four of the Domestic Abuse Survivor Co-Production service**.** Of the three Survivors, two were in heterosexual relationships with children and one had been in a homosexual relationship with no children in that relationship. For two of the men, the abuse occurred during their relationships but one had experienced domestic abuse from his adult son, who was living in the family home. The second Survivor had experienced domestic abuse from his partner, who was a woman, and his young child had also been targeted. The third Survivor to be interviewed had separated from his partner, a man, after they had been cohabiting in the Survivor's home. The abuse began following that separation, taking the form of an extensive stalking campaign of approximately two years duration.

Regarding the first Survivor's account, there were similarities with some of the women discussing abuse from their children, including adult children. This is an area that requires additional attention in academic and policy literature.

This Survivor's eldest son had been abusing him for around 12 years. The son had been taking drugs for many years and had later been diagnosed with schizophrenia. He had been abusive to other family members also but had tried to kill his father on three occasions. Again, as in the women's accounts earlier, the feelings associated with this abuse are complicated by the inherent emotional conflict that the parent has for his child and self-blame is present, as indicated in the following quote from this Survivor:

"It's worse when it's your son, I know it's bad when it's other members of the family, but when it's your eldest son, someone you've looked after all their lives, it's horrible…and I was worried about him… no matter what, how big an idiot he was, or how nasty he was, he's still my son. And I knew that there was still the little boy I loved in there…and you just can't figure out, what did you do that made him this way?"

The Survivor goes on to explain how he eventually had to limit his use of his own home, due to fear of his adult child, largely living in his bedroom, with bolts on the door, and rarely going out. The Survivor stated that he had warned the police on many occasions about the behaviour of his son. The police had been called three times in relationship to three separate attacks. On the second occasion, an injunction was granted but the son was bailed to his father's address and the abuse continued. On the third occasion, the son was arrested and sent to prison but for another offence. As examined elsewhere in

[2] https://womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-marks-momentous-ministry-of-justice-decision/#:~:text=The%20government%20has%20made%20a,the%20presumption%20of%20contact%20removed.

the report, the routine breaching of bail conditions and restraining orders without sanction was common, as the Survivor indicates below:

"…but he got away with it every single time and I don't understand how or why he got away with it."

The Survivor discussed the impact on his mental health and impact on his feelings of safety. He only felt safe at home once his son was in prison and, even after that, would only go out if accompanied by other family members. He had significant trust issues. As he put it, if his own son could do that to him, who could he trust? Certainly not the police, who he did not believe could keep him safe.

In the account from the second Survivor, coercive control developed early in his relationship and worsened after the birth of his child, blighting both his life and that of his child. The Survivor had experienced abuse from his own father, including the use violence, which the domestic abuse from his former partner had compounded.

The coercive control had started with manipulation of his movements, wanting him to stay with her all the time. If he went out, she questioned his love for her and began to self-harm and to use violence against him. There was also financial abuse, with her having credit cards in his name. Once their daughter was born, she was jealous of the attention that the baby was getting and the abuse escalated. There were parallels here with accounts from women in the service, about their partner's lack of empathy with their children. In the survivor's account here he explains how his former wife did not bond with her own mother and how this carried into her relationship with her own daughter. He described the abuser being neglectful, leaving the baby in dirty nappies and unfed, and leaving her unattended in the house as a toddler. The Survivor had to leave his job to provide full-time care for his daughter. After a school referral, where he was initially assumed to be the aggressor, he took his daughter to live with his mother. Although he returned to his former partner on some occasions, believing she would change, the coercive control worsened, resulting in him leaving again.

The Survivors encounter with public services had largely been characterised by an initial assumption that he was the aggressor and/or that he was exaggerating. On one occasion when he had called the police after locking himself in a bedroom, the account was dismissed and played down, with one police officer telling him he should *'man up.'* Initially, the daughter's school had appeared to assume that it was him who was the aggressor. The assumption was apparent in the first visit from social services, where it had been assumed that it was him who had been bailed for assault, not his former partner.

When a non-molestation order was applied for in relation to the child, there was an assumption that his former partner should be seeing the child and he was told that it takes longer to get a non-molestation order against mothers than fathers. Although, the order was eventually granted, the Survivor explains how he is very scared about what will happen when it ends, particularly for his young daughter:

"…she puts the fear of God in me…she would do anything."

