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Perspective

Seeking to Work Together to Drive Change: A Collaborative Approach to Co-Creating Domestic Abuse Policy and Practice Recommendations †

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† The term 'victim-survivor' is used throughout this paper to refer to individuals who have experienced domestic abuse or other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Using the term 'victim-survivor' aims to be inclusive and avoid imposing language that may not reflect how an individual sees themselves. This terminology recognizes the diversity of personal experiences and respects the fact that individuals may identify differently.

Abstract

This paper summarizes outcomes from a collaborative project involving victim-survivors of domestic abuse (DA) and DA support services, practitioners and policy makers—including police and criminal justice professionals, and academic researchers. Through discussion-based activities undertaken both at a conference of 96 stakeholder representatives and in a series of follow-up workshops, we sought to identify barriers that may prevent DA victim-survivors from accessing services and support. A number of general barriers were identified, as well as specific barriers experienced by those from certain communities or victim groups, such as those from minoritized racial groups and those from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Areas of good practice were also noted, such as the use of person-centered approaches to improve service quality and user experience. A series of co-created recommendations is presented, and the paper concludes by discussing how findings from these activities might be used to inform policy and practice developments, awareness-raising campaigns and developmental opportunities, including CPD and training for professionals and practitioners.

Keywords: domestic abuse; victim-survivors; police; criminal justice; support services; knowledge-sharing; co-production

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> "We spend time talking about the problems...
> but it's rare that we actually come up with solutions."
>
> [Criminal Justice System Professional]

1. Introduction

SEEKERS (Sharing Experience, Expertise and Knowledge for Effective Responses and Support) is an initiative that brings together victim-survivors and advocates, primarily from the charity Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS: https://www.waitsaction.org/), police, practitioners and researchers, to undertake a range of knowledge-exchange and co-creation activities to help inform responses to domestic abuse (DA) (Hammond et al., 2025).

In developing this project we consulted the different stakeholder groups to determine how best to conduct activities, including with regard to their structure and format. We also referred extensively to previous work exploring the use of co-creation/co-production approaches and participatory epistemologies, with a particular focus on fostering opportunities for meaningful engagement. Through the SEEKERS project, we have sought to create a mechanism for different stakeholder groups—including victim-survivors—to work together to drive positive change.

Following initial start-up events and activities, which ran between January 2023 and December 2024 (see Figure 1), in February 2025 we held a conference as part of our SEEKERS activities. The conference—titled 'Change the System'—was developed and delivered collaboratively with victim-survivors and WAITS (https://www.waitsaction.org/report-from-waits-change-the-system-conference (accessed on 21 October 2026)). What was different from the previous events (as detailed by Hammond et al., 2025) was that the victim-survivors who had been working with us as part of the SEEKERS project took the lead role in developing and running the conference. Birmingham City University (BCU) provided the facilities and supported the running of the event, but the day was planned primarily by the DA victim-survivors from WAITS. Thus, the focus was on the issues that they felt were most important to address and which they wanted to discuss with key partners and different stakeholder groups. They decided the program for the day and the themes that were covered, invited attendees, and both developed and facilitated the discussion-related activities (with support from members of the SEEKERS project team). They subsequently worked with the authors to compile a report summarizing key issues that victim-survivors of DA experience and suggested solutions to the problems identified. They presented this to MP Jess Phillips—who at the time was the UK's Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, and to representatives from local police forces and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

The authors subsequently undertook more extensive analysis of the discussion related material. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we generated a thematic summary of key barriers experienced by victim-survivors when seeking to access DA services and support. We used both this and initial suggestions made as part of the discussions that took place during the conference to draft a set of recommendations as to policy and practice changes that could be implemented to address some of the issues identified. We then held a series of workshops in which both the thematic summary of key issues and draft recommendations were reviewed by the victim-survivors and some of the original conference attendees, as well as other individuals representing different stakeholder groups (e.g., advocates, charities and support organizations, the police and other professionals working with victims-survivors of DA). A final set of co-created recommendations was developed based on their feedback (see Figure 1 for an overview of the stages and development of the work).

The present paper provides a detailed account of the development and delivery of the outlined activities and presents the thematic overview that was developed of barriers that may prevent DA victim-survivors from accessing or engaging with services and support. This is used to highlight key issues with current systems, policies and processes as identified by the different stakeholder groups. Our co-created recommendations are then presented at the conclusion of this paper, alongside suggestions for further work in this area.

We hope that this paper provides useful guidance for future developments, including collaborative work with those with lived experience, to inform criminal justice policy and practice and ensure that victim-survivor needs are better met going forwards.

