



# DONCASTER DOMESTIC ABUSE PERPETRATOR PROGRAMME EVALUATION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Background

This report describes work carried out to evaluate a domestic abuse perpetrator programme in Doncaster, England. The perpetrator programme was commissioned to prevent the escalation of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) by providing early help to 'low risk' DVA perpetrators who want support to change their behaviour towards their partner or family members and improve their relationships.

In line with the requirements of NIHR PHPES (Public Health Practitioners Evaluation Scheme), this evaluation was initiated by local public health practitioners. The project was supported by public health commissioners and the wider domestic abuse strategy group at Doncaster, as well as the provider organisation delivering the intervention called Foundation for Change (F4C). The evaluation was carried out between April 2015 and March 2017, and was undertaken by a team of researchers from the University of Sheffield, School of Nursing and Midwifery and School of Health and Related Research.

## Research Objectives

1. To develop a detailed description and evaluate the programme logic of the perpetrator programme including its component elements and key in-built assumptions: explore key contextual factors that influence the (i) change mechanisms and/or (ii) implementation processes.
2. To explore and describe any differential access, experiences and outcomes of the programme by gender, socioeconomic and ethnic group.
3. To identify strengths and weaknesses of the perpetrator programme and transferable lessons for other contexts.

It is increasingly recognised that in order to establish the effectiveness of a complex public health intervention, a theory-driven evaluation is an appropriate approach to ensure that findings are developed and positioned using an in-depth understanding of the programme (Patton, 2008). This is particularly true where the current evidence describing the theoretical

underpinnings of the intervention are weak and there is limited understanding of how the intervention operates on the ground (for instance because it has not yet been implemented widely and/or where effectiveness is highly dependent upon contextual factors). Interventions for perpetrators of domestic abuse generally, and the perpetrator programme in particular, fit this picture.

Our approach was informed by methodological contributions (Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner, & Hacsí, 2000; Weiss, 1997a, 1997b) and experiences of relevant recent applications of theory-driven methods (Bacchus, Aston, Torres Vitolas, Jordan, & Murray, 2007; Bacchus et al., 2010; O'Campo, Kirst, Tsamis, Chambers, & Ahmad, 2011). We used a mixed-method, theory-driven evaluation approach. Involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, including service commissioners, service providers, clients, social workers and other professionals facilitated the development of a shared understanding of the programme and the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Data for the study was collected using:

- 20 in-depth interviews including nine open-ended individual interviews and eleven repeat narrative interviews involving a total of 14 different clients.
- Five iterative, 'theory-focused' interviews involving six members of staff of the perpetrator programme.
- 11 in-depth interviews involving 12 stakeholders including commissioners, social workers, professionals from other services such as the police, probation, women's centre, domestic abuse victim services, and children's services.
- Three focus group discussions (including one with perpetrator programme staff and two with other stakeholders) involving 21 participants.
- Ethnographic observations of six one-to-one sessions between clients and their keyworkers. We also reviewed recordings of each of the eight group sessions.
- Case note review of 33 clients
- Review of routinely collected data of 281 clients.
- Pre and post-programme attitude survey completed by 42 clients.
- Self-administered questionnaire administered at the start of the programme (T0; N=42), at the end of the programme (T1; N=11) and three months' post completion of the programme (T2; N=4).

### Summary of Findings: Quantitative

- From April 2014 (inception of the perpetrator programme) to 31st December 2016 (33 months) a total of 281 clients accessed the perpetrator programme. This included 260 (92.5%) males and 21 females (7.5%).
- The majority of clients accessing the perpetrator programme are heterosexual, male, living in central parts of Doncaster. The age of the clients, ranged between 16-59 years with a mean age of 31 years (median 29 years; mode 28 years).

- There were a total of 17 referral routes recorded on the programme. Major sources of referral included children's services, social services, South Yorkshire police, South Yorkshire probation, Doncaster probation and other voluntary agencies.
- The majority of clients (45.6%) self-referred themselves to the service.
- Over half of the clients (51.6%) have children
- Nearly 29% of the clients reported mental health issues including anxiety and panic attacks, suicidality (20%), self-harm (16%). Drug or alcohol problems (11%) were also common.
- Ninety-three clients (33%) reported a history of convictions, injunctions, bail conditions, pending court appearances or other offending issues.
- The mean time between referral and start date on the programme was 18 days, and the average length of time a client spent on the perpetrator programme was 112 days.
- Common and consistently reported abusive behaviour include verbal abuse, breaking and damaging household items, arguments, showing extreme jealousy, telling their partner what to do or not do/where to go/not go, who to see/not see and accusing their partner of having an affair.
- The completion rate for the programme was below 50% and there was no statistically significant difference in general characteristics (such as referral route, age, employment status) between those who complete the programme and those who do not.
- However, using three items on our attitude survey, completion can be predicted for 77% of those clients joining the perpetrator programme by assessing whether the client: considers themselves confident in identifying personal triggers, feels that they have new opportunities for their future and are less confident about their social skills. Clients that are less likely to complete the programme are less confident in identifying personal triggers, do not feel that they have new opportunities for their future, but are more confident about their social skills.

