



Ciara Leeming looks into the many schemes that rehabilitate perpetrators of domestic violence and why lack of funding is jeopardising progress

# Ending abuse

**It was during a particularly nasty row with his wife that Jim realised he needed help.**

"I caught myself with my hands around her neck one night – and that really frightened me," recalls the former bodybuilder, who works as a civil servant in the North West.

"She'd come in late after going for a drink with her workmates, and I just lost it. I remember throwing the TV remote control at her and smashing a foot stool to bits on the floor. Then I put my hands around her neck.

"That's when I realised I had to do something about this anger of mine, which had got worse and worse throughout our marriage. I knew that if I didn't, one day I'd really hurt her."

In some ways Jim was lucky. His wife did not report the attack – or earlier incidents – to

police and he managed to get a place on a domestic abuse perpetrators programme after being referred by a counsellor at Relate. For six months, he attended a weekly session together with other abusive partners – all of them there of their own accord.

His 18-year marriage did not survive, but he firmly believes that course saved his life. He says: "I honestly believe I would have ended up in prison if I'd carried on – I don't know what I would have been capable of.

"Those sessions were very painful, and we'd often all be sitting there in tears. I saw the effect my aggressive behaviour had been having on myself, my wife and my children.

"My first reaction when things went wrong had always been anger, and I was controlling and manipulative.

"It's been a long, slow process but I now feel I have a new perspective on life and believe that if and when I do meet someone else, I'll be a different person."

Domestic abuse is a serious issue. Two women each week are killed by a partner, and it's estimated that one in four will be affected over their lifetime. One in six men are also thought to be victims.

Although massively under-reported, "domestics" account for 16 per cent of all violent crime. Figures released in May revealed that police forces across the north dealt with almost 146,000 incidents of domestic violence during 2006/07 – up from 116,500 two years earlier.

By far the highest number took place in Greater Manchester – where officers dealt





with a staggering 64,700 cases in 2006/07.

In response, the government has made domestic abuse a priority and spent £14 million bringing in special measures to combat the problem.

Its 2004 national action plan gave new powers to the police and introduced specialist domestic violence courts designed to fast-track offenders through the system. By the end of this year, 100 will be in action.

While prosecution is paramount, rehabilitation is also vital. Domestic abuse is highly complex, and rarely the result of a one-off incident. Police are called repeatedly to deal with the same people and re-offending rates are high.

Part of the approach involves working with perpetrators to challenge their behaviour and bring about change. Such programmes have been running in the US and Australia for decades but are relatively new in Britain.

Here, the courses fall into two categories. While some abusers end up in Probation Service-led treatment programmes as a result of contact with the criminal justice system, others – like Jim – refer themselves to one of a handful of independent community-based projects, accredited by the umbrella organisation Respect. All are under pressure from funding shortages.

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Domestic violence consultant Wendy Bateman, a former nurse from Cheshire, has run self-referral programmes across the north, including several over recent years in east Lancashire and rural Cumbria.

She works with male and female abusers, gay and straight, and has seen clients aged from 18 to 65. She passionately believes abusers should be given the opportunity to change.

"You do get a lot of people who are sceptical about the idea that a violent partner can change their ways. But the people we're working with have usually reached a stage in their life where they are recognising the harm they are bringing into their relationships and



**Harry Fletcher: wants more funding for treatment orders**

want do something about it," she says.

The problem is that with just 37 self-referral projects across all of England and Wales, those who want help are often forced to go without.

In the north, there are programmes in Pendle, Liverpool, Yorkshire and Cumbria but all are over-subscribed and have long waiting lists. In Greater Manchester the only courses available are run by probation.

"There just aren't enough of these programmes to meet people's needs," admits Bateman. "Often we get people travelling two or three hours each way to attend our sessions. That's how much some people want to make these changes.

"The other challenge we face is one of funding. Often the programmes are funded by charitable organisations but there are conditions attached – perhaps that users come from a certain geographical area. That means that people living outside that district either have to pay or can't access services at all.

"And because these projects are funded in the way they are, their financial situation can be precarious. You may get a programme in a certain area for two or three years, but when the money runs out and funders' priorities change, it then has to close down. It's hardly an ideal situation."

