

**Reducing
the Risk**
of Domestic Abuse



‘Reducing the Risk’ IDVA Court Service Report

Evaluation of pilot project in Oxfordshire

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Introduction

This report describes and evaluates the pilot Court IDVA service run by Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse Oxfordshire in the first 13 months of its operation.

The Court IDVA service was established to work with victims of domestic abuse in Oxford's domestic abuse court within Oxford Magistrates Court¹ and in the Crown Court. The primary goal of the service was to support victims through the court process, relieving fear and anxiety and promoting their safety and wellbeing. It was believed support of this kind for victims would have a positive impact on the justice process.

A second goal was to assess any further needs of victims (particularly those not already supported by domestic abuse professionals) and link them with resources which could help them rebuild their lives. Reducing the Risk also envisaged potential to build connections and work more closely with the police, and in particular the uniformed, non-specialist police, to help increase the safety of victims at different levels of risk.

This evaluation of the pilot project is based on:

- Observation of the Court IDVA's work²;
- Regular discussions with the Court IDVA throughout the pilot to analyse the work she undertook, the impact of the service and outcomes for victims;
- Feedback from victims³;
- Interviews with and feedback from other actors in the justice system.

From this data, this report describes the role a Court IDVA can play, and that the Court IDVA in this pilot project did play, in court proceedings involving allegations of domestic abuse. It sets out in detail the functions that a Court IDVA undertakes both in the lead-up to a criminal trial and on the day of trial and it describes the work of the Court IDVA in civil proceedings and family proceedings.

Key findings:

- The large majority (~ 90%) of victims were safer and more confident as a result of Court IDVA support;
- The justice system benefitted from the Court IDVA's work - but for the Court IDVA's involvement, victims would have withdrawn their support from the prosecution process in a number of cases;
- A broad range of victims were assisted, including those who had not previously been supported by domestic abuse specialists (or other services);
- The Court IDVA's expertise in the justice process and regular presence at court has self-reinforcing benefits: this focus means the Court IDVA can more easily assist the court, which in turn both benefits victims and helps ensure perpetrators are held to account.

¹ Oxford Magistrates Court dedicates a court room every other Thursday to domestic abuse cases; in this report this is referred to as the DA court.

² 3 days accompanying the Court IDVA at Oxford Magistrates Court, 1 day at Oxford Crown Court.

³Where victims offered feedback this was collated but we did not attempt to survey victims or to collect quantitative data.

This report covers the period from the first referral to the Court IDVA service in September 2020 to the end of September 2021.

The report also evaluates a pilot project which Reducing the Risk established with Thames Valley Police which took place between February and December 2021 (overlapping with the Court IDVA pilot project). In this pilot, in every case in which they issued a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN), Thames Valley Police referred the victim to the Court IDVA. It was envisaged that, through this project, the Court IDVA would be connected to a broad range of victims including those who had not previously received specialist domestic abuse support, allowing her to use the opportunity created by the Notice to reassure, advise on safety and explore longer term options for safety and wellbeing.

About the Service: overview

Reducing the Risk's Court IDVA pilot project was due to launch in March 2020. The Covid pandemic led to the closure of the criminal courts between March and August 2020. This meant that the Court IDVA service launched in September 2020 (later than planned) when the courts reopened.

The Court IDVA received 173 referrals over the period 7/9/2020 (the first referral) to 30/9/2021⁴. 11 of the 173 referrals fell outside of the service remit (e.g. the victim lived out of area), and in 15 of the referrals the client did not engage. The Court IDVA was therefore actively engaged in 147 referrals in the period under review. The level of her involvement in a case ranged from extensive (advice, support, safety planning, attendance at trial, assisting in preparing Victim Personal Statements, making onwards referrals) to relatively brief (e.g. a single session of advice by telephone).

Originally it was envisaged that the Court IDVA service would focus exclusively on cases in the criminal courts and on criminal law issues, and this was reflected in Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse's bid for Trust funding for the pilot. In the event, the work of the Court IDVA has been wider than this: the service has supported domestic abuse victims in the criminal, civil and family courts.

The work of the Court IDVA in the civil courts was partly a response to the closure, due to Covid, of the criminal courts and the fact that, even after the criminal courts reopened in September 2020, Covid restrictions initially meant only half of available court rooms were in use. This caused a lag in the volume of criminal cases in the courts: it took time for the momentum of criminal cases to build. These delays made it even more imperative to keep victims safe in the community. Unlike the criminal courts, the civil and family courts operated online through the pandemic, and the Court IDVA supported victims to use the orders available in these courts to help keep them safe.

As the momentum of criminal cases built once the courts reopened, criminal cases became a higher proportion of the Court IDVA's workload. In September 2021, due to the increasing overall caseload, the decision was taken that the service would focus on cases in the criminal courts and applications for non-molestation orders in the civil courts, and would not continue to be involved in cases being heard in the family courts.