### Summary of Findings: Qualitative

Following initial investigations and consultations, the following mid-range theories were considered important to underpin the effectiveness of the programme:

- Timeliness of the intervention is required to coincide with a window of opportunity for engagement
- Client motivation and willingness to change is a necessary precondition to promote and maintain engagement
- Exposure to positive role models encourages clients to examine and change their behaviour
- The relevance and effectiveness the course content and delivery helps to encourage clients to maintain engagement and associate the content with their situation
- The ability of clients to be able to learn and apply learning is critical for the potential for sustained behaviour change
- Analysis of the qualitative data resulted in five themes that supported and refined our understanding of elements of these theories: 1) 'voluntary participation', 2) 'assessing

motivation', 3) the 'role of staff in modelling respectful relationships', 4) 'programme content and its relevance' and 5) 'putting learning into practice'.

### *Voluntary participation*

- Clients' early understanding of the programme emerged as an important factor shaping their engagement after referral and their continuation with the programme. Networking and promotion activities carried out by perpetrator programme and council staff helped maintain a high level of awareness about the programme amongst a wide range of stakeholders, enabling them to facilitate voluntary participation by informing clients about the aims, content and format of the programme and supporting clients to make the decision to participate for themselves.
- Joint working between perpetrator programme and stakeholders was beneficial in assessing client suitability prior to referral.
- Not all stakeholders had a shared understanding of the importance of voluntary participation and some clients reported that they considered attendance on the programme to be compulsory or influential on other outcomes, such as child custody proceedings.
- Stakeholders that required or coerced clients to attend were challenged by the perpetrator programme and the 'Awareness Workshop' proved to be an effective means of providing clients with information about the programme, including the importance of voluntary participation.

### *Assessing motivation*

- The programme staff assessed client motivation at several different points in their journey through the programme, using a variety of different methods and drawing on evidence from their own observations, interactions and discussions with the clients and, in some instances, information provided by other stakeholders.
- It was reported that clients who continually failed to demonstrate that they were motivated to change their behaviour were asked to leave the programme. Level of motivation was judged by programme staff against their past experiences rather than a clearly articulated set of criteria; stakeholders supported the view that there is no straightforward way to assess whether a client is motivated to change their behaviour.
- Clients, programme staff and stakeholders all agreed that client responsibility for their own participation in the programme was important in maintaining client attendance and in influencing potential changes in behaviour.
- Flexibility over how and when clients attended, gave clients a sense of ownership and control. In group work, client ownership was encouraged through the joint setting of ground rules, by keeping clients informed of what to expect from the sessions, and allowing clients to decide whether or not to engage with and participate in a range of learning activities.

- Disguised compliance was a concern for some stakeholders and evidence of clients apparently rote learning and mirroring the programme language suggest that client engagement with learning was sometimes superficial. However, other clients demonstrated a deeper understanding of issues discussed on the course, suggesting a more meaningful engagement with the learning process.
- Clients reported the non-judgemental attitude of programme staff to be unexpected and valued. A positive relationship with their key worker emerged as an important factor in maintaining client engagement with the programme. The consequences of the sense of respect that clients experienced were that it put them at their ease (making them more likely to attend), they were more willing to open up and talk to staff, and staff members were able to challenge clients' comments and behaviour without client resentment.

#### *The role of staff in modelling respectful relationships*

- The programme staff modelled respectful relationships by working as a unified team in the delivery of group sessions, as well as describing examples of how they have responded to issues in their own relationships. Examples of clients asking for advice from staff about how to behave within relationships indicates that clients were seeking to learn alternative ways of behaving in their own relationships and perceived programme staff as knowledgeable in this area.
- Group work allowed programme staff to create opportunities to facilitate supportive relationships between clients and provide opportunities to learn from peers. Evidence suggests that the group work environment facilitated client willingness to reflect on their behaviour and disclose their feelings, helped build client confidence to participate fully in the sessions, and provided opportunities to learn from peers with differing experiences and histories.

