



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Thursday, 12 January, 2023

PRESS RELEASE

Police response to domestic abuse reviewed

The policing response to reports of domestic abuse in Scotland has changed significantly in recent years with this form of criminal behaviour being prioritised while steps have also been taken to protect those most vulnerable to its harmful effects.

Police Scotland has a proactive approach to tackling the most persistent offenders, comprehensive training has been rolled out, various national specialist units have been introduced and innovative campaigns have been launched. However significant challenges still exist in preventing and understanding the scale of domestic abuse, states a report issued today (Thursday, 12 January, 2023).

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Craig Naylor, acknowledges in the publication many positives in the tactics and methods currently used by Police Scotland, especially given the volume of reports of domestic abuse.

He said: “Domestic abuse is an abhorrent crime committed by individuals on those they supposedly love and care for. It often takes place in private, behind closed doors and increasingly online, and the impact on those directly affected can be devastating.

“There is no doubt that domestic abuse, which is directed at men as well as women, has had a heightened profile in the public consciousness in the past decade with third sector and government input, in addition to that of criminal justice. New legislation has been introduced and Police Scotland has been at the forefront of tackling this most repugnant form of behaviour.”

The most recent figures show there were 64,807 domestic abuse incidents recorded in Scotland last year with 32,776 (50.6%) reported to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service(COPFS). Homicide figures, from the same period, show that 56% of women killed died at the hands of a partner or ex-partner.

It is widely accepted that domestic abuse is under reported with significant social, economic and cultural barriers persisting. There are indications that issues arising from the cost of living crisis could result in an even higher prevalence of domestic abuse offending.

“A great deal has been done by Police Scotland and the organisation is committed to further improvements to the services it provides directly and those from partner organisations. The risks associated with this area of policing, which are of significant public concern, determine that the improvements we identify in this report must be prioritised”, said Mr Naylor.

In particular, he highlights the need for training, referencing the lived experience of victims, to address any outdated attitudes which may exist and improved ways of communicating with victims during investigations. Plans for their safety, which is a critical aspect of the response to domestic abuse and developing a consistent recording method for safety plans, also need urgent attention.

The HMICS Thematic Review of Domestic Abuse considers the state, efficiency and effectiveness of the police response to domestic abuse, with a particular focus on the user experience of the reporting and investigative processes up to the conclusion of the police investigation.

HMICS has made 14 recommendations including the need to ensure there is an adequate cadre of suitably trained sexual offence liaison officers (SOLOs) and the prioritisation of a robust system for progressing domestic abuse inquiries which will improve the service to victims.

Progress in the provision and promotion of third party reporting sites, the use of diary appointments, greater opportunities for the capture of digital evidence including the need to ensure and save victims from having to trawl through their own devices, enhanced response at the first point of contact and the requirement to offer the preferred gender of attending officer to victims are also reflected in the recommendations.

The report highlights the more developed approach within Police Scotland to sexual offending and expressed disappointment at the lack of a formal process to garner the views of victims of domestic abuse. Recently published figures on repeat offenders and sentences that have been achieved through proactive work are welcome and need to continue to be delivered.

The scrutiny body identifies a number of examples of good practice and areas for development with a view to improving service delivery and the experience of victims, ultimately enhancing public confidence in an area of policing which is of great public interest and concern.

“Good quality service to victims at the first point of contact, and beyond, is crucial. If, having taken the bold step to report domestic abuse, a victim has a poor experience, they are far less likely to report any further abuse,” said Mr Naylor.

Call handlers, who are generally the first contact a victim has with the organisation, are recognised as providing a good service overall as are officers in cases where children are involved and those in specialist teams. But there can be a lack of awareness among attending officers in how to handle counter complaints and inconsistency in record keeping.

As part of the inspection an online survey was developed to seek the view and experiences of those who reported domestic abuse to Police Scotland. It generated 94 responses and the detailed findings are published in conjunction with this report.

Ends

FOOTNOTE

This report forms the first phase of planned inspection of this area of policing. Wider criminal justice issues impacting victims of domestic abuse, including the effect of court backlogs, will be assessed in due course.

The definition of domestic abuse in Scotland, which is recognised by Police Scotland, is “Any form of physical, verbal, sexual, psychological or financial abuse which might amount to criminal conduct, and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, cohabiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse may be committed in the home or elsewhere, including online.”

In law, the term ‘complainer’ is used to describe the person against whom it is alleged a crime has been committed. Women and men who have experience domestic abuse and/or sexual violence often prefer to use the term ‘survivor’. This report uses the term ‘victim’ which is the terminology used in legislation and is commonly understood. In using this terminology, no assumption is made about the veracity of any allegations.

The findings of the survey are provided at Appendix 2. HMICS recognises the 94 respondents are a self-selecting group which may have been more motivated to provide a response having had a negative experience. The small number of responses, from over 60,000 domestic abuse incidents per year is not representative but it is important that the user experience of victims is reflected.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The HMICS Thematic Inspection of Domestic Abuse Phase 1 is available to download at the HMICS website www.hmics.scot from 1100hrs, Thursday, 12th January 2023.

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