⁴ This compares with the 50 envisaged in the funding bid as the total for the first year.

Originally it was envisaged that a significant proportion of victims supported by the Court IDVA would be medium or standard-risk victims who would not have had, nor have been eligible for, non-Court IDVA support (non-Court IDVAs are assigned only to high risk cases). Again in part due to the pandemic, initially the pattern of referrals was not as predicted. During the height of the pandemic, the volume of high-risk victims requiring protective orders to keep them safe meant that most referrals to the service were high-risk victims. Overtime, the proportion of medium and standard risk referrals to the Court IDVA service increased, partly as a result of the receding impact of the pandemic and partly as familiarity with the service grew among a range of agencies which interact with medium and standard risk victims.

During the pilot Thames Valley Police Protecting Vulnerable People (PVP) also approached Reducing the Risk to pilot an additional initiative. It was agreed that Thames Valley Police would refer cases where they issued a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) for short term constraint on the perpetrator to the Court IDVA for her to contact and support the victim. Please see pages 16-18 for details.

Not all cases referred to the Court IDVA resulted in a court hearing – some police investigations resulted in no further action; some clients decided against applying for protective orders in the civil courts or shied-away from bringing family proceedings. Whether or not a court hearing took place, the Court IDVA was able to support all service-users with advice, emotional support, safety-planning, and, where appropriate, signposting to other services.

Irrespective of whether a court hearing took place, the cases referred to the Court IDVA can be categorised according to whether the referral related to the work of the criminal, civil or family courts. A single referral could relate to the work of more than one court. For example, a non-molestation order might be sought from the civil courts while criminal proceedings are ongoing. Over the period under review, the distribution of criminal, civil and family related referrals was as follows:

Criminal	74
Civil	76
Family	61

Going forward, it is likely that the majority of the Court IDVA's work will relate to criminal cases.

About the Service: criminal cases

Outcomes of criminal cases

Of the 74 criminal cases referred to the Court IDVA in the period under review, 34 cases have concluded by reaching a verdict, 21 cases are ongoing, and 10 cases were discontinued before a verdict was reached. In 8 cases the Court IDVA was unable to assist: in 4 the victim would not engage with the Court IDVA; in 2 the referrals came from domestic abuse professionals who in the event were able to support the victims themselves; 1 case was out of the area; and in 1 the referral was not accepted because the behaviour that was subject to the trial was not domestic abuse. Of the 34 cases where a verdict has been reached: 11 resulted in guilty pleas, 17 in guilty verdicts and 6 in not guilty verdicts.

Assistance provided by the IDVA in criminal cases

The range of assistance a Court IDVA service can provide to victims involved in criminal cases, and that the Court IDVA in this pilot project gave to those referred to her, is described below under the headings 'support before trial' and 'support on the day of trial'. The overall impact of this support in terms of wellbeing is discussed in the section headed 'Impact of the service: Impact on victims' safety and emotional wellbeing' below.

Support before trial

Victims of domestic abuse are likely to have high levels of anxiety about attending court in support of a prosecution. Sadly, the anxiety that many victims feel about attending court is not misplaced: it is well known that attending court can be a re-traumatising experience.⁵ Supporting a prosecution may place victims at increased risk of abuse or intimidation.⁶

As soon as a case is referred to the Court IDVA she can take steps to increase the safety and reduce the anxiety of victims.

Bail hearings and safety planning

The defendant in domestic abuse proceedings will, like all defendants, be either held on remand or bailed or released under investigation (RUI) pending trial. Defendants held on remand can apply to be released on bail. If the defendant is bailed (either police or court bail), conditions may be imposed. Knowing that a defendant is held on remand, or is subject to stringent bail conditions, can have a significant impact on a victim's safety and wellbeing.

There is no right of the victim to be consulted in relation to bail decisions: the police and the courts will not generally, and certainly not as of right, hear from the victim. Under the Victims' Code, there is a right to be informed of forthcoming court dates,⁷ but this is insufficient to ensure the victim will necessarily have advance notice of an application by the defendant to be released on bail or released from bail conditions. There is a right to be informed of the outcome of bail decisions after the event.⁸ Generally this means only that the Witness Care Unit will contact victims within 5 days of that Unit receiving information from the court.

The result is that a defendant in domestic abuse proceedings who has been held on remand can be released without the victim having any say or notice. Bail conditions can be imposed, varied, or discharged without the victim's input or knowledge. Safety planning for victims in these circumstances is compromised.

As a result of the Court IDVA's regular attendance at court, including at the DA court, she is able to keep track of bail applications in domestic abuse cases. This allowed her, in the period under review, to warn victims if defendants were about to be released on bail, and to safety plan with them. In one case she also gave information to the court at a bail hearing, that the

⁵ See e.g. <https://safelives.org.uk/understanding-court-support/press-release> and <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Court%20Support%20Mapping%20Report%20-%20DAC%20Office%20and%20SafeLives.pdf>

⁶ As acknowledged by the Crown Prosecution Service – see CPS Legal Guidance on Domestic Abuse, section headed 'The impact and dynamics of domestic abuse' [here](#).