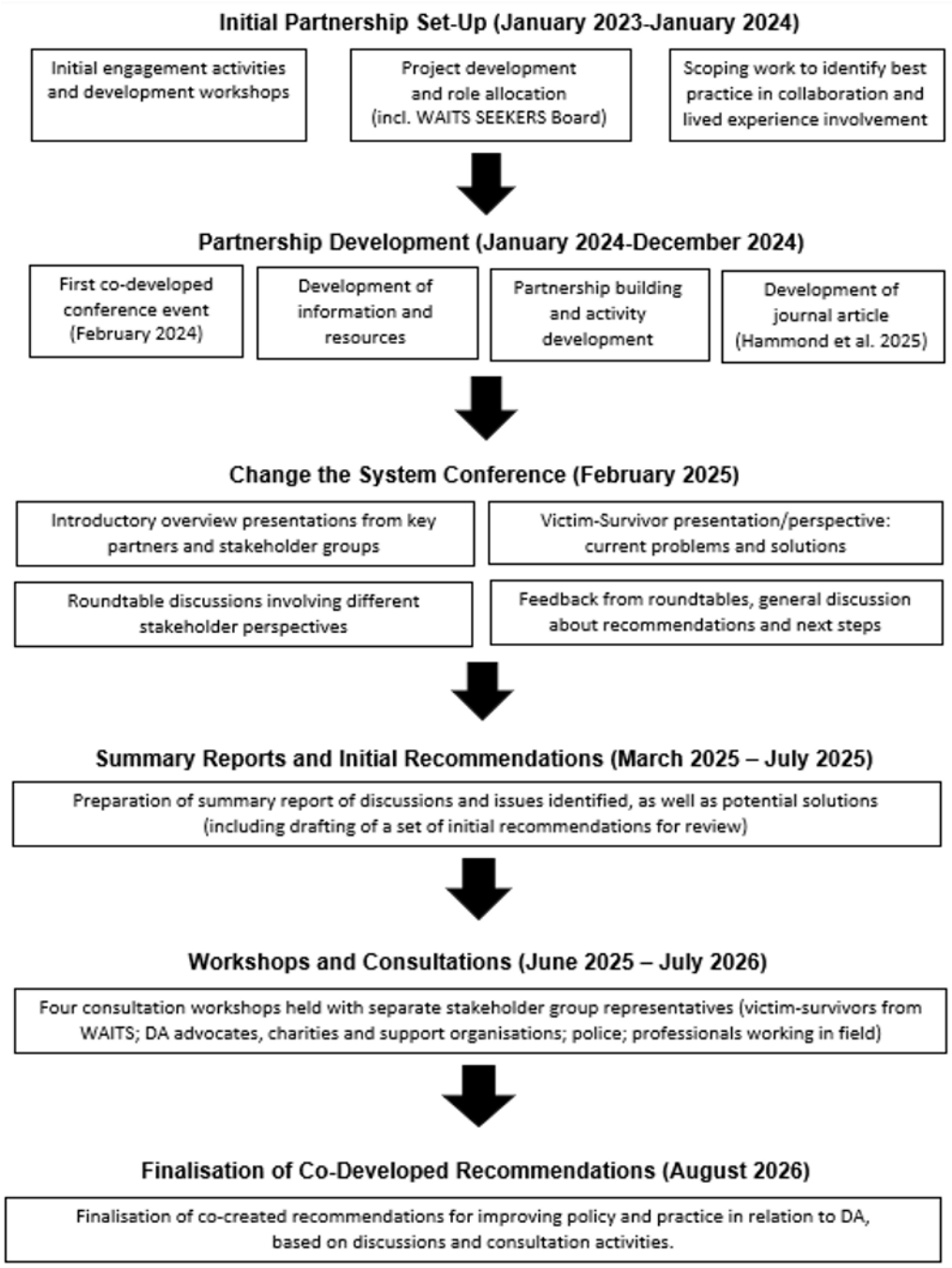


Figure 1. Summary of stages and development of SEEKERS work to date (Hammond et al., 2025).

2. Background

> "We spend time talking about the problems...
>
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>
> [Criminal Justice System Professional]

An estimated 2.2 million females (9.1%) and 1.5 million males (6.5%) experience DA in the UK each year (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). Between April 2024 and March 2025, police recorded 816,493 domestic abuse-related crimes in England and Wales, with 54,987 DA-related prosecutions, of which 41,070 (just over 5%) resulted in convictions (Office for National Statistics, 2025).

As Hester et al. (2025) discuss, engagement with the criminal justice system (CJS) for domestic and sexual violence offenses often results in impunity. DA is a national policing and governmental priority, and is recognized as a global public health issue, yet we consistently see poor outcomes for victims-survivors who go through the CJS. This is because it was never designed to deal with the volume of cases that are now being reported (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025).

However, access to justice is not just about legal outcomes, it is also about how victim-survivors are treated throughout the process (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2025). As Pinchevsky et al. (2025) discuss, whilst justice is typically thought of as a product of legal systems prior research has found that survivors of domestic and sexual abuse may also value other factors outside of the legal system. They suggest that justice is a multidimensional concept, comprising factors inside the legal system (e.g., arrest, incarceration), outside the legal system (e.g., abuse stopping), and tied to the legal system (e.g., treatment by members of the system). Hence, viewing justice through a singular lens limits our understanding of what victim-survivors need and want, thereby impeding the development of more effective systems and processes (Pinchevsky et al., 2025).

Hester et al. (2025) found that victim-survivors of DA have multiple perceptions of justice in relation to individual, community, and societal responses, and that these may change throughout their journey following their abuse. Those that they spoke to referred to several thematic areas when conceptualizing justice. These included: accountability, fairness in outcome and process, protection from future harm, recognition, agency, empowerment, affective justice, reparation, and social transformation. The authors argue that unless legislative or policy approaches take account of how victim-survivors themselves understand and demand justice, then the "justice gap" often noted for those impacted by DA will continue to prevail (Hester et al., 2025).

Victim-survivors of domestic and sexual violence often report poor experiences of criminal justice systems and processes (e.g., Rudolfsson et al., 2025). These are particularly prevalent for those from marginalized populations, who often also have to contend with other systemic injustices (Pinchevsky et al., 2025; Cole et al., 2025). Failures of key criminal justice agencies and professionals, as well as of criminal justice systems more broadly, shape perceptions of the efficacy of policing and criminal justice policies and practices, feeding into a lack of trust and confidence amongst many (Gill & Anitha, 2026). It is perhaps not surprising that fewer than one fifth of those who are victims of DA have the confidence to report to the police, with those from marginalized communities being less likely to approach the police despite being believed to experience higher rates of gender-based violence (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). Even if they do report, many victim-survivors disengage and withdraw from criminal justice processes after a relatively short period of time (Barrow-Grint, 2016). Those with vulnerabilities such as insecure housing, alcohol and/or drug dependencies or mental health needs being even more likely to withdraw (McPhee et al., 2022).

The above underscores the importance of developing systems and services via multi-agency collaboration to better support victim-survivors' holistic needs (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). As Davies (2021) discusses, the challenge to deliver a more effective response to DA rests with local stakeholders.

Research into the most effective ways of policing DA is increasing in prevalence, with a drive towards collaborating with those with lived experience to improve system responses and service delivery (cf. https://www.vkpp.org.uk/vkpp-work/vkpp-research/voice-of-the-victim-resource/ (accessed on 21 October 2026)).

2.1. The Importance of Collaboration and Co-Creation

Co-creation approaches focus on generating ideas, knowledge, and solutions in collaboration (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018). Such approaches recognize and actively utilize the experiential knowledge, insights and skills of individuals and communities (Wydall et al., 2023). Abbott et al. (2024) suggest that the guiding principles of effective co-creation are meaningful engagement and the active involvement of stakeholders—not just as participants, but as partners and decision-makers. Individuals or organizations work collaboratively towards a mutually defined aim, and everyone connected with an issue plays an active part, with their experience and knowledge being recognized and valued (Pettican et al., 2023). Co-creation enables people's voices to be heard, considered, and used to inform service delivery (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018), in a manner which is democratic, inclusive, collaborative and participatory (Pettican et al., 2023). In turn, this can make services more effective and efficient, and can enhance trust, confidence and satisfaction (Mangai et al., 2023).

The literature describes benefits for all parties engaging in collaborative activities, with 'intrinsic value' for individuals stemming from feeling connected and valued (Warwick-Booth et al., 2022). Research speaks to the advantages of collaboration for knowledge generation, transfer and dissemination (Fiolet et al., 2025). Jumarali et al. (2021) discuss how authentic collaborations facilitate bidirectional learning between academic and community partners, and Davies (2021) emphasizes the value of mutually learned and mobilized knowledge in effecting organizational and cultural change.

Whilst co-creation and co-production are becoming embedded in mental health and social care, the criminal justice system has been slower in embracing such approaches (Morgan et al., 2024). This is perhaps surprising, given their potential in addressing shortcomings in current service provision and opportunities for the proactive building of relationships with partners who can contribute experiential knowledge to help guide system reform and service development (Pettican et al., 2023).

Within criminal justice contexts, collaborating with victim-survivors enables them to play a key role in informing service design and delivery for the benefit of other victim-survivors (Fiolet et al., 2025). The West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner's Victim Strategy (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2025) highlights how victim-survivors' experiences can be used in helping to remove barriers to reporting, engagement, and access.

Wheildon et al. (2023) suggest that collaborating with those with lived experience is a useful strategy for policymakers to use in addressing persistent or 'wicked' policy problems. Policymakers are often distant from the realities of people's lives, and so may not have the necessary knowledge and insights to create effective policies (Stone et al., 2025). In this sense, collaborating with service users can help develop services that are viewed as more legitimate by the people who use them (Morgan et al., 2024).

Relatedly, Würtz Jensen and Thunberg (2024) argue that stronger communication between victim-survivors and organizations providing support improves services by ensuring that they are based on both the needs of those using them and what the organization can offer, either themselves, or through cooperation, coordination, and/or collaboration with other organizations.

