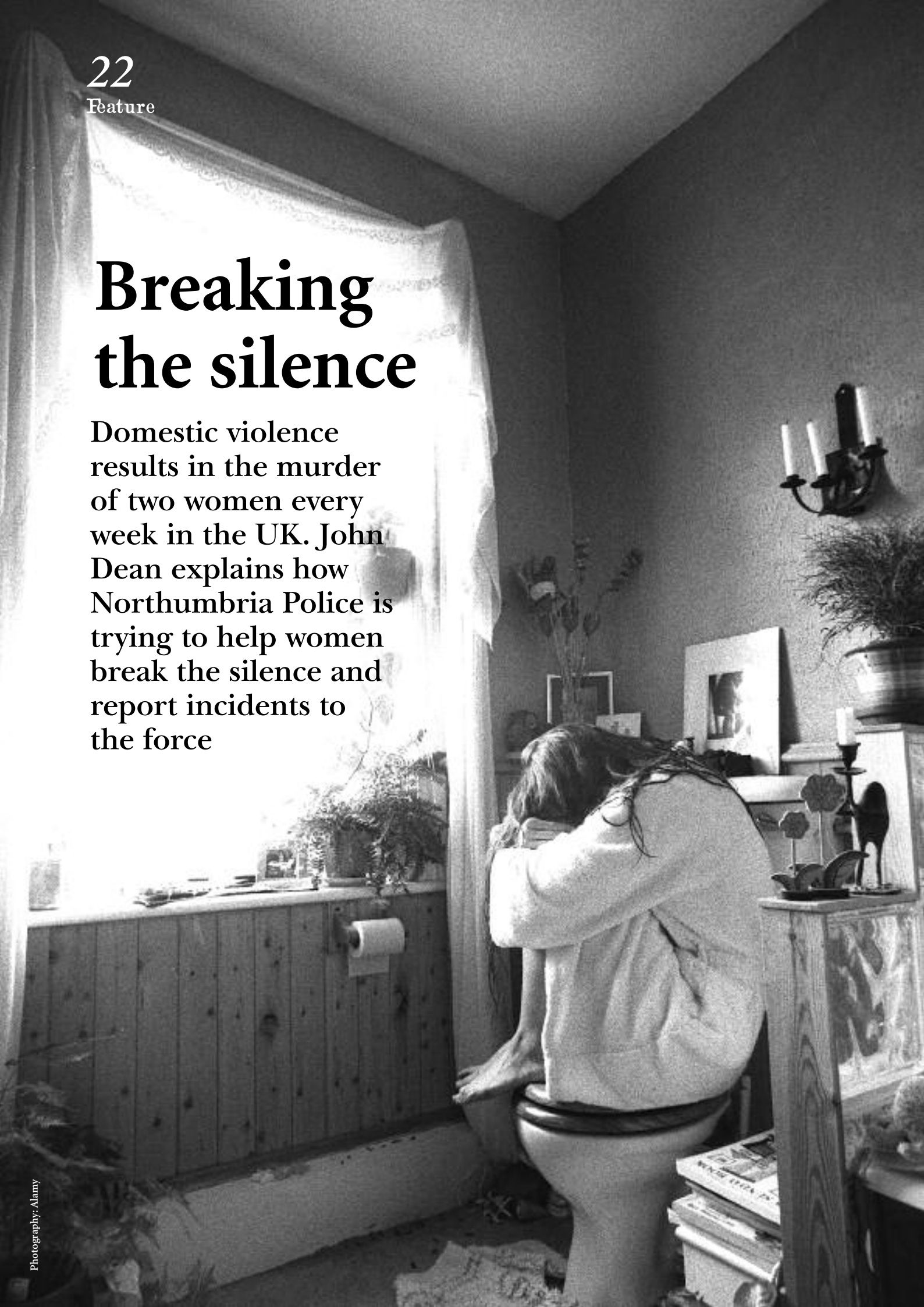


# Breaking the silence

Domestic violence results in the murder of two women every week in the UK. John Dean explains how Northumbria Police is trying to help women break the silence and report incidents to the force



Domestic violence is often still a hidden crime, but one which nevertheless pervades many areas of a police officer's everyday working life. Be it assaults, rapes or even murders, the cause can often be traced back to domestic violence, according to Northumbria's Public Protection Unit.