⁷ Paragraph 8.1 of the code, which can be found here https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974376/victims-code-2020.pdf

⁸ Victims' Code paragraphs 6.1, 6.13, 8.1 and 9.10

victim in that case was high risk – information that would not otherwise have been available to the court. In another case, she was able to check the address that the defendant gave as an address for bail, and in another she was the point of liaison allowing arrangements to be made for a defendant who was subject to bail conditions to collect his belongings. The Court IDVA hears and speaks for the victim at bail hearings, prioritising their safety in the process.

In some cases where bail conditions were inadequate from the perspective of the victims' safety, the Court IDVA applied for non-molestation orders from the civil courts pending criminal proceedings. More is said about this below in relation to the civil work of the Court IDVA.

Keeping the victim informed about the progress of their case before trial

Victims have rights under the Victims' Code to be kept informed by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service about specific aspects of the progress of their case.⁹ Whether or not this right is upheld, the Court IDVA greatly enhanced the flow of information to victims referred to the service during the pilot project by: updating them on the day of a hearing; relaying the full context of the hearing and factors that may be important to the victim (e.g. the defendant's demeanour); responding empathetically to the victim; being a single, consistent point of contact.

Talking through what to expect

The Court IDVA is available to explain what to expect as proceedings progress, and to answer victims' questions. Generally, while a defendant is legally represented, domestic abuse victims do not have a lawyer or representation in court (the prosecutor acts for the Crown, not the victim). The Court IDVA is the professional with knowledge of the court system who is present specifically to support the victim. In the criminal cases referred to the Court IDVA in the period under review, it was not uncommon for the Court IDVA to have multiple contacts¹⁰ (phone calls, text messages, emails and face to face conversations) with a victim, talking through what to expect in the run-up to a trial, and so helping to reduce their anxiety.

⁹ The Victim's code of conduct is here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime-in-england-and-wales-victims-code#right-8-to-be-given-information-about-the-trial-trial-process-and-your-role-as-a-witness>.

¹⁰ In one randomly chosen case, the number of contacts was 8.

Arranging pre-trial visits

The Witness Service (part of the Citizens Advice Bureau) is a volunteer-run organisation which arranges pre-trial court visits for witnesses. Over the period under review the Court IDVA conducted 11 court visits herself, in place of the Witness Service, where either it was not possible for the Witness Service to help, or where a consistent, sole point of contact for the victim had particular value. In cases in which she did not carry out the pre-trial visit herself, the Court IDVA knew the date and time at which the Witness Service was carrying out the pre-trial visit, and when possible (e.g. when she was present in the court building), she met the victim at their pre-trial visit. The Court IDVA's expertise is such that she can identify and respond to a domestic abuse victim's concerns during a court visit, which may be more acute or take a different form from victims of other crimes ("will I be able to hear his voice?"). The Witness Service itself referred a case to the Court IDVA in the period under review where it recognised that the victim would benefit from this facet of the Court IDVA's expertise.

Effect of pre-trial support

The role of the Court IDVA in supporting victims before trial makes victims' continued engagement in the prosecution more likely. Feedback received from victims during the pilot project includes comments that they would have withdrawn their support from the prosecution were it not for the Court IDVA's involvement.

Case study

The victim was terrified about supporting the prosecution of the perpetrator, and wanted to withdraw. The Court IDVA explained the court processes to her and eased her anxiety, responding to her questions over a period of time about what to expect, and meeting her emotional need for support and reassurance. In the event, the defendant / perpetrator pleaded guilty at the first hearing. The victim's verbal feedback to the Court IDVA at the closure of the case was that she wouldn't have supported the process without the Court IDVA's support.

Feedback

"I had a constant 'go-to' who gave me practical help and advice when everything was overwhelming, frightening, daunting and confusing. [The Court IDVA] was able to explain the process and where I would panic, she would be able to calm a situation by giving me the facts. I would have been lost without her and am eternally grateful to her."

In some cases, the fact of the victim continuing to support the prosecution led to guilty pleas by the defendant without the victim needing to give evidence at trial. At least three of the guilty pleas (out of the 11 guilty pleas in cases referred to the Court IDVA in the period under review) appeared to be made as a direct result of the victim attending court.

Case study

The Court IDVA had been supporting the victim in relation to a forthcoming criminal trial, including by ensuring special measures were put in place for when she gave evidence. When, through anxiety, the victim didn't attend court for the trial, she was summonsed to attend. The Court IDVA had discussed the application for the summons with the CPS: based on the Court IDVA's knowledge of the case and her judgement of the victim's emotional state, she had suggested that a summons may be helpful. Once issued, the

Court IDVA explained the summons to the victim and again talked her through attending court. On the day of the postponed trial, the Court IDVA collected the victim to bring her to court – thereby ensuring she did not breach the summons while being at her side throughout. The defendant changed his plea to guilty once the victim attended. The victim was not required to give evidence.