Würtz Jensen and Thunberg (2024) also discuss how professionals need to collaborate with other professionals or organizations in order to deliver effective services. Often criminal justice agencies work in siloes, which can result in fractured systems which lack in coordination and alignment (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025).

Police officers highlight how working more extensively with Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) improves their practices, enabling them to focus on the policing aspect of DA safe in the knowledge that other victim needs—such as accessing housing or

additional support services—are also being met (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). Moreover, they note that working with IDVAs how they approach working on DA cases more generally. The work of Stulz et al. (2024) demonstrates the value of public service and health care providers working together to provide tailored support for women experiencing and escaping domestic abuse. Murray et al. (2021) further demonstrate the benefits of bringing partners together throughout law enforcement and public health, and the value of making proper time to actually discuss the "big issues" which affect them, how they each experience these issues, and how together they might have overcome these. They developed collaborative workshops which brought together an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) comprising stakeholders from academia, policing, mental health nursing, psychiatry, paramedics and emergency medicine, alongside people with lived experience, policy makers, third sector and community partners, to co-create the most important priorities for law enforcement and public health research in Scotland. The extensive outcomes and impacts of this work so far—and in a relatively short space of time—are testament to the potential opportunities collaborative approaches offer in tackling pressing issues in relation to policing and criminal justice.

2.2. Meaningfully Engaging with Victim-Survivors

While many police and partner agencies engage with and collect feedback from victim-survivors, this is often done in a somewhat tokenistic manner (Wydall et al., 2023). Allnock et al. (2023) note that there are only infrequent examples of creative engagement methods and meaningful collaboration with victim-survivors in co-developing public services. Referring to what they term 'voice of the victim' practices, they note considerable variation in terms of how police forces interact with victim-survivors, and how participatory the methods used are. The lowest level of engagement comes from what they term 'customer service approaches'—practices which entail a one-way flow of information, whereby police learn about victims' experiences through the use of surveys, for example, or via complaints from victims. 'Transactional approaches' entail an exchange of information, often with victims receiving some information and being asked to respond to this—for example, as part of scrutiny panels or Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs), or as part of victim forums. 'Collaborative approaches' represent the highest level of engagement and participation, incorporating practices whereby police and those with lived experience work together to implement improvement and change. Allnock et al. (2023) note that whilst all three approaches can be beneficial, depending on the purpose of the 'voice of the victim' practice and the needs of victim-survivors, collaborative approaches have the greatest benefits in optimizing outcomes and building trust and confidence.

In a consultation undertaken as part of the development of The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework, 2020), practitioners were supportive of engaging victim-survivors and other practitioners in service and policy design, generally agreeing that this improves service quality and service user experiences. Allnock et al. (2023) too found a strong consensus as to the need for and value of collaborative practices incorporating the 'voice of the victim' amongst policing practitioners.

Ailwood et al. (2022) discuss in detail key limitations in legal and criminal justice systems, and suggest that many of these stem from a failure to truly listen to victim-survivors' voices. They stress the importance of experiential expertise in driving meaningful reform and change. Abbott et al. (2024) exemplify how those with lived experience can provide valuable insights into systemic issues which might otherwise be harder to identify. Wheildon et al. (2026) suggest that victim-survivors possess knowledge that cannot be produced any other way. They argue that policies developed without this knowledge risk being ineffective and unresponsive, undermining their capacity to deliver meaningful public value.

When used appropriately, collaboration and co-creation offer viable and potentially highly effective mechanisms for engaging with victim-survivors as well as other criminal justice organizations and agents, promoting more person-centered ways of working to produce positive outcomes (Morgan et al., 2024).

3. Working Collaboratively to Identify Problems and Potential Solutions: Our Approach

> "The only way we can know where the CJS pathway is doing well, not so well, and where change needs to happen is to understand the journey through the diverse experience of those who have been through it."
>
> [Victims Advocate Natalie Queiroz MBE (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2025)]

To implement a collaborative approach in identifying and potentially overcoming barriers to accessing services and support in relation to DA, we held an initial one-day conference in February 2025, followed by four smaller half-day workshops with specific stakeholder groups between June 2025 and July 2026.

The development and delivery of these events was guided to an extent by the process developed and summarized by Murray et al. (2021), who present what they refer to as a 'roadmap' for the replication of their co-production approach. Activities were developed in line with Morgan et al.'s (2024) principles for effective co-production, and in seeking to create non-hierarchical safe spaces for sharing and learning we also referred to the recommendations of Wydall et al. (2023). This was to ensure that opportunities for meaningful engagement were optimized, enabling us to move beyond simply consulting victim-survivors towards creating spaces in which different forms of knowledge and experience might genuinely contribute to identifying problems and developing responses.

3.1. Ethical Considerations

A number of researchers have reflected on some of the challenges of undertaking collaborative co-creation or co-production with those with lived experience (e.g., McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Pettican et al., 2023). Such challenges are further exacerbated when working with people who have experienced trauma, such as victim-survivors (McGeown et al., 2023). Stone et al. (2025) in particular emphasize the importance of those with lived experience being able to engage safely and effectively when being involved in collaborative endeavors.

We referred to a range of examples of collaboration and co-production in developing the SEEKERS activities (e.g., Warwick-Booth et al., 2022; Wydall et al., 2023; Abbott et al., 2024; The Women Advisory Board in collaboration with et al., 2025), to ensure that appropriate mechanisms were in place to enable the victim-survivors involved to participate in a manner that is considerate of their needs (Macafee & Reeves, 2024), and enable a more equal exchange of knowledge (Clayson et al., 2018). The need for 'respectful' engagement is emphasized throughout (The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework, 2020), as is the need for recognition and respect with regard to the experiential knowledge and expertise of all involved (McGeown et al., 2023).

The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework (2020) notes the importance of providing support for people with lived experience both during and after any engagement activities. Throughout the development and delivery of the events, victim-survivors had on-going support from WAITS, and could also access specialist support services at any time if needed. In addition, the victim-survivors involved in the SEEKERS project have been offered a range of training, mentoring and coaching opportunities as part of the work, and WAITS have held regular drop-in sessions for them to come and discuss any of the

activities, ask any questions that they might have, or receive any support that they feel that they might need. WAITS were most appropriate to undertake this support role as they had already been working with the victim-survivors prior to the SEEKERS project.

All of the DA victim-survivors involved with WAITS have been given the opportunity to be involved in the SEEKERS activities, to whatever extent they would like or feel comfortable with. Some have been involved in all of the different activities, whilst some have taken part in particular elements of the SEEKERS work or in certain events. It is always made clear that the choice is theirs as to how and in what ways they want to be involved, including in terms of whether they speak at events or participate in any activities. If they prefer not to actively take part in a session or activity, they still have the option of being involved in developing the content or focus of the activity, to simply attend and observe, or to have their ideas incorporated into the delivery of the session in whatever way(s) they would like. They also have the chance to feed back any thoughts, suggestions or recommendations afterwards via established channels (operated through WAITS), to ensure that they have full control over how and what they contribute.

