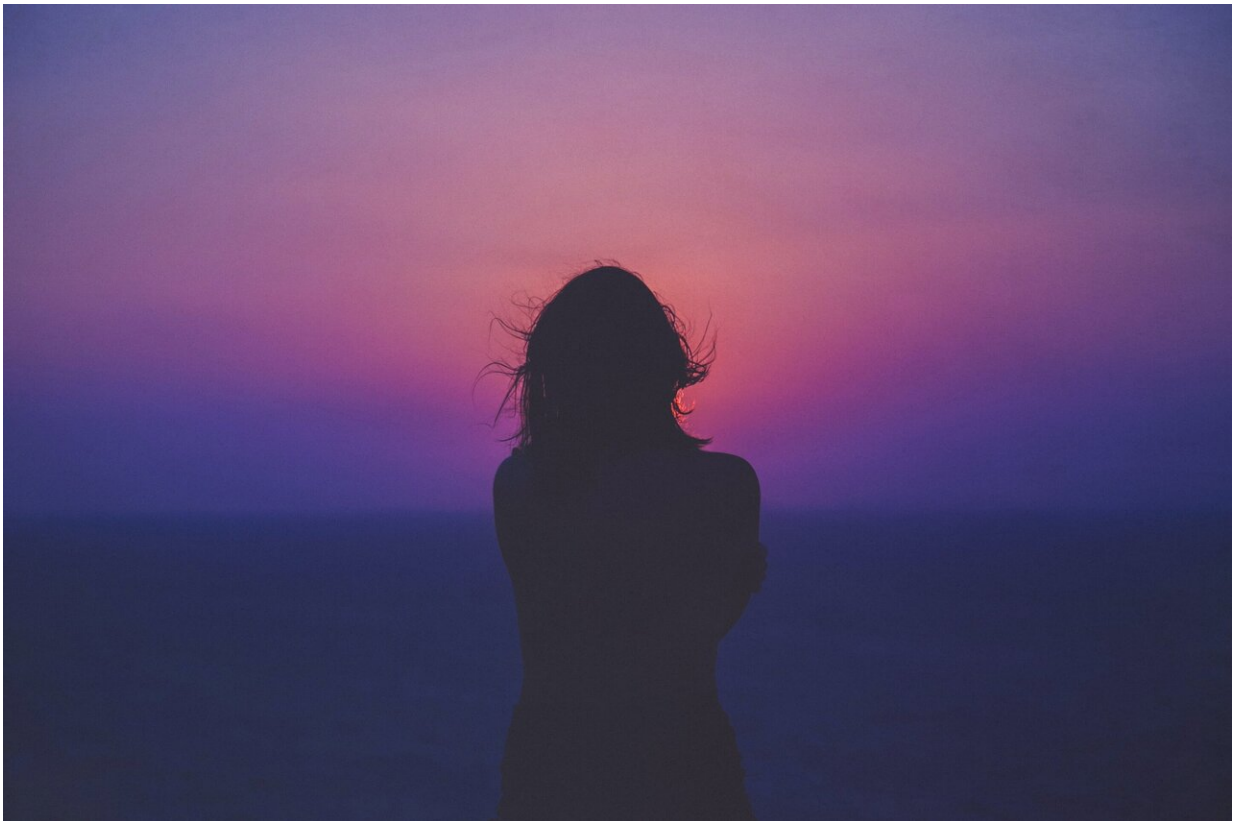


New research reveals need for flexible, tailored support for domestic abuse survivors

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A four-year evaluation led by academics at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), in partnership with Bangor University, the University of East London and Manchester Metropolitan University, has

revealed the need for flexible domestic violence and abuse services that are more tailored and responsive to survivors' changing needs.

The research, published in a report today, analyses how domestic [abuse](#) support services in the UK can become more accessible to those that need them. The report is published by Women's Aid and SafeLives, two charities that collaborated with survivors of domestic abuse over a period of five years to develop and deliver their Roadmap Programme across England.

The evaluation, which was carried out between 2017 and 2021, involved interviews and surveys about the experiences of 300 women and 70 children affected by domestic violence and abuse, spanning five sites across England.

Researchers found that survivors of domestic abuse valued services that were survivor-centered and enabled them to choose the pace and type of support they received, and that many needed help with parenting as well as support in their own right.