Support for the day of trial

The role that the Court IDVA plays in relation to the day of trial goes beyond that which non-specialist services could provide. She safety-plans for the journey to and from court, responds to the specific emotional needs of the victims, ensures special measures are in place, requests that orders are applied for the victim's benefit, and helps ensure the victim's voice is heard.

The Court IDVA attended 16 trials in the period under review.

Travelling to and arriving at court

The victim's anxiety may peak on the morning of trial. Generally, the Court IDVA will talk through with the victim how they will travel to court and make contact with them on the morning of the trial day. If it is difficult for the victim to travel to court, their emotional needs are particularly high, or there are safety concerns, the Court IDVA herself might drive the victim to court (she has done this approximately 8 times in the period under review). The Court IDVA is far more likely to have the victim's trust than other professionals involved in the court process, and will be best-placed to assess risks and make arrangements relating to travel to court.

Case study from the pilot project

The defendant was part of a close-knit community which included many of the area's taxi drivers. The Officer in Charge had assumed the victim could take a taxi to the court, but the Court IDVA recognised this would be impossible for the victim. She arranged to collect the victim herself.

If the defendant is not on remand, the victim might encounter him in the court entrance or waiting area. The Court IDVA makes arrangements for the victim to use separate entrances to the court, dedicated private waiting rooms, and back-routes to the court room.

Special measures

The importance of special measures at trial – giving evidence from behind a screen, or via a video link – is recognised in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which creates an automatic entitlement to special measures for victims of domestic abuse. While this statutory entitlement had not been brought into force during the period under review, the expectation has nevertheless been that domestic abuse victims would be offered special measures. During the period of this review the Court IDVA played a role in particular in prompting the application for special measures to be made in advance of the day of trial itself (so that the victim's anxiety, when anticipating giving evidence at trial, could be somewhat reduced). Special measures were features of all 16 trials which the Court IDVA attended during the pilot project.

Being alongside

The trial process, including being cross-examined by the defendant's lawyer, is at the least distressing for the victim, and can be retraumatising.

If the process of the victim giving evidence is not completed in one court session, the victim will be given a warning (known as the 'purdah warning') not to discuss their evidence with anyone until the evidence is completed at another court session. If the witness is in purdah overnight, they may be told they cannot stay with their friends or family, to avoid any appearance that they may have breached the requirement not to discuss their evidence.

While the Crown Prosecution Service has published new draft guidance on pre-trial therapy¹¹ which makes clear the welfare of victims is the priority, the existing guidance¹² which dates from 2002, has caused victims to be discouraged from receiving counselling or psychotherapy pending trial. It can take many months for a police investigation to reach trial.

The combined effect of the purdah warning and the absence of counselling or therapy is that, at the height of their distress relating to the court process, victims can be isolated from support. The imbalance - that the defendant has legal representation and victims do not - seems particularly acute at this point. In this context, the presence alongside them at trial of the Court IDVA is of huge value to victims.

Case Study

An extremely vulnerable victim was given the purdah warning and was told by the prosecution barrister that she could not stay with her family overnight while her evidence was progressing. She was giving evidence of rape. She had been discouraged from having therapy by the police during their investigation. She had disclosed suicidal thoughts. The defendant (and his family) knew the victim's whereabouts. The Court IDVA drove her to and from court on each day of trial, and also offered to stay with her overnight.

Ensuring the victim is heard

Victim personal statements (VPS) help give the victim a voice in criminal proceedings. They can be a rare positive in victims' experience of the criminal justice process.¹³

Victims should first be given the opportunity to make a VPS when giving an evidential statement to the police, and it is often the police who will take down the statement. However, the process of making a VPS can be emotionally challenging, and not all victims will make a statement when initially given the chance to do so. There may not be a subsequent opportunity to make a VPS to the police, and even if there is, some victims will only feel comfortable talking through the impact of abuse with a specialist professional.

¹¹ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/draft-guidance-pre-trial-therapy>

¹² <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/therapy-provision-therapy-vulnerable-or-intimidated-adult-witnesses>

¹³ The Victim Commissioner Baroness Newlove has commended on "the crucial importance in offering a VPS to all victims" and said "I know first-hand many victims cherish their opportunity to share their experiences in the knowledge that the court has listened, and it counts for something."

<https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/vc-finds-little-progress-made-in-the-offer-of-victim-personal-statements/>

The involvement of the Court IDVA generates a further chance for the victim to make a VPS (or to amend one). The Court IDVA has been involved in writing a victim personal statement in 11 of the criminal cases referred to her in the period under review.