As Nollett et al. (2024) discuss, ethical considerations differ for qualitative research and public involvement or engagement activities. Where people act as research participants and their input is transcribed verbatim, treated as 'data', and used to address a specific research question, then ethical approval is usually required and informed consent should be obtained as standard. Where the contributions of people attending public involvement/engagement events or discussion groups will be recorded only as key summary points (e.g., a list of key themes emerging or key priorities discussed by the group in relation to a specific topic), to help shape and guide further discussion or activities, then ethical approval is not required (Nollett et al., 2024). However, such activities should still be conducted in an ethical manner. Those involved should be provided with sufficient information about the activity up front to ensure they are clear what their involvement will entail, and they may be asked to provide agreement or consent but not in the formally documented way required for research (Nollett et al., 2024).

As the activities undertaken comprised a co-developed conference and collaborative workshops rather than planned, formal data collection activities, with outputs constituting aggregated summaries of discussions and not including any specific quotes or case examples, it was deemed not to be necessary to apply ethical approval for the events or for collation of information volunteered. This was confirmed through consultation with an IRB (Institutional Research Board) Chair.

We felt that having formal processes and a series of forms for participants to work through (information sheets, consent forms, etc.) would be counter-productive to what we were trying to achieve through the events—which was to create an open and free space for people to be able to discuss and share their thoughts, and that it might discourage people from participating or feeling that they were able to speak freely. It might also have prevented the victim-survivors from hosting the event in the manner that they wanted. However, in developing the activities we sought to ensure that we utilized an ethical approach and that the rights of all of those involved were protected at all times.

Attending the events and contributing during them was entirely voluntary. Attendees were given detailed information about the purpose of the event when registering—including with regard to the intention to develop recommendations from the discussions, and were reminded of the purpose and intent at the start of the events. It was made clear that their attendance and contribution would be taken as indication that they were happy for their contributions to be included, with the understanding that outputs would report summative outcomes of the discussions only, and that no individual identifiers or information which could compromise their anonymity would be included in any outputs. It was also explained

that discussions would be audio-recorded to support development of summary reports but that no individual case details or quotes would be included in any outputs.

If they did not want to take part in any discussions they had the option not to do so. This was reiterated numerous times throughout the events. If they chose to take part in the discussions then it was made clear that by doing so they acknowledged that anything that they said might be included in summaries or outputs. They were, however, also advised that they could specifically request that any of their contributions not be included in any outputs if they wished (although no-one did this).

3.2. Conference

The final structure, format, aims and agenda for the conference were developed by the DA victim-survivors who are part of the SEEKERS project and form their own SEEKERS Board (https://www.waitsaction.org/staff-trustees/seekers-board (accessed on 17 October 2026)), with support from WAITS and the broader SEEKERS team (including the authors). The victim-survivors also created the guest list for the event and invited prospective attendees. The invitation, which was sent via email from the main contact email address for WAITS, included a link to a closed Eventbrite page which participants could use to register to attend. The purpose of the event was explained in detail both in the invitation and on the Eventbrite page: that activities would include both general and round-table discussions amongst individuals with different expertise and experiences (including DA victim-survivors), and would consider how current responses to DA might be developed to enhance outcomes for victims and improve the experiences of different service users. It was also made clear that these discussions would be used to co-create recommendations for DA policy and practice.

In total, 96 individuals attended the conference and participated in the roundtable discussions. Table 1 below provides a summary of attendees by stakeholder group.

Table 1. Conference attendees representing different stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants
Victim-Survivors (SEEKERS)	14
Charity workers/advocates or DA service providers from or working directly with WAITS	17
Victim-survivors not currently involved in the SEEKERS project but involved with WAITS	6
Other charity workers/advocates or DA service providers	6
Policing practitioners and policy makers	12
Criminal justice professionals (including Crown Prosecution Service representatives, judges/magistrates and legal representatives)	8
Those from local councils and trusts	13
Those from local forums or community groups	3
Those from housing provisions or social services	8
Researchers/Academics/Students (including postgraduate researchers)	9

During the first part of the conference, invited representatives from different stakeholder groups gave introductory keynotes. Keynote speakers summarized several key issues and challenges faced in relation to DA from their perspective, as well as their hopes

regarding what might be achieved through the collaborative partnership approach being implemented. These included the CEO and Community Organizing Leads from the charity WAITS, academic leads from the SEEKERS project, the head of the Public Protection Unit (PPU) of the local police force, a local councilor, and the head of DA and interpersonal violence from a local trust.

The keynote presentations were followed by a panel session, in which victim-survivors (members of the WAITS SEEKERS Board) presented summaries of what they collectively felt were key issues facing DA victim-survivors in relation to the following core areas: (1) police and policing responses; (2) courts and criminal justice systems; (3) social services and social support; and (4) housing. They also provided some initial thoughts for discussion as to ways in which some of these issues might be resolved through collaboration and partnership working across the region.

The second part of the day involved a series of guided small-group, roundtable discussions. There were two tables focusing on each of the four core areas identified by the victim-survivors (eight tables in total). There were between 10 and 14 attendees at each table, representing different stakeholder perspectives (victim-survivors, practitioners, researchers, etc.). Practitioners were encouraged to join the table most closely aligned with their area of expertise (e.g., policing professionals at the police and policing responses tables), so that they could provide input based on their professional experience. Other professionals and victim-survivors, advocates and academics/researchers were encouraged to sit at whatever table best suited their preferences or interests.

Each small group was asked to consider and share their views on barriers to victim-survivors of DA accessing services and support, including those that might particularly impact certain groups or communities. They were then asked to consider ways in which such barriers might be overcome, and how services could be made more accessible, inclusive and effective.

The small-group discussions were facilitated by WAITS SEEKERS Board members, with support from the broader SEEKERS project team (including the authors). Student volunteers took detailed notes of the discussion content (although did not record any information about who in each group said what, or include in the notes any information which could identify any of the individuals participating in the discussion). Group members also had the option of writing on shared sheets of paper if they had any thoughts or suggestions that they wanted noted.

Following the individual small-group discussions there was a whole group discussion, led by two session co-chairs (one from the WAITS SEEKERS Board and one from the SEEKERS research team). Representatives from each of the groups (typically the facilitators) fed back on issues that they had identified and what they thought might help in addressing these. Discussion was then opened up to the room, and other attendees had the chance to provide additional insights and give their opinions regarding the problems identified and solutions offered. These general discussions were audio-recorded to capture broader issues identified and suggested solutions, and these along with notes from the group discussions were used to develop a post-event summary report.

An anonymous feedback form was distributed following the conference. This was used primarily to gather general feedback on the event itself, but also provided attendees with an opportunity to share additional thoughts or suggestions they may not have wished to share during the discussions. Any relevant feedback was also incorporated into the post-event summary report.

3.3. Preparation of Summary Reports

Notes from the group discussions and recordings of the general discussions pertaining to barriers that might prevent DA victim-survivors from accessing services and support were compiled in an initial summary report which the WAITS SEEKERS Board members presented to numerous policymakers and practitioners as part of their on-going community participation and activism initiatives.

They were then analyzed more extensively by the present authors using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), to develop a thematic overview of key issues with current DA policies and practices. In doing so, the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed iteratively: initially the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, re-reading the notes and transcripts of the recordings multiple times. They subsequently identified initial themes, which were then discussed and reviewed with further re-readings of the materials (both independent and collaborative), and a final set of themes and sub-themes was formed. A thematic map was then developed, and final themes were agreed and defined. Following this, the material was reviewed again, and—where appropriate—specific examples of discussion elements that featured in relation to each of the themes were identified.

