

Home Front

Domestic violence is a problem all year round, although the tensions present at Christmas can increase it during the festive season. John Dean reports on an initiative to tackle the problem.

They can be among the most difficult crimes to investigate but now a recently-established police unit in North-East England is finding ways to bring more domestic violence cases to court.

The domestic violence unit was set up by Durham police in May as a pilot project and has been so successful that it has been confirmed as a permanent initiative.

Driving the venture was a concern that many victims feel too frightened to approach the police or, in some cases, do not even recognise that they are victims. They also tend to make a complaint then withdraw it, frightened of the consequences, which can make taking cases forward more difficult.

The Durham team has set out to solve some of those problems by working more closely with the victims and creating a sense of continuity.

Based at Peterlee police station, the unit covers the northern part of the force area and has a detective

sergeant, three detective constables and an independent advocate, on secondment from the probation service, who represents the interests of the victim.

They deal with all domestic violence cases in their area, and are overseen by Detective Inspector Eric Malkin, who is based at force headquarters in Aykley Heads, Durham.

He says: "This kind of violence crosses all levels of society - it is not just a 'working class' crime.

"It should be remembered that a lot of 'domestics' don't get reported at all and our approach has been to bring those people into the criminal justice system.

"We deal with all sorts of abuse, be it physical, emotional, financial or sexual and most of the people we deal with tend to be women.

"A lot of the people do not even realise that they are victims. There is a school of thought that, on average, there are 22 domestic incidents in the home before a victim makes a report to police. That figure used to be 36 but it is easier for people to make reports these days.

What we are trying to do is make people more aware of what can be done.”

The unit’s cases usually start with the submission of an assessment form which all uniform officers attending such incidents are asked to fill in.

DI Malkin says: “These kind of incidents tend to be dealt with by uniform officers who are usually called in during late evening or in the night-time. They are response officers with a heavy workload and the idea of the unit is to ensure a continuity in the way these cases are dealt with, so that victims deal with the same person throughout the investigation.”



Photography: KJB-Photography

Case Conference: agencies work together to tackle domestic abuse

The officers first on the scene are viewed as crucial and they are encouraged to gather as much evidence as they can, including using cameras to record injuries, and gather forensics.

DI Malkin says: “We do give feedback to those officers. We want to make sure that they do the best possible job with their evidence gathering. It is about improving the level of investigation and we are reaping the benefits.

“That evidence gathering should not just be limited to domestic violence. It should be the standard all officers set themselves in every crime investigation. Getting it right, covering all the options and setting standards high makes a big difference.”

The quality of evidence can sometimes be the difference between a case going forward or not.

DI Malkin says: “Victims withdrawing complaints is the biggest frustration and we aim to talk to the victims and bring as many cases forward as we can. We have had some victims who have given evidence on camera on the evening of the first visit by a uniform officer and that has been allowed in court. Defendants have changed their plea when they see the strength of the evidence.

“Although some victims withdraw their complaints, the Crown Prosecution Service is quite willing to take cases forward without the victim, if the evidence is there. For example, that can come from telephone conversations

with the emergency services and video footage taken at the scene.”

Detective Sergeant Graham Fletcher, from the team, says: “We have had 23 retractions, but we will always take a case forward if we can.”

The unit has dealt with more than 200 cases since it was created, running at more than 30 a month, and DI Malkin believes that the sense of continuity means that cases are being much more effectively handled.

He says: “The first priority of most people we deal with is to see the abuse stop and we can help find ways of doing that.

“It is about being joined up. One of the advantages is that we are in touch with all the people who can help, be it social services, housing officers or the health service, and the CPS specialists are in the same building as the unit. It also helps that the specialist domestic violence court meets regularly at Peterlee, next to the police station. It all means we can deal with incidents more effectively and take decisions based on the all available information.

Having such close co-operation means that victims receive a good service, he says.

“The advantage of having a dedicated unit is that, once the assessment form comes through, we can make things happen that day, whether it be to call in an outreach worker, to install alarms or do other crime prevention work or carry out some target-hardening work, things that cannot be done by the uniform officers on the scene in the middle of the night.

“And we are moving from being purely reactive to being proactive. By assessing people’s situations, we can work out whether they are at risk in the future and what we can do about it. It is about crime prevention as well as bringing cases to court.”

Detective Constable Paula Temperley says: “We try to take a positive approach. Often, police will be called in before there has been an assault. It might relate to a verbal argument and we can give advice in such situations.”

DC Constable Catherine Glass says: “It is about supporting the victims. By having a unit, they know that there is someone at the end of a phone if they have a problem and want to talk to someone.”

A crucial part of the system is the independent advocate, a role fulfilled by Julie Ferry, of the probation service. She says: “I represent the victim. I get involved at the point of charging and am able to help them through the judicial process.

“Also, sometimes people will tell me things that they would not tell a police officer. I am working for the victim and am able to help them through the judicial process.”

Talks are now under way to introduce specialist units in other parts of the force area and DI Malkin said: “I believe that this team is making a big difference and similar teams spread out throughout the force area will make a big difference for the many victims out there.”