#### *Programme content and its relevance*

- Clients reported that they had found the content of the programme easy to understand and many had been able to relate the content to their own issues and circumstances. Not all sessions were perceived as equally relevant by every client but it was generally felt by clients that the sessions had been managed in a way that was inclusive and responsive to the needs of group members.
- Clients reported being better able to recognise their abusive behaviour as a result of their participation and that the programme had resulted in a change in their thinking that enabled them to consider situations from other people's perspectives.
- The findings suggest that learning from the programme had increased client awareness of the impact of their abusive behaviour on their partner and children.

### *Putting learning into practice*

- The majority of clients that were interviewed reported that they were able to put their learning into practice in their own relationships and many reported improved relationships with partners since joining the perpetrator programme. Positive feedback from a partner appears to be important to consolidate behaviour change; clients who are not in relationships might struggle to implement their learning effectively.
- Several clients reported that their emotional wellbeing had improved since joining the programme. Some felt calmer or better-able to cope with stress, while others attributed changes in their alcohol consumption to their learning from the programme. There is also limited evidence to suggest that, for some clients, participation in the programme had contributed to increased confidence and a positive outlook for the future.
- Evidence concerning the sustainability of behaviour change is limited. Several clients reported that they were confident and/or determined that changes in their behaviour would be long lasting and a number of clients recognised that embedding behaviour change required time and effort. Others were less confident about their ability to sustain change without further support or the opportunity to apply behaviour change within a new relationship.

### Conclusions

In summary, clients accessing the programme are broadly representative of the local population; although, as expected for this type of service, levels of unemployment are higher. However, in common with evaluations of similar services, the geographical reach seems limited. This is a concern for potential unmet need in areas away from urban centres. Some clients felt coerced to attend the programme. However, there is evidence that some intrinsic motivations were also present in these cases. Referring agencies seemed to have good knowledge of the programme to facilitate this.

The ongoing development of the relationships between clients and key workers has implications for effective working with clients, assessment and evaluation. This emphasises the importance of ongoing assessment of clients' motivations, engagement and willingness to change. Individual tailoring of the programme was mostly limited to flexibility in delivery and individual interactions rather than content. However, this was valued by clients, as was being treated with respect and not being judged by case workers. Clients reported that changes in behaviour were stimulated by awareness of the impact of their behaviour; commonly resulting in clients reporting thinking before they acted.

### Recommendations

#### *For perpetrator services*

The evaluation of the perpetrator programme has helped identify some areas of improvement for the Doncaster service, some of which might be applicable to services in other areas. Whilst some of these recommendations can be acted upon at the level of perpetrator services, it is

clear that a more integrated approach to commissioning and provision of all associated services will be required to fully address the issues raised. These recommendations are presented below:

- *Integration with other services:* Although some communication was reported between the domestic violence victim services and the perpetrator programme, their primary organisational aims and working cultures (victim safety and isolation from the perpetrator as opposed to perpetrator rehabilitation and potentially family reconciliation) are currently incompatible and their caseloads are built from different populations. Whilst there was evidence of useful information sharing with social workers; approaches should be sought to further facilitate collaborative working with services focusing on children, victims and family (e.g. domestic violence victim services) to share data and intelligence. The current lack of integration could have negative consequences for both victim safety and perpetrator rehabilitation.
- *Engaging with perpetrator's partners:*  
There is a need to explore ways to engage with partners of clients to enable better understanding of the client's issues, identification of changes in abusive behaviour and to improve monitoring of the effectiveness of the programme.
- *Programme content:* More sessions on understanding of abusive, violent and coercively controlling behaviour could help to facilitate better understanding of the issue, as there seems to be little emphasis on the understanding of these behaviour as oppose to other issues.

#### *Further research and evaluation*

- *Understanding long-term effects:* The drop-out rate is high (approximately 50%) and ongoing contact following completion of the course is very challenging. An exploration into methods of engagement would help to understand the barriers and possibilities for assessing long-term effects.
- *Impact on non-completers:* Little is known about the effect of the intervention on clients that drop-out of the service, it is not possible to assume that the intervention was not worthwhile. Future research and evaluation should explore the potential for understanding the effect on non-completers.
- *Predicting engagement:* This study has added to understanding some of the predictors of non-completion. However, a better understanding of factors affecting engagement, which might be amenable to change, might identify elements to increase effectiveness of interventions through improvements in engagement.

- *Outcome assessment:* Important outcomes and economic data requirements for evaluation have been identified. Some difficulties for collecting specific measures have been recognised, which could be addressed in future evaluation or research (for further details see SROI report).
- *Geographical reach:* Clients lived in close proximity to the service; near to the centre of town. Inequity of access and the potential for unmet need in areas further away from urban centres should be explored.