



Ask and Take Action

Why public services must
ask about domestic abuse

A report by Agenda, the
alliance for women and
girls at risk

August 2019



“We remain clear that tackling VAWG is ‘everyone’s business’, and all government departments, local agencies, specialist third sector organisations and the public have an important role to play.”

HM Government, Refreshed Ending VAWG Strategy, March 2019¹

“no one even bothered, even when I went to hospital when my tooth got knocked out, even then they never even bothered to refer you.”

Woman with lived experience²

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Executive summary

There is a growing political consensus that domestic abuse should be everyone's business.⁴ The Domestic Abuse Bill, introduced in July 2019, is a once in a generation opportunity to make this a reality.

Victims and survivors of domestic abuse may access a range of public services – from the health system to social services. These services have a vital role to play in recognising the signs of abuse and ensuring survivors get the support they need.

Yet evidence shows that public services are failing to pick up domestic abuse and respond appropriately. This means many survivors are passed from service to service before finally getting the support they need, causing years of preventable hurt and even putting lives at risk.

It's clear that public services need to transform their approach to domestic abuse. Asking victims and survivors about their experiences of domestic abuse in a trained and compassionate way is crucial to ensuring they get the support they need at the earliest possible opportunity.

That's why we're calling for *Ask and Take Action* – a duty on public authorities to ensure frontline staff make trained enquiries into domestic abuse, backed by sufficient funding to make this a reality.

Evidence suggests victims and survivors want to be asked about their experiences of abuse,⁵ and existing examples of good practice outlined in this report show that ensuring frontline staff ask about domestic abuse is possible. This campaign builds on 'Ask and Act' in Wales, whereby frontline staff in public services are trained to ask about domestic abuse.

Attempts have been made to ensure staff in some public services ask about domestic abuse. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines currently state that staff in all mental health services should be making trained enquiries into experiences of domestic abuse among all those accessing their service⁶ – in recognition of the high rates of violence and abuse experienced by people who access mental health services.⁷ This is especially true for women; 38 per cent of women who have a mental health problem have experienced domestic abuse.⁸

Yet evidence set out in this report highlights that despite these guidelines, in many mental health services patients are still not being asked about abuse.

We found:

- Of 42 trusts that responded to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request by Agenda, 15 had no policies on routine enquiry about domestic abuse. Twenty Five trusts which responded had a policy on routine enquiry.
- Where trusts do have policies on routine enquiry the effectiveness of these policies varies considerably with one trust asking just 3% of patients about experiences of domestic abuse – when they should be asking everyone.
- There is significant variation in the number of instances of domestic abuse flagged by mental health trusts – suggesting that trusts are not asking about domestic abuse or collecting data in a uniform way.
- The vast majority of trusts had no policies on offering proactive support within their services to patients who disclose domestic abuse with many depending on the support of specialist domestic and sexual abuse services in the voluntary sector to respond to patients identified as having experienced domestic abuse.



It's clear that guidelines aren't enough. That's why we need a statutory duty on public authorities to ensure that staff are trained to enquire about domestic abuse – and to ensure enquiries are being made.

We want to see services **Ask** about domestic abuse – **and Take Action** upon the disclosures when they are made. We need to see substantial investment to accompany this duty, to ensure that staff are trained and confident to make enquiries, and survivors are able to access the right support.

We also need an approach tailored to each public service. Because of the prevalence of domestic abuse among the client group of some services – such as mental health or criminal justice - routine enquiry, whereby all service users are asked about their experiences of domestic abuse, in the right environment and by a trained and compassionate member of staff, may be appropriate. Other services will need to take a more targeted approach, for example only asking about domestic abuse where they notice signs and indicators.

Our proposal is that the Domestic Abuse Bill will create should allow consultation with services and experts from the VAWG sector, before robust and comprehensive guidance on implementing the duty in practice is introduced. The proposed Domestic Abuse Commissioner within the Domestic Abuse Bill should have the statutory powers to ensure that any duty is correctly implemented.

It is important to recognise that a duty to ask is not a duty to disclose, and this should never mean that any survivor – whether they disclose domestic abuse or not – should be left to cope alone. Context, environment, tone, and trust are all crucial to encouraging disclosure, but some women will not be ready to share their experiences or may not be asked at the right time for them.

Agenda is calling for:

- ⚙️ **The Domestic Abuse Bill to be amended to implement a statutory duty on public authorities to ensure staff make trained enquiries about domestic abuse, and respond appropriately** with proper pathways into support that takes into account the trauma they have experienced.
- ⚙️ **Government to back this duty with sufficient funding.** Any enquiries into abuse must be accompanied by robust training and support for staff to identify and respond to disclosures in a safe and supportive way. We need to see investment in referral pathways and specialist support so that staff are able to get survivors the support they need. **We support calls from across the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector for substantial investment in specialist services for victims, children and perpetrators of domestic abuse.**
- ⚙️ **All public services must respond appropriately to disclosures of domestic abuse,** both on an individual level by ensuring survivors get the support they need, and on a strategic level, including through operating in a trauma-informed way.⁹ **This must be accompanied by data collection on enquiries into domestic abuse, and responses,** to inform the picture of the levels of abuse in this country and help our services adapt as a result.

References

1. HM Government (2016), [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2016 – 2020](#)
2. Agenda and AVA (2019), [Breaking Down the Barriers: Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage](#)
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4. HM Government (2016), [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2016 – 2020](#)
5. Feder G, Hutson M, Ramsay J and Taket AR (2006) Women exposed to intimate partner violence: Expectations and experiences when they encounter health care professionals: A meta-analysis of qualitative studies, Archives of Internal Medicine, 166 (1) 22 – 37.
6. NICE (2014), PH50, Domestic violence and abuse: multi-agency working. [Recommendation 6](#)
7. REVA (2015), [Guidance for Trust managers: Implementing and sustaining routine enquiry about violence and abuse in mental health services](#)
8. Scott, S. & McManus, S. (2016) [Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women](#) (DMSS research for Agenda) [Data tables appendix](#), Table 38
9. Trauma-informed approaches to care aim to reduce or eradicate re-traumatisation, coercion and control. Sweeney, A; Clement, S; Filson, B; Kennedy, A (2016), ["Trauma-informed mental healthcare in the UK: what is it and how can we further its development?"](#), Mental Health Review Journal, Vol. 21 Issue: 3, pp.174-192





Agenda is grateful to the following funders for their kind support:



The Pilgrim Trust

Published by Agenda
August 2019
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Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. We work to get systems and services transformed, to raise awareness across sectors and to promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.

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