The thematic overview that was developed was included alongside a general discussion of the themes and a draft set of recommendations for review by stakeholder representatives in the next phase of the project (stakeholder workshops).

3.4. Workshops

Four follow-up workshops were conducted with specific stakeholder groups (victim-survivors and the broader WAITS team; other DA charities and support organizations; police and other criminal justice practitioners; other professionals working with DA victim-survivors), with between six and fifteen individuals taking part in each. Some had attended the conference, and some were other stakeholder representatives. The aims of these workshops were a) to provide those who had attended with an additional opportunity to share thoughts in smaller homogeneous groups, and b) to provide opportunities for others not involved with the event to represent their views and feed back on the recommendations.

In these workshops, findings regarding barriers experienced by DA victim-survivors in accessing services and support were reviewed and draft recommendations were discussed.

Detailed notes of the discussions which took place during these workshops were taken by members of the project team and student volunteers. These were used by the authors to finalize the set of co-created recommendations presented below.

4. Barriers to Accessing DA Services and Support: Key Themes

> "It is deeply regrettable that the criminal justice system often re-traumatizes victims, compounding their suffering and creating barriers to healing and justice."
>
> [West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner Simon Foster]

4.1. Difficult, Complex and Inaccessible Systems and Processes

A first theme from the discussions that was identified related to systemic issues. It was noted by many that the justice system can be very daunting, with victim-survivors not being adequately prepared for or supported in navigating the complexities of the CJS. Some spoke, for example, of the difficulty for victim-survivors in having to face their abuser in courts, and how frightening court processes could be. Potential adjustments were suggested which might make legal processes less stressful for those having to go through them, particularly victim-survivors. These included having separate waiting areas,

entrances and exits for victims and offenders within courts, or having victim-survivors provide evidence via video links instead of having to be physically present during legal proceedings. It was felt that victim-survivors should be supported during court attendance if this is required, including by mental health advocates. This, it was noted, is particularly important after they give evidence.

More generally, it was felt that criminal justice processes as a whole could be made more victim-friendly. For example, there was broader recognition that the language used throughout the criminal justice system is often inappropriate and inaccessible. Lots of technical jargon is used, and having this explained or clarified (e.g., by lawyers or legal advisors) can be challenging, not least due to financial barriers or constraints. It was felt that throughout the CJS the language used needed to be simplified, with lay terms being most appropriate for ensuring clarity and ease of understanding.

It was noted that across the board there are lots of different forms and pieces of paperwork that victim-survivors are typically required to complete or collate, including when seeking to access certain services or support. Paperwork with regard to accessing housing or housing support is particularly complex. Victim-survivors spoke of the challenge of collating and providing evidence and substantiating claims with little guidance or support, and some said that they felt as if their legitimacy and needs were being questioned or tested because of all the questions that they were being asked and because of the volume of information that they were expected to provide. They also talked about how there is often not enough time within application windows to collate the evidence surrounding DA that is required to substantiate need.

It was also noted that the three-month concession period post-DA acts as a barrier to accessing support for many, with restrictive allocations being viewed as inappropriate and unhelpful. Issues for those with no recourse to public funds were also discussed at length, although it was recognized that this is a group which experiences extensive challenges and perhaps merits special consideration.

Whilst automated services were referred to as a means of streamlining application processes or access to services, it was noted that these could also cause barriers—particularly where victim-survivors had additional or intersectional needs. Barriers resulting from both digital poverty or insufficient technical skills in relation to accessing relevant information on criminal justice processes were also discussed.

It was suggested that AI-powered tools offer potential opportunities in terms of translating legal languages and making them more accessible, enabling more effective communication between criminal justice agents, agencies and participants.

As a broader issue, it was suggested that many victims will not be aware of their legal rights, or their rights as outlined in the Victim's Code, which could prevent them from accessing information, guidance, advice or support, and which could significantly impact their criminal justice journeys and outcomes. Finding information that was accessible and relevant to their specific circumstances and needs was often very difficult.

4.2. Barriers to Accessing Services or Support Which Disproportionately Impact Certain Communities or Groups

A second theme that was identified highlighted inequities due to the fact that many of barriers identified and discussed disproportionately impact certain communities or groups, including those from minoritized racial groups and those from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Multiple references were made to cultural barriers, often arising from bias and victim-blaming cultures that can be prevalent in public services and social systems. Time and time again, a lack of cultural awareness was highlighted, and it was suggested that there is a pressing need for further education and continuing professional

development in relation to cultural aspects of domestic abuse and the experiences of diverse victim groups. This, it was observed, is important for those working in different areas of service development, provision and delivery, including leads/leaders and policymakers.

Language barriers were noted to cause substantial issues throughout criminal justice processes, making it difficult for many to access services and support. Issues were highlighted around the use of interpreters, as well as around a lack of appropriately translated resources.

It was also discussed how victim-survivors who are migrants or refugees, particularly women who are partners of migrants (e.g., on student visas), are likely to encounter substantial barriers when seeking access to services or support. This ties in with issues identified with regard to having no recourse to public funds, as well issues around a lack of documentation or fear stemming from having an insecure immigration status.

4.3. A Lack of Knowledge, Understanding and Capacity Within Services

A key barrier to effective responses to DA was noted to be the fact that many of those working with victim-survivors across the different services (including the police) are fairly young and inexperienced, often being relatively new in post. In addition, many of those working in the DA arena only do so for relatively short periods of time, with high levels of staff turnover presenting consistent challenges. Relatedly, it was noted that DA is very complex, and that the nature and forms that it takes are changing rapidly. It takes time to build up a good understanding of the nuances of DA and what is required in terms of responding effectively, and even then police and other practitioners cannot be expected to be well-versed on every single element of DA or of DA-related policies and practices. Concerns were raised that a lack of understanding as to the realities of domestic abuse meant that victim blaming attitudes were both prevalent and persistent.

It was suggested that one of the biggest requirements for improving responses to DA was more extensive and specialized training, including training incorporating lived experience perspectives. Many—including professionals or practitioners themselves—felt that those working with victim-survivors of DA do not currently receive enough training. It was also noted that training in such arenas is often specialized and needs to be requested, rather than being routinely incorporated into broader professional development.

Particular areas where training needs were noted were in relation to non-physical forms of abuse (e.g., "gaslighting", love bombing, coercive control, economic abuse), and related crimes such as stalking or honor-based violence. It was also felt that more training was needed on how culture and gender stereotypes can play a role in relation to non-physical abusive behaviors (and perceptions of these behaviors).

Many felt that those working with victim-survivors of DA would benefit from more extensive cultural awareness and diversity training, as well as training to build broader communication and engagement skills. Some victim-survivors reported having received inconsiderate responses from professionals, almost as if they were 'reading off a script' rather than considering the lived experience and trauma faced by those who have been through domestic abuse.

4.4. A Lack of Clarity and Transparency, Which Impacts Trust and Confidence

An issue that arose out of discussions was that often there are misunderstandings with regard to what the police can and should do in relation to situations that arise in the context of domestic abuse; for example, in terms of helping a victim-survivor retrieve items from a household that they have been removed from. Subsequent perceptions or feelings about police not performing their 'duties' can feed into a lack of trust and confidence, and an unwillingness to interact or engage with the police subsequently. Relatedly, it was

noted that the public only really hear about cases where things have gone wrong, and/or about bad policing practices. It was noted that it was actually very helpful—as part of the workshop—to hear about examples of good practice, and of efforts being made to improve responses, which can positively impact levels of trust and confidence.

