



Respect briefing paper on unsafe domestic violence perpetrator interventions

August 2010

Introduction and background

This paper is for commissioners, the judiciary, policy makers, domestic violence practitioners and any agencies within the statutory or voluntary sectors working with domestic violence.

Respect is the UK membership association for domestic violence perpetrator programmes and associated support services. Our key focus is on increasing the safety and well-being of victims by promoting, supporting, delivering and developing effective interventions with perpetrators. Domestic violence is extremely dangerous - two women are killed every week and the lives of many thousands of victims and children are negatively impacted. Research shows that over 70% of women experience post-separation violence¹. It is vital that services working with perpetrators have safe working practices that take into account the very real risks faced by their partners, ex-partners and children. Respect is aware that not all services are working to the basic minimum standards regarding safety. These are:

1. The need for an integrated partner support service to be provided either by the agency itself or an agency working in partnership;
2. A system of risk assessment and management.

Integrated Support Service

An integrated support service (ISS) is a linked parallel service that runs alongside a perpetrator programme for the duration of a perpetrator's attendance. This service aims to have regular contact, either by telephone or face to face with both current and ex partners (particularly where there are children) to enable a better assessment of risk, to provide information about legal and support services, to provide where possible supportive counselling and to dispel any expectations of change being rapid or guaranteed.

Consequences of operating without an integrated support service

1. **Practitioners will not know if the client is continuing to abuse his (ex)partner and/or children and therefore cannot assess risk, change, safety or danger.** This means that they are more likely to assess a man inaccurately and to miss the dynamic and static risk factors indicating the level and type of risks he is currently posing. This in turn further isolates victims as they may feel that nothing will ever help them to be safe.
2. **The person using abuse can give his partner/ex-partner inaccurate or misleading**



information about the programme or what he is being told. This can include, for example, telling her that the programme leaders think she is to blame or that she has to modify her behaviour. This is likely to lead to unsafe decisions by victims and to help perpetrators justify any further abuse.

3. **Women do not know if their partner/ex-partner is attending the programme or not.** This makes them vulnerable to misinformation and to making decisions about their safety based on that misinformation.

Risk identification and management

We now know significantly more about risk factors and about circumstances that exacerbate the risks to victims. We also know more about how to assess and manage these. Working with perpetrators provides the opportunity to improve knowledge of risk and to manage it, a unique contribution to the processes of protecting victims and children. For example, clients often provide information to group workers about their current living arrangements, their contact with their partners, their mental state and other key risk indicators.

Gathering, considering and if necessary acting on this information can significantly improve protection and support for victims. It can also aid the process of working with perpetrators by helping them to consider the impact of their behaviour and develop non violent and non abusive behaviour patterns. Failure to act on significant information about risk factors undermines victim and child safety but also undermines the strength of the work with the perpetrator, as it allows clients to maintain their belief that they will face no negative consequences if they continue to pose a risk.

Funding, supporting, referring to or promoting organisations running perpetrator programmes without an integrated support service for partners and ex-partners **and** some form of risk assessment and management is dangerous for victims and children. This view is shared across both government and the violence against women sector.

We therefore make the following recommendations:

1. Organisations operating without proactive (ex)partner contact or effective risk management should be considered unsafe.
2. Practitioners who are currently choosing to operate without these two key elements need to suspend client work pending a review.
3. Agencies should avoid referring clients to services without these key elements and need to use their influence to try to persuade such services to suspend client work until these are in place.
4. Partners and ex-partners of perpetrators need to be informed about the dangers of their



abusive partner participating in services that operate in unsafe ways. They need to be supported if their partner does approach or participate in these services and offered information about their rights to protection and advocacy.

5. Referring agencies, funders, commissioners and others who have concerns about a particular agency offering perpetrator interventions need to ask that agency to provide information about their integrated support service and their risk management processes.
6. Referring agencies, funders and commissioners are recommended to contact Respect for further information about the appropriate standards or if they have concerns about perpetrator interventions that are not adhering to these safety issues.

The length of perpetrator programmes, both in actual duration and the length of time over which a client attends, has critical importance for ensuring the best possible conditions for a client to make long lasting changes to abusive behaviour. Current knowledge strongly suggests that programmes need to be at least 26 weeks duration to stand a reasonable chance of helping clients to make sustained changes.

National Standards for perpetrator programmes

Respect sets the National Service Standard (also known as the Respect Accreditation Standard; <http://www.respect.uk.net/pages/accreditation-project.html>) for voluntary sector organisations working with clients who have used or are using domestic violence. The Standard represents a clear statement, based on current evidence from research and practice, regarding what is necessary to ensure that:

- a) Victims and their children are not placed at increased risk as a consequence of an abusive partner participating in (or approaching) a domestic violence perpetrator programme;
- b) The conditions are in place to provide effective opportunities for people using violence in their relationships to end their violence and abusive behaviour and for victim and child safety to be maximised through the combination of services and activities

The Standard provides a framework for a range of interventions using different theoretical models, practical approaches and professional disciplines. The first organisations to achieve this Standard are of different sizes, structures and involve practitioners of various professional disciplines. **For further information contact** the Respect website: (<http://www.respect.uk.net/pages/accreditation-status.html>).

ⁱ Routes to Safety (Women's Aid 2002)