Feedback

Being called to give evidence in court against my son's Dad [was] nerve-wracking, I wasn't sure what to expect and was in two minds about attending. I'm now so glad that I did as I received some great support which helped me to prepare the best evidence I could. I was able to edit my Victim Impact statement at court to make clear that despite the abuse I suffered, my son's Dad needs help, not prison. My son needs his Dad in his life as a positive role-model, which I know he can be if he resolves anger issues. I wanted his Dad to take responsibility for his actions, which he has finally done today, after 8 months of waiting for him to turn up at court.

My Domestic Abuse caseworker and Court IDVA supported me every step of the way, reassuring me that everything would be ok and they made me feel as comfortable as possible. I'm proud for having the strength to come to court and give evidence and I'm grateful for the support received. I just hope more women and men like myself will find the power to do the same.

Restraining orders

Restraining orders (ROs) are a key tool in ensuring the safety of victims at the conclusion of criminal proceedings: they can include prohibitions on the defendant contacting the victim or going to specified addresses (actions which, in normal circumstances, would not be unlawful), breach of those prohibitions constitutes an offence, and the RO is registered with the police.

During the pilot project, the Court IDVA helped ensure that an RO was applied for in every case where it could help protect the victim. Of the 34 criminal cases referred to the Court IDVA where a verdict has been reached, an RO was issued by the court in 19. Because of the Court IDVA's close relationship with the victim, she was able to ensure that ROs were worded optimally from the perspective of the victim. For example, the Court IDVA added zonal orders to ROs and orders dealing with child contact - matters which the prosecutor might have missed. On one occasion the Court IDVA prevented an RO from including information which might undermine the victim's safety – as originally drafted the RO included the victim's address, when this was – and needed to remain - unknown to the perpetrator.

RO's are more commonly made where the outcome of a criminal trial is a guilty plea or verdict, but they may also be made after an acquittal. In three criminal cases during the pilot project the Court IDVA prompted the CPS to apply for an RO after an acquittal, and in one of these cases the RO was granted. This represents a victim-focussed use of the court's jurisdiction, initiated by the presence in court of someone for whom the victim's safety and wellbeing was the primary consideration.

Because the service focuses on the ongoing safety of the victim beyond the conclusion of the criminal trial, 5 of the criminal cases involved the Court IDVA making applications for a variation of an RO, recognising that changes to an existing RO were needed to maintain the victim's safety.

Relaying verdicts and sentencing

Verdicts are often handed down when the victim is not present at court. Sentences are frequently handed down some time after the trial date, and, since the defendant will be present at sentencing, victims generally choose not to attend.

Because the Court IDVA is frequently based at court, she may be able to attend verdict and sentencing hearings on the victim's behalf. Even if this is not possible, she will keep track of the hearing dates, and contact the Witness Care Unit to obtain verdict and sentence information. She then ensures that the victim is kept informed in a timely and empathetic manner. For instance, in one case during the pilot project the Court IDVA had to relay the potentially devastating news of a not guilty verdict. Because she had attended the hearing at which the verdict was handed down she was able to relay the context of the court's verdict to the victim: she explained that the result was not due to the victim being disbelieved. She also spoke to the victim about the option of applying for a non-molestation order in the civil courts. In relaying sentences, the Court IDVA can discuss implications for the victim's safety (e.g. the defendant's likely release date from prison, and how to keep in touch with the Probation Service). *In these ways, the scope of the Court IDVA and associated capacity to promote the victim's wellbeing, is significantly wider than that of the role of the Witness Care Unit.*

Effects of support at trial

The 2021 Victim Survey shows how negative victims' experience of the criminal justice system generally is.¹⁴ There is good reason to believe that victims of domestic abuse and sex crimes may have particularly poor experiences.

This report did not survey service users as the national Victim Survey does, but the design of the service, as set out above, is intended to improve victims' experiences of court, and feedback received strongly suggests that it has met this aim.

Feedback *Our court case was in September 2020 and between March and September we were assigned an IDVA and she was absolutely fantastic. Even during the pandemic and an increase in referrals, she always made me feel that she had my back. [She] made everything seem much clearer or she was able to advise and reassure to get me through the next day/week/hurdle. She was there at court with us and provided a huge support to us both, but especially to my daughter who found great comfort in her being there with her (us). [The Court IDVA] phoned when she said she would, she checked in with me at various times and gave me prompt, no-messing advice, which is really what I needed. I was so grateful to [the Court IDVA] and to Reducing the Risk for giving us this support. Being stuck in the middle of a pandemic ...and dealing with the biggest situation of our personal lives with such uncertainty not just with the pandemic but as to where our short term future would be and worrying whether he would walk in the door at home at any time, dealing with nightmares [...] on a nightly basis, getting us [...] the therapy we needed - obviously I could go on (you get the gist)..... But there was one constant - our [Court] IDVA.*

¹⁴ <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/2021-victim-survey/>

About the service: civil cases

76 of the cases referred to the Court IDVA in the period under review involved support relating to civil court orders. The role that civil court orders play in protecting victims of domestic abuse is described below and the civil court work of the Court IDVA in this pilot is reviewed.