That we are in this situation in 21st century Britain is a scandal in itself. "We shouldn't have to wait until people arrive at Relate or in the criminal justice system, before they get help – it should be there for all who need it," Bateman says.

"Domestic violence comes at a price – there are costs to the NHS of treating the victim, their employer, their children's education and so on. Prevention is vital for all involved and will lessen the impact for society as a whole."

The probation-led Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) is also showing cracks. Piloted in West Yorkshire in 2001, and modelled on a successful project which





## Violent lives

Although domestic abuse is chronically under reported, research estimates that 77 per cent of victims are women.

It has more repeat victims than any other crime. On average there will have been 35 assaults before a victim calls the police.

One incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute.

ran in Minnesota, USA, two decades previously, the scheme is so under-staffed and under-resourced that fewer than half of all men ordered to attend the 27-week courses complete them. Those programmes cost between £8,000 and £10,000 each.

Jo Todd, director of Respect, raised concerns about the situation when she appeared before the Home Affairs Select Committee earlier this year.

"We are aware of certain areas that have got very long waiting lists where [probation] have even told the magistrates courts 'do not bother referring. We have closed the waiting list.' You cannot even make an order to a programme," she warned.

In a recent survey by the Probation Service union, Napo, staff in South Yorkshire reported waiting times of at least six months for offenders ordered to complete a course. Only those deemed at "high risk of serious harm" – in other words still living with their partner – can now be offered a place. Psychologists are no longer available for domestic violence groups.

In one reported case, a man who had punched his partner several times in the face was denied treatment because he was not deemed to be of sufficiently high risk.

Similarly, in Greater Manchester, probation service managers have also deemed that only those at high risk can attend treatment programmes, while those at lower risk get more limited one-to-one work.

Some fear such failings are having an effect on victim safety. Although there has been no systematic research on their effectiveness, anecdotal evidence suggests the courses work. Outcome evaluations by the Domestic

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With Napo members reporting waits from 33 to 208 weeks until courses start – depending on the area – some abusers are likely to return to the family home and continue being violent.

The union's assistant director-general, Harry Fletcher, says: "We thoroughly approve of the increase in domestic violence courts, but the problem is that lots more treatment orders are now being made – with no equivalent rise in resources for probation to deal with those. Surely someone should have thought this through.

"Virtually every area of England is seeing big delays before offenders can begin on these programmes. In some cases probation orders are actually expiring before their courses start, and in others treatment is being rationed.

"We fear that all this means abusers are more likely to go home and start being violent all over again. If a court makes an order in January and the offender is still waiting to get on their course come November, the motivation's not going to be there.

"The government must allocate more resources, so we can train enough staff to tackle this backlog."

Such concerns have now been echoed by the influential Home Affairs Committee – chaired by Labour MP Keith Vaz – which has spent months on an inquiry into domestic abuse.

In their report *Domestic Violence, Forced Marriage and "Honour"-based Violence*, which came out last month, members call for the "desperate shortage" of perpetrator programmes to be urgently addressed.

The report says: "This is an unacceptable situation. Once research currently being undertaken by the [probation] service to identify the full extent of under-capacity has been completed, the government urgently needs to find the resources to fill the gap.

"The costs of failing to protect victims from further attack by tackling the root causes of domestic violence are far greater than the cost of funding sufficient programmes."

The committee also calls for more funding to be made available to community-based programmes aimed at addressing behaviour. "Ironically, those without convictions who are not eligible for the statutory programmes may well be less hardened offenders and more willing to address their behaviour," they warn.

While the government is aware of the problem it refutes allegations that failure to deliver such programmes is placing anyone at risk.

The Ministry of Justice says that while in some areas demand for the domestic abuse programmes is "outstripping" places, the problem is being tackled.

"We are refining the process of assessing offenders to ensure that only those who will benefit from an intensive programme are recommended for it," a spokeswoman says.

*\*Not every area has a domestic abuse perpetrator programme. For details of courses, contact the Respect information line on 0845 122 8609 or visit [www.respect.uk.net](http://www.respect.uk.net)*