Many found it beneficial to hear about on-going policy and practice developments more generally; victim-survivors said that they found it reassuring, including with regard to hearing about how their inputs or contributions may have had an impact. This, they said, fostered a sense of involvement and of agency. Other service providers, too, found it helpful to hear about work that was going on 'behind the scenes' in other areas—this, they noted, provided opportunities to learn from one another and collaborate more effectively in such endeavors, rather than working in isolation and continuously reinventing the wheel. Police representatives reported finding workshops like this helpful in gathering useful feedback, as well as in creating opportunities to support evaluations and future developments.

4.5. Employing 'Victim First', Person-Centered Approaches to Enhance Service Quality and Improve Service User Experiences

It was noted that existing policies and practices typically prioritize procedural requirements over the needs of individuals—victim-survivors in particular, but also criminal justice agents or other partners—and that this needs to change.

It was felt that more of a person-centered approach is needed, with the victim being clearly considered every step of the way. They should be clearly informed of their rights, kept up to date with the progress of their case, and suitably advised as to potential options and outcomes available to them. There are often substantial backlogs when it comes to case updates, and in many instances survivors have to contact police to get updates. This, it was noted, can be emotionally taxing, and some may not have the strength or "energy" to do this.

Examples were given of best practice emerging in relation to the use of family-led conferencing approaches to enable families to develop their own solutions to best fit their needs. It was noted that such approaches could help better connect families and social workers, making experiences and objectives more congruent: families know their needs best and they know what will work for them; social workers can then support and guide them in accessing that support.

4.6. The Need for More Coordinated Responses to DA

Throughout discussions it was noted that multi-agency coordination needs to be strengthened. Recommendations were made as to how to encourage collaboration between social services, law enforcement, and DA support organizations, including with respect to improved information-sharing protocols to enhance victim services. Risks associated with poor inter-agency communication were discussed, such as crucial information not always being communicated or shared appropriately, with barriers to effective communication including lack of time and/or capacity.

The value of multi-agency partnership approaches in sharing experiences, developing practices and coordinating wraparound support was noted, including Coventry's 'Housing Domestic Abuse Champions Network'. The value of engaging more frequently and extensively with other sectors or service providers was discussed in detail, with the majority of partners seeing considerable benefits to doing so. Historically, there have been limited opportunities for co-learning, knowledge-sharing, collaboration or mentorship. Some said that they found MARACs (https://www.westmidlands.police.uk/police-forces/west-midlands-police/areas/about-us/about-us/multi-agency-risk-assessment-conference/ (accessed on 17 October 2026)) helpful in such respects, but these are only used for high-risk cases meet-

ing a particular threshold, and are focused on a particular set of circumstances; as such, they do not offer opportunities for broader professional development or partnership-building. The use of IDVAs (Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors) in coordinating multi-agency responses, including chairing of MARACs (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences), was highlighted as a particularly effective strategy for improving responses to domestic abuse.

Additional suggestions that emerged from the discussions centered around creating and utilizing opportunities such as those afforded by the current project to develop partnership networks, generate knowledge-sharing and learning opportunities, and to extend collaborative co-production efforts in developing DA policy and practice. This might include fostering the organic development of our burgeoning 'Community of Practice' (https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/ (accessed on 17 October 2026) to help support the development of more effective responses to domestic abuse going forwards.

5. Recommendations

> "The rights and welfare of victims and survivors must always be at the forefront of policing and the wider criminal justice system"
>
> [West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner Simon Foster]

5.1. Recommendations for Service Development and Delivery

Recommendation 1: Where possible, services should seek to ensure that the needs of victim-survivors are prioritized in the development and delivery of policy and practice in relation to domestic abuse, including through lived experience representation on all relevant boards, forums and scrutiny panels.

Whilst some DA scrutiny work is currently being undertaken, panels and forums are often composed of police and other service providers, not members of the public, community representatives or 'experts through experience'. Often cases are presented in the form of a summary report, and it is suggested that scrutiny panels might employ methods akin to those used for stop and search or use of force panels, where body-worn camera footage is reviewed and the quality of the interaction is scrutinized. This might facilitate identification of good practice, as well as opportunities for development, including the generation of examples to be used for training and development purposes. Recommendations made as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-soteria-year-one-report/operation-soteria-bluestone-year-one-report-accessible-version (accessed on 17 October 2026) provide guidelines which might prove helpful in reforming current scrutiny and accountability frameworks.

Recommendation 2: Consider using governance structures that ensure that the 'voice of the victim' is heard.

There are a number of examples of Advisory Groups and Boards being used as a means of ensuring effective governance in relation to the development and delivery of DA-related services—for example, the Women Advisory Board in collaboration with Vamstad et al. (2025), or the lived experience panel which operates as part of the Lost Mothers Project detailed by Abbott et al. (2024). Having effective governance structures in place can protect against change and flux within services (Allnock et al., 2023), which would help in addressing some of the systemic issues noted by our partners.

Recommendation 3: Develop and utilize DA Champions to promote and extend good practice.

It has been noted that champions are an under-utilized asset and could be used to greater advantage (https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/article/43718/Domestic-abuse-change-champions (accessed on 17 October 2026)). Champions are often the 'go to' contacts within their areas of business, frequently acting as conduits both within and outside of their organizations. They are typically those who are best placed to provide on-the-ground assessments of service delivery, to give timely and targeted feedback with regard to service provision, and to challenge inappropriate practices. Coventry's Housing Domestic Abuse Champion Network offers clear examples of how champions and champions networks can act as a port of call for guidance and advice, with champions often operating as 'critical friends'.

Recommendation 4: IDVAs (Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors) should be integrated wherever possible to support effective service delivery.

The Ministry of Justice recently published statutory guidance around the use of IDVAs in providing advocacy to help relevant professionals and services understand victims' perspectives. This highlights the extent to which IDVAs can play an integral role in supporting victims along criminal justice pathways, as well as in ensuring they are able to access appropriate support to meet their intersecting needs.

Wherever possible, IDVAs should be used to help survivors to engage with or access statutory and other services such as sexual health, education providers, housing services, benefits agencies, therapeutic counseling, and mental health services (in line with the recommendations made by the MOJ). We would suggest that best practice would be to establish IDVAs as primary points of contact for victims (see Recommendation 5 below).

Recommendation 5: It would be helpful to establish 'Single Points of Contact' (SPOCs) for victim-survivors.

Victims will often need to engage and communicate with multiple statutory agencies, organizations and relevant professionals over the course of their involvement with criminal justice services. To simplify communication and prevent further re-traumatization, some victims may benefit from having someone acting as a 'Single Point of Contact' (SPOC: MOJ, 2025). This person could communicate with relevant professionals and advocate for the victim-survivor on their behalf, where appropriate, which could reduce demands placed upon victim-survivors. SPOCs could compile and disseminate information and evidence to prevent victim-survivors having to give information multiple times to multiple organizations.

SPOCs could also be responsible for keeping victim-survivors updated on their case and its progression through criminal justice or legal systems, which would help to alleviate pressures placed upon victim-survivors and potentially reduce risk around disengagement or withdrawal.

Recommendation 6: Take a needs-led, whole-person approach when interacting and working with victim-survivors.