Orders in the civil courts

Orders relevant to domestic abuse victims in the civil courts include non-molestation orders and occupation orders. Non-molestation orders prohibit the respondent from carrying out certain behaviour such as contacting the claimant (victim) or entering the street on which they live. Occupation orders regulate who may live in a property – and may exclude a legal owner from their home.

Breach of either an occupation order or a non-molestation order is a criminal offence and a power of arrest attaches to the order, which means they can be a powerful tool for keeping a victim safe.

Where it is not clear that the behaviour involved has crossed the threshold into constituting a criminal offence, where there is insufficient evidence for a criminal prosecution of abusive behaviour, or where the prosecution has not been able to secure a conviction at trial, there may nevertheless be sufficient grounds and evidence for a non-molestation or occupation order.¹⁵ In addition, civil orders may be used in tandem with criminal proceedings – helping to protect a domestic abuse victim if bail conditions are not in place in the run up to a criminal trial, for example. It is a significant part of the service offered that the Court IDVA has been able to advise and support victims in relation to civil orders, in addition to her work in the criminal courts.

Civil orders will not always be a necessary part of the safety-toolkit if, for example, the victim has moved away from the area where the perpetrator lives or to an address unknown to them. They can be difficult to obtain if the relationship has not fully ended: non-molestation orders would in many (although not all) circumstances be difficult to enforce if the victim were to initiate contact with the perpetrator.

The Court IDVA's work in civil cases

In the period under review the Court IDVA helped victims apply for and secure 23 non-molestation orders or variations to non-molestation orders and 6 occupation orders. This involved completing the court application form and personal statement on behalf of the victim, and sitting alongside the victim at hearings where the civil court has considered the application. For most of the period under review, these hearings were held remotely, and the Court IDVA sat alongside the victim at a computer.

Also in the period under review the Court IDVA referred 14 victims to other agencies which could help them apply for civil orders. The majority of these referrals were made in respect of victims who were entitled to legal aid and made to legal aid family law solicitors. The remainder were to DV Assist which specialises in making non-molestation order applications in straightforward cases, and is a free service for clients.

¹⁵ Orders in the civil courts are based on whether the claimant has proved the relevant facts on the balance of probabilities.

30 victims, having received advice from the Court IDVA, either decided not to apply for a civil order or disengaged and could not be contacted further. Reflecting the dynamics of abusive relationships, those who decided not to apply did so most commonly because they were still in a relationship with the perpetrator. However in some cases the decision followed a change in circumstances which meant a protective order was no longer needed (e.g. where court bail in concurrent criminal investigations was extended).

The Court IDVA advised 5 victims that there was insufficient evidence or grounds to obtain a non-molestation order. Of these: in 2 cases she provided assistance and emotional support at a hearing, an application having been made prior to the referral; in 1 case the help sought was to clarify a pre-existing application to help ensure that the order was granted; and 1 case is still ongoing.

In all cases, the Court IDVA sustained involvement for as long as needed to safety plan with the victim, reassure them, and where appropriate refer them to other services for emotional and practical support. In all cases she advised on the steps to be taken should a civil order be breached to help ensure the orders are as effective as possible in securing victims' safety. She assisted in serving civil orders where it has been difficult to do so (e.g. because the respondent's address is unknown, or because the respondent had been avoiding service, or the victim could not afford to pay for service through an agent.)

Feedback

The Court IDVA advised and assisted victim to apply for a non-molestation order after a Domestic Violence Protection Order had expired, the victim having felt that the DVPO had been an effective deterrent.

The value of non-molestation orders as an option for elderly parents at risk through their children has been an emerging theme of the case work of the Court IDVA.

I would like to thank you so much for all the help and support you have given me with my non-molestation order against [...], without your help, support and understanding I would not have had the courage to do this and I also would not have known I could do this without you letting me know. No one told me about the help that is out there.

I hope this will make [...] realise that it is not acceptable behaviour and the way his actions makes me feel, being scared to come home and not know what mood he is going to be in is not nice and is at times really scary.

People don't understand how hard it is when it is a family member that is violent but I have felt that you have had an understanding and have been there for me thank you so much.

About the service: family cases

The decision was taken in September 2021 for the service to focus exclusively on cases in the civil and criminal courts. This decision was taken because of the increasing workload in those jurisdictions so that the service did not have capacity for a family court service, and because of the length and complexity of proceedings in the family court.