The third Survivor had endured a systematic and calculated campaign of abuse after he ended his relationship with his former partner. This was directed at him, his family, including his adult children and his elderly parents, and eventually his new partner. As is indicated in the following quotes, the extent of this stalking campaign was relentless:

"…so, this is when stuff started happening, he got onto my Google account, virtually every day, for two years…there's some very serious stuff he started doing. He knew where I was…this is where it may change me as a person, because I became very suspicious of friends. How was he getting to know all this information…..he'd stolen my V5, my logbook for my car, and he'd logged into my car account…he

cancelled the insurance on my mum's house…then he got to know [new partner's details] and he found out where his parents lived, he put their house on the market, sent them funeral stuff through post, cancelled the TV Licences, water, council tax…I sold the house I was in, he got to know the new address within weeks, …..sent me vile stuff through the post."

The account here bore striking similarities to those of the women in the service who had raised stalking behaviours, post separation. The spectrum of targeted behaviours involved the Survivor but also implicated their friends and families, indicated in the text below:

"I see your daughters out walking the dog along the riverbank. It was quite threatening. Then you get emojis with swords and daggers and shotguns."

Similarly to the first two men discussed in this section, this Survivor initially had a negative experience of policing:

"So, I contacted the police…. I gave them a big statement …I gave them all the information, all this photographic evidence on a stick, sat on that for about a year and they didn't do anything."

The Survivor goes on to explain how he perceived that the force might not be taking it seriously because he was a man and he also wondered whether his sexuality might also be a factor:

"But there was something going on with [City force], they just didn't take it seriously. This is when I started wondering is it because I'm a chap? There's a lot of women out there needing priority… you know, in stalking and harassment….and once I said that it wasn't a violent harassment…. there wasn't any physical damage. I never felt threatened because I'm a big guy. I knew he would never threaten me physically, …it's all verbal. But they e-mail something like that. I wondered if it was …because I was a gay person, being stalked and harassed? I don't know why I just couldn't work out why the police weren't taking it seriously because we had evidence that's it's continual…. I've got pages of it, and they weren't taking it seriously."

9.1: Men's Positive Experiences with Service Agencies

In contrast to these negative experiences, all three of these Survivors reported positive experiences with some public service providers. For example, the second Survivor, speaking about his dilemma around the lack of intervention around the domestic abuse stated, *'where do you go.'* As with survivor 1, he eventually went on to have a positive experience with Equation, following referral from social services, who had gone on to provide much needed support. Quotes from both Survivors can be seen below:

"Equation were brilliant."

"Equation was the best thing that's ever happened to me."

The third survivor also praised Equation, who provided much valued support to him, and who were pivotal in chasing up the lack of police response in his case:

"So that's when I started contacting charities, Victim support, …and Equation in the city, they were very good. …I had a lovely support worker from there…and he seemed to have my case… He contacted the police, so he was putting pressure on the police as well and then suddenly they decided they were moving it over to another city force …and then things stepped up."

Eventually, the Survivor's case was taken over by another police force and he had a very positive experience with a police officer who *'took it seriously'*, telling him *'No-one should have to put up with that.'*

"I got a fantastic policeman there. He was so supportive, emailing, ringing, a lot of contact. And he said, Look, you know, I'm on a mission here, right and. I'm determined to get this solved for you. I think he

realised the seriousness. And he said, Right, you're going to have to follow this through…. we're going to have to arrest him because he's become an obsessed stalker. …If you don't deal with it, it's never going to go away. It's not going to stop."

In this case, after the initial arrest and imposition of conditions, the behaviour stopped:

"So, he was arrested in end of June. Very soon after I did my statement, so we had him in the police station locally. He pleaded guilty, saying yes, you know, he was doing this. So, once that happened…What's the word where they've got ...bail conditions or injunction. …And after that, as soon as he was arrested, it all stopped."

What the Survivor here had found particularly helpful was how that the police and, later, the judge in the trial had taken the abuse seriously and how their responses reflected this. This Survivor also praised the witness support team. He had not wanted to go to court, and the trial took place in his absence, but the witness support team had kept him informed and had respected his wishes; all of which had helped him to gain closure:

"Yeah. So obviously all the support Equation, they were very good…witness support. Yeah, very good. …I decided not to go…. they did it in absence…I got a transcript of the actual court case…it gave me closure…it's better than not being there, I could see what they were saying… …And I got a letter from the courts saying what the outcome was."

The Survivor was also pleased with the sentence of the court and thought that the judge had taken it seriously and reflected that in the sentencing:

"He was supposed to have got three years jail sentence, but because he pleaded guilty…he got a year off...the judge decided because it's his first offence, good behaviour, he'd followed all the bail conditions, that make it suspended. Two years suspended sentence, 40 days of rehabilitation. 200 hours community service. A permanent restraining order for both me and partner. he awarded us both £3000 each compensation the judge. So, he's having to pay that £150 a month. "

Finally, this Survivor praised the police officer who had pursued the case and thanked him, pointing out the key reason that he felt the experience was positive overall:

"Because he understood the impact."