Ministry of Justice guidance regarding DA advocacy emphasizes the need to consider and respond to the 'whole person', which means making a concerted effort to understand a victim-survivor's unique characteristics and circumstances in order to provide tailored and holistic support.

Services should seek to ensure that they understand and respond to the holistic needs of individuals and families, delivering support that is person-centered, culturally responsive, and informed by lived experience (in line with the recommendations made by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2025). Key considerations should include how best to communicate with victim-survivors in order to understand their needs and expectations, and to ensure clarity, transparency and authenticity in interactions. Victims should be asked what they want, and responses should seek to appropriately set and manage

expectations. Practitioners should communicate openly, using accessible language, and adopt a non-discriminatory, non-judgmental and trauma-informed approach, remaining considerate of the victim's experiences (MOJ, 2025).

Suggested best practice is that—wherever possible, and unless the victim requests otherwise—interactions with victims should be directly with them and conducted on a one-to-one, private basis (unless needs dictate otherwise).

Recommendation 7: Use targeted community approaches and interventions to raise awareness, including regarding support services that are available.

Lived experience and community needs should inform the development of awareness-raising initiatives, information and resources, and community-based interventions to ensure that communities are aware of different services and support that are available and to help tailor access to their needs.

Part of this should involve educating people as to their rights—legally and/or as victims (i.e., in accordance with the Victims Code)—and providing mechanisms for them to access information relevant to their specific needs.

5.2. Recommendations for Policy and Practice Development

Recommendation 8: Consultation with lived experience representatives should be a minimum standard for policy and practice development, with co-production involving 'experts by experience' being best practice.

Policymakers and practitioners need to ensure that services do not fail those who need and use them. Policies should be developed based on lived experiences, the incorporation of which could be facilitated through the use of advisory panels which include external partners and 'experts by experience'.

Senior police leaders and policymakers should receive training in both participatory approaches to policy development and trauma-informed approaches, to enable them to work more effectively with community partners and lived experience representatives in designing and implementing policies and practice guidance.

Recommendation 9: Clear policy guidance should be provided for practitioners by the organizations that they work for (including related training, where appropriate).

The onus should be placed on policymakers to ensure that policy and practice developments are communicated effectively both within their organizations and to relevant external partners or stakeholders. It was suggested that many policies are complex, hard to understand, and may lack sufficient guidance to ensure effective implementation. It was also noted that it is often helpful for those who are expected to implement policies or practice guidance to be aware of the rationale and justification for these.

Recommendation 10: Develop systems and structures to facilitate better communication and co-operation between agencies.

It is recommended that organizations seek to develop mechanisms through which agencies can contact and communicate with one another. This could include, as a starting point, updated directories of local services and provisions.

Co-ordination of multi-agency responses should be improved, including through the development of provisions for multi-agency consultation. Multi-agency forums could be used to create spaces to discuss issues, share experiences and examples of good practice, and to provide opportunities for peer mentorship and support.

Recommendation 11: Develop local steering groups, especially for consultation around complex or specialist issues such as honor-based abuse, forced marriage, and FGM.

The development of local steering groups would provide mechanisms to facilitate stakeholder consultation around policy and practice development. Such groups could also provide opportunities for ensuring that different stakeholder groups are made aware of any relevant policy or practice changes, developing trends or emerging issues, or other pertinent information that it might be beneficial to disseminate.

Recommendation 12: When designing services, focus on developing wrap-around provisions with flexible delivery wherever possible.

Würtz Jensen and Thunberg (2024) discuss how professionals can co-produce support plans with individuals, and—if needed—engage suitable external organizations for the purpose of adapting support services to the individual's needs. Whilst they note the complex field of considerations and constraints that professionals need to navigate during this process, they offer guidance that might prove helpful in developing flexible, wrap-around provisions that are tailored to the needs of service users. It is argued that this would constitute best practice in terms of responsive service design and delivery.

Recommendation 13: Consult with community and lived experience representatives, as well as academic or subject specialists, to make information and resources more readily available, accessible and culturally relevant.

Often the way in which information is communicated within criminal justice systems means that it is inaccessible for many, and often likely to be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Efforts should be made to work with community partners and subject specialists to enhance the accessibility of information and support resources, particularly where they are imperative to a person understanding their rights or entitlements.

Resources should be developed to help service users understand what to expect, what they are entitled to, what they must do, and where to go or to whom to turn if there are any problems or issues.

5.3. Recommendations for Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Recommendation 14: Professionals working within the DA arena should have the opportunity to undertake training and CPD commensurate with their role and role-related responsibilities.

Research—including that undertaken as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone—has highlighted a lack of specialist knowledge and evidence-informed specialist practice, which impacts on the quality of criminal justice encounters, victim engagement, and the consequent progression or outcomes of cases (cf. Rudolfsson et al., 2025).

All of those working within the DA arena and/or with victim-survivors of domestic abuse—including police, practitioners, lawyers, legal representatives, judges and other criminal justice agents—should undertake training and CPD that enables them to respond effectively within the confines of their role(s) and responsibilities. This training should provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to ensure that victim-survivors receive a quality service, which may include opportunities to reflect on personal practice and effectiveness (MOJ, 2025).

Particular areas of coverage that are suggested to be particularly important include understanding and responding to risk, trauma-informed approaches, understanding the impacts of domestic abuse, and understanding and addressing victim-survivors' intersectional needs.

Recommendations from Domestic Homicide Reviews/Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews highlight a particular need for training in relation to Black and minoritised communities, as well as around immigration issues and abuse of process (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). More cultural competency training generally would be advantageous.

Recommendation 15: Training and CPD opportunities should be developed to provide better opportunities for practitioners to develop core competencies and hone skills.

Training and CPD opportunities for those working within the criminal justice system could be multi-agency/multi-professional—akin to the format of MARACs and other multi-agency approaches that are commonly used for other purposes. Training should ideally be delivered by external agencies with relevant expertise, which might include lived experience inputs. The work of Lavoie et al. (2022) demonstrates how collaborative co-design and production by diverse community experts and stakeholders can create transformative specialized training for police and criminal justice practitioners; this might be used as a template for developing training provisions going forwards.

Worked case examples should be used in training and CPD to provide a better understanding of the varied and nuanced nature of DA and the different contexts within which it occurs, as well as of the needs of varied victim groups.

Training and CPD might also seek to develop soft skills, in terms of things such as effective communication, with a key focus being on how to work effectively with different groups or communities. This might include being cognisant of barriers to accessing services and support, as well as of specific needs of different victim groups. Cultural competency should be a priority for training and CPD, to help remove harmful practices, including biases and victim blaming.

Recommendation 16: Victim-survivors should be provided with access to opportunities to learn or develop skills that facilitate their personal and/or professional development.

Partners should seek to create opportunities for victim-survivors to learn or develop skills that benefit them directly, including as part of any collaborative or co-production activities.

In developing our SEEKERS work, we have actively sought to create opportunities for lived experience representatives and community partners to develop skills in relation to public speaking, policy making, research and evaluation, including through the provision of workshops, training and coaching.

More broadly, it was noted that often education providers and employers lack awareness with regard to the experiences and needs of victim-survivors of domestic abuse or other forms of violence, which can create barriers to them accessing educational opportunities, and to finding or maintaining employment. Many organizations do not have DA policies or mechanisms in place to support employees impacted by violence or abuse, and it is suggested that a focus for future collaborative efforts might be to support institutions and organizations in developing and co-creating policies and practices that address the barriers and educational or employment-related inequalities experienced by victim-survivors of DA.