When direct support was provided for children who had lived with domestic abuse, it could assist their mood, sleep, [physical health](#) and reduce their fear and anger. The study found examples of children who received support from Roadmap services successfully navigating key transitions in their lives:

"[My [worker](#)] really helped me. I feel more secure and I know people will listen to me and what I want more. I think I am more confident."
(Child, SafeLives Co-Produced Pilot)

The research also highlighted improvements in safety, coping and confidence and mental wellbeing for women and children using the services provided by Women's Aid and SafeLives:

"My [mental health](#) has obviously got a lot better...I'm not waking up every morning feeling like I'm going to be sick, fearful." (Survivor, SafeLives Co-Produced Pilot)

These findings will contribute to the development of statutory guidance on the UK government's new Domestic Abuse Act, which became law earlier this year.

The changes achieved by services for women and children generated considerable social value. This was enhanced by the use of volunteers—many of whom were survivors—including those who volunteered as Women's Aid Ask Me Ambassadors, who provide advice to women experiencing domestic abuse in their local communities. This Ambassador reported how she had successfully assisted a woman who needed to leave her abusive partner:

"...by 8 o'clock that night, she was on her way to freedom. It was amazing, she was really grateful for what I'd done and I felt proud..." (Women's Aid Ask Me Ambassador)

Roadmap staff also provided training for frontline workers who encountered domestic abuse in their work. This training improved professionals' knowledge and confidence in responding to domestic abuse and staff employed in benefits offices, housing and children's social care benefited from this training. However, health services were less likely to take up the training and were less likely to work collaboratively with Roadmap services.

Professor Nicky Stanley, from the Connect Center for International Research on Interpersonal Violence and Harm at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), said: "This extensive research demonstrates the vital role that specialist domestic abuse services play in supporting survivors and helping them to rebuild their lives."

"Many of the women using Roadmap services had high levels of health and mental health needs, indicating the importance of good communication between health services and domestic abuse organizations. We'd recommend that the 2014 NICE Guidelines on domestic violence and abuse are revisited and updated to provide up-to-date guidance for health professionals and encourage them to collaborate with domestic abuse services."

Suzanne Jacob OBE, chief executive of SafeLives added: "The innovative, tailored interventions in pilot 'Beacon' sites recognize that to make sustainable change, we need to acknowledge and respond to families as they are, deeply interconnected with one another, with intertwining situations and needs. This includes putting accountability for change on the individual(s) causing harm, directly addressing their behavior.

"After this research published today by UCLan, SafeLives is more confident than ever that putting survivors at the center of domestic abuse response work is crucial and delivers better outcomes. If solutions are designed with survivors of abuse themselves—both adults and children – they are much more likely to meet their needs."

Case study

This woman had been signposted to the Women's Aid VOICES [service](#), provided by a domestic abuse organization, by a member of her local community. At the start of the intervention, she had regular brief chats with workers by telephone, but she didn't want further involvement until she felt ready to leave her partner; this point came after a period of six months. At this time, she was assigned a key worker, and described feeling 'relieved' that she would have one person to support her throughout the process. Input from the worker gave her 'the confidence and the strength' to leave safely, and this occurred three months after

being assigned to the VOICES worker. She described feeling fully in control of this process:

It went at my pace, completely at my pace. I was not pushed to do anything any quicker. I was not held back at all. It was completely, she just worked with me and supported me and we went exactly at the pace I wanted to go.

The intervention aimed to support the survivor to recognize what she needed, and the type of support required to help her progress. She described how, as a result of being able to communicate effectively with her worker, feeling listened to and understood, they were able to collaborate on a plan to enable her to leave safely:

I mean she's really helpful at understanding what I was going through and helping me... That was all very, very helpful, at managing situations. And she gave me the confidence that I would be able to get out of that situation.

Regular and consistent contact with the worker was highly valued and the survivor described feeling that her worker 'was always available and always there whenever I needed her to be.' Being provided with information about different sources of support strengthened her capacity to leave by providing her with a 'network of support.'

Having been supported by VOICES staff to leave her abusive partner, this survivor was now living in her own home with her young child and had started to retrain for a new job. She described feeling liberated and optimistic about their future:

"I'm doing studying, there's so much, there's everything that I do, every minute of the day is stuff that I do and I can do. I can do things when I like, I can do what I like. I go out with my friends, you know....and I

keep reminding myself, I can do all this stuff now."

Although she felt well supported by the service as a whole, she reflected that it was the relationship she had with her individual worker that was key to her being able to achieve change:

"I know that I could have phoned [the service]. If I'd never been given [her] as a key worker, it wouldn't have been anywhere near as good. She's been pivotal in changing my life."

More information: The full report can be read at:
clock.uclan.ac.uk/39447/

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