A further good experience with public agencies was reported by the second Survivor. After an initial problematic encounter with his daughter's school, where they had appeared to misread the situation and assume he was the perpetrator, this had subsequently changed. Once the school had realised that it was the mother and not the father who was the abuser, and before the non-molestation order was in place, the survivor describes the support of the school as 'amazing', highlighting how they helped to organise a rota drop off and timetable to avoid his former partner's harassment.

In summary, in the accounts of these three survivors, the additional barriers to men recognising domestic abuse, reporting it and accessing services, were apparent. Understandings of domestic abuse and service provision are largely built upon heteronormative models and frameworks, wherein the victim is assumed to be a cisgender woman and the perpetrator is assumed to be a cisgender man. These heteronormative understandings undermine men's willingness to report domestic abuse.

This means that men are unlikely to be viewed as victims of abuse, particularly domestic abuse, and their experiences are often trivialised, minimised or denied. These issues compound the experience of domestic abuse for men including experiences of secondary victimisation. Indeed, initially, men reported that their experiences were either dismissed, because they had been assumed to be perpetrators, or because what was happening to them was not considered to be serious. These issues were compounded by societal stereotypes and bias around gendered and sexual identities, which will be considered more broadly, in the following section.

Notwithstanding, as the account of these survivors indicated, positive encounters with public agencies, including policing, schools and Equation had occurred. What was evident in these accounts was that these encounters had featured practitioners moving beyond stereotypes and grasping the nature and impact of the survivor's accounts, which will be revisited at a later point in the report.

10.0: LGBTQ+ Experiences of Domestic Abuse and Services: Intersectionality

It is important to point out that there were only two LGBTQ+ survivors within this service, and that Years 3 and 4 of the Domestic Abuse Co-Production Service will involve a much wider LGBTQ+ cohort. The two survivors in the service were a young transwoman and a retired gay man. Whilst their experiences have been included in the sections on women and men's experiences, this section will focus on two key points of difference from that of other survivors. The experience of domestic abuse of these two survivors was compounded through intersectionality, wherein homophobia and transphobia have been frequent experiences in the survivor's life. As an example of this wider context, in the previous section, an initial failure of the police to instigate legal proceedings was interpreted by the survivor as potentially being due to his homosexuality, due to previous bias that he has experienced. In the following quote, from a young transwoman, she explains how she navigates her experience of domestic abuse, within an overall climate of transphobia within media and wider society:

"…the other thing is learning to sit with difficult emotions and not trying to suppress them…whenever there is a piece of negative news in the media, about trans people…I let myself feel it, the depression the anger, the hurt, the hate that's always directed towards me. Just let myself feel it for a day…do what I need to do, and then tomorrow, I'm going to be fine, because the world moves on."

From these accounts, it was clear that heteronormative frameworks and attitudes, resulting in potential failure to understand domestic abuse in gay and trans relationships, can also exacerbate wider structural bias, which may be consequential for a person's self-esteem and recovery.

As part of this recovery, it was also apparent that there is an urgent need for LGBTQ+ domestic abuse services to help raise awareness and to provide tailored support. When asked about what advice they would offer to other LGBTQ+ people experiencing domestic abuse, the survivors indicate that you have to be persistent, in trying to find appropriate support:

"Don't let yourself give in to the thought of just going quiet and accepting when it happens. Don't let yourself stop thinking and feeling about this. Because you need to follow what your gut says, if your gut says, get out, get out. There is support available for us even when it seems the world is against us a lot of the time. It may not be as well-signposted but there are ways to find it."

"You have to be persistent…there was a good service from Equation eventually, does depend on who you get…. obviously because I've got a good support worker there, he was very good. I did send that [evidence] by e-mail to him, and I think that's when he realised…He'd never seen anything like it. Then he started becoming more serious, ringing me every fortnight. You know. I knew he was always there, could rely on him."