Nevertheless, many service users have deep and pervasive fears about the safety and wellbeing of their children, and the real difficulties faced by victims of domestic abuse in the family court are well-known. A recent report concluded that the family court systematically

minimises or disbelieves allegations of abuse; victims experience difficulties evidencing abuse, particularly where the court focusses on single incidents of recent physical abuse; and evidence presented in the criminal courts might not be acknowledged or effectively engaged with in the family court.¹⁶

In the period under review, the Court IDVA was able to provide reassurance and support to 31 victims undergoing hearings in the family courts. The range of hearings covered fact finding hearings (where the family court sought to establish whether domestic abuse had taken place), hearings to determine the living arrangements for children, hearings to establish who has parental responsibility for children, and care proceedings. Family hearings are usually private to the parties. Nevertheless, the Court IDVA was given judicial permission to attend hearings alongside victims on 6 occasions. In other cases she provided advice and support outside the hearing. She made onward referrals for support where appropriate.

Going forward, while the Court IDVA service is not taking referrals for cases being heard in the family court, the Court IDVA will still be able to give limited advice and support where there are family proceedings alongside civil or criminal cases with which the service is engaged. Reducing the Risk will explore the possibility of establishing a family Court IDVA service in future – linking with a current Ministry of Justice pilot of family court services in two areas in the UK.¹⁷

Case study 4

The victim was seeking an order that the perpetrator have no contact with the child.

The Court IDVA was able to reduce the victim's anxiety about the hearing by explaining how the court could promote her safety and wellbeing, including through use of special measures to limit contact between her and the perpetrator, and by ensuring no information would be disclosed to the perpetrator which might reveal to him where she is now living.

On the day of the hearing the Court IDVA drove the victim to court. She sat with her during the hearing, at the end of which the court made an order for no contact between the perpetrator and his daughter.

Before the Court IDVA's involvement came to an end she assessed the victim's need for further support, and referred her to the Freedom Project and to Own my Life, and her daughter to SAFE.

Needs assessment and links with other resources

Reducing the Risk had envisaged that, through the relationship forged by court support, the Court IDVA would be in a position to assess further needs that service users may have. In the period under review the Court IDVA linked approximately 40 victims with further sources of support, encompassing:

- Referrals to specialist legal services – especially where the victim was entitled to legal aid;

¹⁶ see e.g. 'The Harm Report' <https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/assessing-harm-private-family-law-proceedings/>

¹⁷ www.gov.uk/government/news/pioneering-approach-in-family-courts-to-support-domestic-abuse-victims-better

- Referrals for ongoing domestic abuse support with domestic abuse outreach services;
- Referrals to ensure ongoing support for emotional wellbeing, including referrals to the Freedom Programme, Own My Life therapeutic groups, and to 'Safe' – a service for the emotional support of children. The Court IDVA has also made referrals to mental health services;
- Support related to establishing new homes, such as to the Citizens Advice and to housing services (in particular helping to organise further safety measures when service users had fled to another home, including raising flags with the police and in one instance arranging for the installation of a guard cam);
- Connecting victims to specialist medical support (e.g. a multiple sclerosis support group);
- Linking with a new local school and providing encouragement in seeking employment.

Sources of referrals to the service and service take up

Referrals to the Court IDVA service have come from a range of sources. The most common have been the police – both uniformed and the DAIU (~26 referrals); Witness Care Unit (~21); self-referral (21); ODAS (~16); and the IDVA service of RtR (~36). In addition, there have been referrals from Victims First (~8), and (fewer than 10 each) from Elmore, family members, housing, health, schools, and the voluntary sector.

The Court IDVA herself prompted some referrals to be made – when attending the DV court, she would follow-up with Witness Care Unit if a domestic abuse case was heard and a referral hadn't yet been made to her. As relationships have continued to strengthen with judges, magistrates, and court clerks, subsequent to the period covered by this review, the court itself has begun to refer cases to the Court IDVA.

One hoped for benefit from the service was the opportunity to reach victims who had not received specialist domestic abuse support previously. 21% of referrals have been from the high risk IDVA service itself. Most of these referrals were in the first half of the review period. This reflects the increased demand for Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse's services through the pandemic, and the time it took to build other agencies' awareness of the Court IDVA service. Over the period under review, the percentage of referrals from the high risk IDVA service fell. Overall, over 2/3rds of service users had not had specialist domestic abuse support before they referred themselves or were referred to the service. Going forward, it is anticipated that this figure will be higher.

Impact of the service

Impact on victim's safety and emotional wellbeing

It is clear that being advised by a domestic abuse specialist who has expertise in court processes, in safety planning, and in providing emotional support, can be transformative for victims. The service has turned their need for court support into an opportunity to also ensure their safety and build their confidence.