5.4. Other Recommendations: Suggestions for Research and Research Collaboration

It was noted that academic research has been vital in understanding the issues surrounding domestic abuse, and lots of ideas for future research developments and collaborations were discussed. Many of these focused on employing co-design and co-production methodologies.

Specific areas for focus that were suggested included the following:

- End-to-end processing and progression of DA cases through the criminal justice system, with a focus on the assessment and management of risk;
- Challenges in responding effectively to DA, with a focus on practitioner experiences and development needs;
- The nature and quality of interactions within criminal justice contexts;

- The impacts of IDVAs or other agents (including interpreters) on the nature and quality of encounters within criminal justice contexts;
- The experiences of IDVAs and other agents, with a focus on their developmental and support needs;
- The effectiveness of DA training and current CPD provisions;
- Experiences of accessing services and support;
- Community perspectives, awareness and needs;
- Educator and employer awareness of DA and of the needs of those impacted by DA;
- Work with diverse communities and groups to understand particular challenges, barriers, needs, and opportunities;
- Research with victim-survivors who have not reported their victimization, to also reflect their experiences in policy or practice developments;
- More extensive research into the experiences of victim-survivors of non-intimate-partner domestic abuse.

5.5. Other Recommendations: Suggestions for Future Engagement Activities

Broader suggestions were made with regard to creating opportunities for future engagement and partnership-working. These included the following:

- Holding regular engagement events;
- Offering engagement opportunities that are more broadly accessible, including for wider stakeholder groups such as the public;
- Creating mechanisms through which different stakeholder groups are kept aware of ongoing developments, updated with regard to policy and practice developments, and given opportunities to provide feedback to services and service providers;
- Listening network events, to hear broader community views and perspectives;
- Co-ordinated community-based approaches to awareness raising regarding DA and DA-related support provisions.

5.6. Conclusions: Moving Forwards

As Allnock et al. (2023) discuss, it is difficult to collate evidence or gather high-quality data to show the impact of the 'voice of the victim' in informing policy or practice developments, or to demonstrate the extensive and far-reaching benefits of collaborative, co-production efforts such as those undertaken here. Many impacts may not be tangible or visible. Some of the recommendations made may be difficult to implement or may not be actionable at the current time (or even in the foreseeable future), and many were not designed or expected to lead directly to systemic change.

No formal mechanisms were employed in the development or delivery of this work to capture impact, as none were deemed suitable or likely to be effective in measuring the extent to which the aims of what we were seeking to achieve were met. Indeed, our primary objectives were to create opportunities for different stakeholder groups to work together, to share their experiences, expertise and knowledge, and to collaborate in driving meaningful change—rather broad ambitions, each without any clear, formal structure to facilitate their investigation or any rigorous methodological frameworks to test their implementation. However, we are confident that our ambitions in terms of what we hoped to achieve have been fulfilled, and that the work undertaken has laid the groundwork for a range of future developments which, over time, may help increase access to services and support for those impacted by domestic abuse and facilitate the development of policies and practices that are more sensitive and responsive to the needs of victim-survivors.

A Community of Practice has developed as a natural consequence of the activities undertaken (see also Hammond et al., 2025), with an extensive partnership network now

in operation across our region facilitating a range of research, collaboration and co-creation activities involving different stakeholder and community groups. Examples include victim-survivors contributing to governance processes through participating in forums and panels and sitting on advisory boards, and being involved in the development and delivery of training and CPD offerings for police and other practitioner groups. They are also increasingly being consulted in development of policy and practice at a range of levels and across a host of different organizations. The fact that they presented the report we developed to MPs and Commissioners is one such example of the opportunities in this regard. Collaborative research in development explores factors impacting the progression of domestic abuse cases through the criminal justice system, including qualitative measures of criminal justice interactions and service provision. The network is also facilitating the co-creation of needs-led, culturally informed, accessible information, interventions and resources that better cater to the needs of different victim and community groups.

The SEEKERS approach offers a mechanism for creating time, space, and opportunities to facilitate collaboration and co-creation of potential solutions to the challenges presented by DA in a range of domains. It demonstrates how voices that often go unheard—not just those of victim-survivors, but also of community representatives, advocates and champions, including professionals and practitioners who themselves possess an abundance of experiential insights—can be meaningfully incorporated into service design and delivery, as well as into policy and practice developments. In doing so, it provides a means of ensuring that services are more responsive to the reality of DA, and that they are victim-focused and needs-led, which will ultimately make them better fit for purpose and therefore perhaps more effective.

We note that there are a number of limitations, some of which stem from the fact that we are very much learning as we go. In developing this paper we have reflected on ways in which potential issues might have been better addressed and identified alternative mechanisms that could have been employed to ensure that the data collated was more robust. To this end, we would like to thank the reviewers and editorial team for their feedback and suggestions, as this has been incredibly valuable in finalizing this paper but even more so in considering potential next steps and how these might be implemented. We also note the fact that these activities have been quite localized in nature, and that some of the findings and recommendations might not be generalisable to other contexts or other groups. Some of the barriers identified might be particular to circumstances of victims from our local communities. Further, different police forces have different policies and practices, and the nature and characteristics of the DA cases that they deal with are likely to vary, which might limit the degree to which the recommendations made are relevant or appropriate.

Despite these limitations, this work contributes to the growing body of evidence around the benefits of engaging in collaborative activities. It provides valuable insights regarding the potential use and value of collaborative, co-creation methods in addressing criminal justice practices, how best to undertake collaborative endeavors, and the challenges that co-creation can encompass (cf. Warwick-Booth et al., 2022). Collaborative, co-creation methods hold considerable potential as a mechanism for generating impact and driving positive change, but only if we can ensure that processes required to create meaningful outcomes are adhered to, and that engagement is authentic rather than tokenistic (Wydall et al., 2023).

Co-creation and co-production can take many forms, and—as Morgan et al. (2024) discuss—considerable care must be taken when deciding how best to collaboratively develop knowledge, evidence, practice, and policy with the people who access and use services. However, it is crucial to remember that co-production involves centring people's voices and

experiences to conceive, design or develop services and support (Morgan et al., 2024). As McCarry et al. (2018) discuss, we need to move beyond consultation to enable a relocation of power and control, towards user-led mechanisms of planning, delivery, management and governance. The present paper takes steps in this direction, showing that by amplifying victim-survivor voices, broadening representation, and working more effectively together, we can drive meaningful change; change which might ultimately increase access to justice, empower victim-survivors, and enable healing and recovery (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2025).

> "My experience is a part of helping to make the system better. My experience, and the help of professionals who are in that position to actually do something...change the system..."
>
> [Domestic Abuse Survivor]

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CJS	Criminal Justice System
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
DA	Domestic Abuse
EAG	Expert Advisory Group
IAG	Independent Advisory Group
IRB	Institutional Review Board
IDVA	Independent Domestic Violence Advisor
LET	Lived Experience Team
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk-Assessment Conference
PPU	Public Protection Unit
SEEKERS	Sharing Experience, Expertise and Knowledge for Effective Responses and Support
SPOC	Single Point of Contact
WAITS	Women Acting in Today's Society

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