Whilst both survivors here had experienced good support from Equation, as the last quote indicates, it is not as simple as getting support from an LGBTQ+ person or service, it still depends on their relatability and how seriously they take what the survivor is saying. In addition to support from Equation, both survivors had received support from other LGBTQ+ people and institutions, which had been invaluable to them. In the following account, the survivor explains how she arrived at a hotel, after fleeing from her former home:

"I just walked and walked with four or five big bags over my shoulder of varying weights, I tried to walk to a bus stop to get where I had been told I could stay, which was a hotel on the motorway, I couldn't make it, I was too exhausted. So, I just got a taxi, all the while, I was anxious, looking over my

shoulder…I got into the room, and just cried…and let myself feel what I'd been feeling for so long and not being able to fully express."

This account from a young trans woman, alone in a motorway hotel and having to eat 'meal deals' from the garage next door, is illustrative of the extent of the isolation she felt. During this period, she reached out to some trans people online, who brought her food and a suitcase and helped her to gain a space in a refuge, also driving her there. In this quote, she explains how she first experienced their kindness, following months of abuse:

"…I got so much support, and it was like, I couldn't accept that I was being supported, so I was just numb to it, and it was a very strange experience."

Over time, this Survivor, explained the importance of the support of LGBTQ+ people, particularly from the trans community, who provided vital support and relatability. Similarly, the survivor, who had been in a homosexual relationship and experienced stalking following its termination, explained the relevance of LGBTQ+ support groups, including those earlier in his life:

"So, there's one called gay dads. There were 400 members…so we'd meet. and we had weekends and it's just the support because everybody knows exactly what you're going through…I found that there's a tremendous support really in that."

Finally, it is essential that LGBTQ+ counselling services and refuge spaces are tailored to support survivors through domestic abuse. The following Survivor talks about the benefits of such counselling to her:

"I had about eight weeks of counselling whilst I was in refuge. Just sort of sitting with someone and letting myself talk about what I have experienced and what I've been feeling. Them helping me to come up with copy strategies, some of them worked, some of them didn't, but for me, that was just like the baseline, the beginning of figuring out for myself, what works for me and what I need, until I get to this point now, where I've got a good idea of what works for me and what I like and need for support."

Whilst this young woman had obtained a space in an LGBTQ+ refuge, there is an urgent need for more refuge spaces, as well as for heterosexual men.

What remains important from these accounts is that empathy and relatability are hugely important. Whilst positive experiences can be expressed through empathetic responses from public service providers, an understanding of the wider intersectional implications around domestic abuse, including institutional homophobia and transphobia, are necessary to provide ongoing support, whilst recognising the wider context for gay and trans people.

11.0: Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this report has revealed several examples of good practice by NWAL and specialist service providers across Nottinghamshire, as expressed by survivors. There are clear differences between these examples and the negative experiences and frequent barriers that survivors frequently faced in terms of their access to a broader range of services and interactions with staff in housing, policing and courts.

It is important to note that our data was based solely on Survivor testimonies and we did not interview housing staff, police, lawyers and court personnel or have access to case files, to obtain the perspectives of these different stakeholders. However, given the issues raised in Survivor experiences, there are some key take aways for stakeholders outside of the specialist providers.

Domestic abuse is a complex crime with high levels of coercive control and manipulation within intimate relationships, resulting in lasting trauma and trust issues. The effects of coercive control, including loss of autonomy, experienced by survivors are not just psychological but practical, affecting their ability to recall and distinguish different events, articulate their experiences, make decisions, access services

and navigate systems. Interactions with public agencies often compound trauma. Survivors are required to repeatedly recall and articulate traumatic experiences to different agencies, often being judged, disbelieved, or misunderstood by professionals, reducing their already fragile trust in others. This contributes to a process of secondary victimisation, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and perpetuating a cycle of abuse.

These issues are complicated still further by a legal system with considerable shortcomings in how it responds to domestic abuse. This poses considerable challenges for domestic abuse Survivors around engagement with public agents.

A number of these challenges are inherent in the nature and impact of domestic abuse, including the following: there is often a fear of retaliation from the offender, many survivors are dependant in some way on the abuser, i.e., financially, legally, those with children are often worried about their children being left with the abuser or taken away. Many survivors are also genuinely worried about the stigma of raising domestic abuse, the shame, and being disbelieved; often compounded culturally, for example, through immigration and language issues. Domestic abuse often occurs in private, without witnesses. Even where witnesses are available, they may be reluctant to get involved. Practically, obtaining evidence of domestic abuse is often difficult. Injuries may heal, emotional and financial may leave little visible proof, digital evidence can get deleted. The ongoing nature and trauma of living with domestic abuse, including stress, PTSD or depression, impact on memory, leading to inconsistency in recalling incidents, impacting on evidence gathering, questioning and credibility.