Part of the force's response to tackling domestic violence has been to raise the profile of their work in the field and improve co-ordination of intelligence gathering. Domestic violence falls within the remit of the force's Public Protection Unit, which is based at headquarters in Ponteland and which oversees the work of six specialist teams within the area commands.

Although the force deals with domestic violence throughout the year, it has identified certain hotspots, which is why it has just completed a winter campaign which ran over the Christmas and New Year period and into January. For Det Ch Insp Michael Barton, head of the unit, the principles enshrined in the campaign illustrated the way the force responds to the issue year-round.

An officer for more than 17 years, most of them spent within CID, he said: "The campaign was all about raising awareness but we did not want to present it to area commands as a new initiative from headquarters.

"Officers encounter such incidents 365 days in the year and the message we wanted to get out to as wide an audience as possible was that domestic violence is totally unacceptable at any time of year.

"We realise domestic violence traditionally rises over the festive period when levels of stress, alcohol and debt all increase, but that is no excuse for perpetrators. Our message to those who commit domestic violence is simple – we'll be pursuing criminal prosecutions wherever possible and seeking to remand in custody."

The *Domestic Violence – It's a Crime* campaign saw Northumbria Police taking a tough stance against offenders while urging victims to come forward and report abuse. Posters were displayed around the region, everywhere from doctor's surgeries to off-licences and community centres, and beer mats containing the campaign images as well as helpline numbers were delivered to pubs and clubs. A new series of posters has just been launched. The campaign was also advertised at Sunderland and Newcastle football matches, both in the programmes and on screens in the grounds.

The campaign also included the force's regular activities when it comes to dealing with domestic violence, including specialist officers speaking to victims to promote the help available and getting tough with offenders, supported by the everyday work of neighbourhood and other officers.

For Det Ch Insp Barton, the approach must balance the need to protect the victim with the requirement to be tough with offenders. "We want to provide appropriate support for victims, put offenders before the court and work with partners to make victims aware of the help that's available. "During our winter campaign, offenders were sent a warning letter saying that we were watching them."

The intensive campaign revealed some interesting findings. Det Ch Insp Barton said: "The number of domestic abuse

reports remained just about the same as last year but there was a significant rise in the number of first time reporters and a decline in the number of repeat offences. We hope this means that more people felt confident to report offences and that repeat offenders got the message.

"We want to address the issue of people suffering in silence and we believe that our work is having an effect - we certainly know that the number of domestic homicides, one of our indicators, is dropping in our area."

Figures show there were 3,343 incidents of domestic violence over December and January, down by 110 incidents compared to the same period last year.

A key part of the approach has been improved intelligence gathering and recording, using the force IT system.

Officers attending domestic abuse incidents fill in a questionnaire and the information is then placed on the system which DCI Barton says means that other officers attending further incidents are aware of the background. He adds that makes it easier to drive up effective risk assessments because police and other agencies are aware of the sensitivities involved. He believes that the system is one of the best in the country when it comes to recording such incidents.

And being aware of sensitivities is crucial, according to Det Sgt John Douglas, an officer for 22 years, including spells in crime operations and reactive CID and now a member of the protection unit at Ponteland.

He said that only by giving victims confidence could they be reassured that continuing with complaints, even if it means prosecutions, is a viable option.

He adds: "Our approach is to give victims and their families a positive experience of the criminal justice system - the attrition rate in these kind of cases can be substantial. We have to be sensitive to the issues in such cases.

"We also have to be realistic about the outcome. It may be that there is no prosecution at the end of the case but that we have been able to help the victim.

"What we are trying to do is empower the victims so that they realise that things can be done when they report incidents. We deal with some harrowing cases and our job is to do everything we can to help those people."

Another central part of the team's work is the co-operation with other agencies, be it child welfare organisations, social services or other interested parties.

By ensuring that everyone is party to the same intelligence, the intended effect is of a system working to support the victim.

Sgt Douglas said: "There is an accountability throughout the system. Domestic abuse is no longer seen as just a police responsibility."

Such a view is echoed by colleague Det Con Julie Howe, a police officer for 15 years, said: "We have to take a holistic approach to be aware of the sensitivities of each case. We have to be aware that victims with whom we deal may be scared about what will happen if things progress. They may experience fear of further incidents if they report abuse, may have financial worries about what will happen and might be worried about the impact on their families."