

Wiltshire women call for action on Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts

WILTSHIRE Club Members of Soroptimist International, the global women's volunteer organisation, are urging local MPs to press the Secretary of State for Justice to take urgent action to protect victims of domestic abuse seeking justice and to ensure that Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts (SDAC) do not add to their trauma.

This follows the publication of an England-wide report (26 June, 2023) which builds on pioneering observation work in Wiltshire and highlights the serious shortcomings of the Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts.

Members of Soroptimist International of Swindon carried out a county study in 2018 and the seven recommendations in the Wiltshire report (see full list below) have been further underlined by the recommendations of the England wide report, published 26 June.

Problems include

The lack of independent support to victims giving evidence in court, poor use of technology, inadequate implementation of domestic abuse training given to court officials and the need for a total review of the Victim Personal Statement (VPS) system were all identified by the independent observers as shortcomings in this court system.

The reports show that a system which was established and developed over a five-year period in 1999, to provide specific support to the victims of domestic abuse is falling short of the service which the public has a right to expect.

Local project lead, Lydia Cardew, said: "We were proud to be one of the first clubs to carry out these observations and contribute to this independent review across England of how these courts should be improved for victims of abuse, the majority of whom are women.

"Soroptimists stand up as



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advocates for all women, especially for those who have no voice. Swindon Club members, assisted by Cirencester and Cheltenham members, worked as independent observers over a three month period to highlight the issues and help drive the change for improvements and help build public trust in our justice system.

"We urge our local MPs to call for action to ensure a better experience and outcome for all victims of domestic abuse".

Demonstration of citizen action

The latest project, carried out by Soroptimists across England, involved 4,000 hours of volunteer time in observation and more than 1,000 questionnaires submitted in relation to observations made at over 30 courts.

Over 200 Soroptimists took part, recording what they saw. These reports were analysed and together form a comprehensive and unique report on the way in which the Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts are working on a national basis. Recommendations made in the new report seek to improve the workings of this system with a particular emphasis on positive experiences and outcomes for the victims.

Only two examples of best practice

The data presented here from courts across England provides a

clear indication that the components required to deliver a Specialist Domestic Abuse Court are not always present. Best practice was only observed in two courts: Westminster SDAC and Nottingham Magistrates Court, which employ a multi-agency approach to provide a more effective response to processing domestic abuse cases within the criminal justice system.

In other regions, problems include the under availability of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors, the under application of special measures and the poorly equipped court facilities. These must be addressed to ensure that victims are protected and supported by the SDAC system.

Changes to policy not reflected in practice

Domestic Abuse has been categorised as a national threat under the new strategic policing requirement.

The government has laid out promising plans to prioritise the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and to introduce tougher legislation on perpetrators who are convicted of Coercive and Controlling Behaviour (CCB), which for the first time will be put on a par with physical violence.

However, this report provides further evidence of a pronounced gap between reported offences of coercive control and successful convictions.

Over the five years of the court observation initiative there have been notable changes to external factors which appear to have had limited impact on the challenges that victims face in seeking justice. The data gathered over this five-year period reflects a disconnect between strategic and operational management, showing that changes to policy have made little difference in practice.

Perpetrator interventions not being utilised

Proposed measures include new civil orders, digital tools for the early identification of dangerous perpetrators, and additional funding for both specialist victim support programmes and perpetrator behavioural interventions. The report shows that of the cases observed, most sentences imposed were financial, and that perpetrator interventions were ordered in just 56 of 626 cases observed.

Despite government spending of £79 million since 2020 for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions, it is clear from these findings that these pathways to changing behaviour are not consistently enforced. These findings align with research which has shown less than 1% of perpetrators receive a specialist intervention to challenge or change their behaviour.

Reasons for this include patchy service provision as well as an overall low rate of conviction for DA related crimes and a lack of identification of Controlling and Coercive Behaviour in the courts.

It is particularly concerning that most victims, in the cases observed, did not receive advocacy from IDVAs, and that the safety of victims was not properly ensured, either inside and or outside the courts.

<https://sigbi.org/2023/specialist-domestic-abuse-courts/>