Despite all these issues, the onus is on the survivor to gather evidence whilst they are living within a context of coercive control, intimidation and unsafety, both before and following exit. Within a normalised context of abuse, this requires, firstly, that the Survivor realises that they are being abused and, secondly, that that they are capable and able to find, gather and articulate evidence.

It is clear, therefore, that there are systematic gaps between the understanding of lived experience of domestic abuse by specialist services and other public agencies (i.e., police, courts, housing). Whilst, in part, this is due to the different and respective remits, functions and workloads of these different organisations, there is still a need for greater alignment between and across services, informed by Survivor testimonies to better support safety, recovery and interactions. Many of the survivor testimonies here are reflective of interactions with staff who did not appear to understand the nature of their experiences, including the *ongoing impact* of domestic abuse on their lives and psychological state. Even for some survivors who have no further contact with the abuser, the mental implications of domestic abuse continue to reverberate over time. For others, they are compounded through perpetrators routinely breaching legal orders and through access to children. Given this, firstly, we argue there is a very real need to share the work of the domestic abuse sector, including findings from this Domestic abuse Co-Production service, with other organisations, including housing, police, social workers, lawyers and court personnel. This could happen through training, education and other initiatives, such as toolkits around awareness raising, prevention and response. At the end of the report, an overall summary of barriers to accessing services, as well as examples of best practice and recommendations for different service providers, is provided, which will also be helpful.

Additionally, given that our findings indicate a mismatch between the experiences of survivors, many of whom continue to live within a *'climate of unsafety'*, and the expectations of public organisations to collect evidence, make decisions, exercise agency to exit, access services and co-operate with any prosecution, we additionally propose a new definition of '*vulnerability*' that might help those in housing, policing, legal personnel and court staff. Many of these organisations are working within a particular context of service delivery using their own definitions of vulnerability, including criminal justice practitioners' focus on the Victim's Code. Yet, given our findings with survivors reveal they often feel disbelieved, judged and unsupported in encounters with these agencies, we argue that a change to the concept of '*vulnerabilit*y' to reflect the nature and ongoing impact of domestic abuse, is required. In short, understandings of vulnerability used by public agencies, are often unreflective of the

dehumanising nature of domestic abuse, where a person loses their perception of selfhood, whilst living within an overall climate of fear and threat. A reframing of vulnerability as we suggest would also help practitioners to appreciate that vulnerability is never static. *Rather it is experiential, fluctuating over time and space and within specific encounters*.

Therefore, the lived experience of survivors supports an understanding of '*vulnerability as a permeating state'* - during and after the experience of domestic abuse, which often, but not always, affects interactions with others. As indicated previously, Survivor experiences of being belittled, dehumanised and controlled in ways that undermine their autonomy, agency and selfhood are often worsened by the wider manifestations of coercive control extending outside the intimate relationship, involving manipulation of wider family, social contacts and professionals, including teachers, social workers, police and lawyers. Coercive control and its wider manifestation can make some survivors begin to doubt their own accounts, self-blame and/or fear that they are losing their minds. Survivors may, *and often do*, regain autonomy and confidence through support but this process is non-linear and is long term; meaning that timing and context of engagement is critical.

Unfortunately, stakeholders in public agencies encounter traumatised survivors, who are often on a process of recovery, interrupted by reverberations from the abuse and perpetrator and *compounded* through interactions with housing staff, police, court personnel. Often this is not fully grasped or understood, which can result in harmful interactions and practices. Whilst addressing this problem, necessitates 'trauma informed' training models, which survivor testimonies can and should inform, we argue here that the expectations and criteria of public agencies require realigning with an understanding of the '*permeating state of vulnerability*.'

Whilst the terms 'permeating' and 'pervading' are often used interchangeably, the term 'permeating' is arguably preferable to help us understand *how* domestic abuse affects interactions with public agency staff, as described in this report. Encounters involving questioning, expectations of agency and choice, compliance with institutional criteria and demands and value judgements on accounts, serve to *reignite* the trauma of domestic abuse, so it 'permeates' these interactions, both physically and psychologically for the Survivor.

As a general recommendation, therefore, for those stakeholders working with survivors who fall outside of domestic abuse services, such as those provided by NWAL, including housing, policing, lawyers and court staff, a new definition of '*permeating vulnerability*', is required. This can help practitioners think about the wider context of the experience and impact of domestic abuse, *how that shapes* the overall context of their own engagement with survivors and the need for reflective practice around institutional criteria and culture. In the longer term, recourse to this concept, in training and policy, can help practitioners be mindful of *how* they engage with domestic abuse survivors by centring lived experience, to engender respect, empathy and support.