The Court IDVA provided safety planning and emotional support to all victims who engaged with the service. The majority were extremely anxious and fearful when referred or self-

referred. All had the opportunity to talk about their safety and develop new or updated safety plans and all were supported emotionally. Almost all of those who engaged are safer and more confident as a result¹⁸. This is true irrespective of the nature of the court advice provided or whether they were witnesses in a criminal case or seeking legal remedy through the civil or family court. The exceptions (around 10%) were service users who had significant mental health issues, or where support by another agency meant that confidence was already established. There were also a number of cases where the victim's experience of the criminal justice system was particularly difficult and further undermined their resilience.

One example is a case in which the criminal proceedings were adjourned twice after the trial had started. The process of the court hearing evidence stretched over months. The defendant was found not-guilty and no restraining order was made. The victim felt she had been disbelieved, and that this occurred in part because of the delays between her giving evidence and the defendant giving his evidence. The support of the Court IDVA could not fully mitigate the impact of this experience.

One notable feature of the service has been the ability of the Court IDVA to use civil orders to promote victims' safety in a way which dovetailed with the criminal process. Knowledge of the civil orders open to them helped the service users in the pilot project to become less anxious and more confident. Whether or not a civil order was applied for, advice given about non-molestation orders, combined with safety planning and support, was empowering for victims. The Court IDVA was able to identify victims who were particularly vulnerable and traumatised, provide immediate intense support to those victims, and then refer them to onwards services for practical, therapeutic or mental health support.

Feedback

'Thank you so much for all you have done. I would not have done it without you.'

'You are an angel. I don't think I would have been able to do this on my own'

Impact on criminal justice

The support the Court IDVA has given to victims in criminal hearings has ensured they in turn continue to support the criminal justice process. As described above in the section headed "Effects of pre-trial support", during the pilot project victims have commented that they would have withdrawn their support from the prosecution were it not for the Court IDVA's involvement. The victim simply showing up at court, with the support of the Court IDVA, appears to have led directly to a guilty plea in three cases.

Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse is aware of prosecutions in Oxford that have been discontinued because the victim arrived late on the day of trial. The role of the Court IDVA in supporting victims to attend court on the day of trial, including by collecting and driving them, has supported the justice process simply by avoiding this outcome.

The positive impact of the service on the criminal justice system is reflected in the support given to it by the judges sitting in the DA court. The Court IDVA has met with court judges and clerks who increasingly have involved her in court hearings, for example by consulting her in relation to the wording of restraining orders, or asking her to call a victim to discuss bail conditions. As the Court IDVA becomes more of an established presence at the DA court her integration in the court process is likely to increase. In the civil courts, Oxford's

¹⁸ Assessment conducted by the Court IDVA. Where feedback has been received directly from the victims this has aligned with the Court IDVA's assessment.

judges have helped to work around potential limits to the assistance which the Court IDVA could provide due to the General Data Protection Regulation, and the leadership judges have worked to make sure that all judges are aware of the role of the Court IDVA.

Impact on DAIU

The Domestic Abuse Investigations Unit (DAIU) within Thames Valley Police, which deals with high risk cases, are clear that the Court IDVA's involvement leads some victims to support prosecutions when they otherwise would not.¹⁹ While all high risk victims should be supported by an IDVA, court hearings are a 'crunch point' for high risk victims, and the DAIU values the particular focus on support through court proceedings offered by the Court IDVA. They point specifically to the impact the Court IDVA can have on the victims' safety and wellbeing pending trial by helping them to obtain orders in the civil courts, which in turn aids them to carry out their investigations.

The DAIU's practice is to refer *all* cases for which court hearing are pending to the Court IDVA.

DAIU feedback

"the role is invaluable and it would be detrimental to policing to lose someone in this role".

Impact for Local Police Areas

One additional aspiration for the service was that it would enable the development of stronger links with local police services in addition to the specialist DAIU, and help strengthen support for victims of abuse within local areas. This has happened in three ways:

1. The Court IDVA was asked to pilot a weekend shift 'safety car' service for a month by a local police area and to use this as an opportunity to provide informal training and consultancy to local shift officers.
2. Reducing the Risk's training team were asked to and have delivered training to local police area officers in North Oxfordshire (and in Buckinghamshire) in responding to and engaging with victims of abuse.
3. Where perpetrators have been issued with a Domestic Violence Prevention Notice by the Local Police, Reducing the Risk was asked to provide a follow up service with the victim. This arrangement led to a pilot project which is discussed further below.

DVPN/DVPO pilot project with Thames Valley Police

During the pilot project for the Court IDVA scheme an arrangement was agreed whereby Thames Valley Police would refer all cases in which they had issued a DVPN to the Court IDVA. This arrangement was piloted between February and December 2021. This section of the report reviews the outcome of the DVPN/DVPO pilot.²⁰

¹⁹ Comment made in meeting with the DAIC to obtain feedback on 6/7/21

²⁰ Since the pilot projects are overlapping, referrals made by the uniformed police to the Court IDVA in the period until end September 2021 are also included in the evaluation of the overall Court IDVA service pilot.

DVPN and DVPOs – background

A DVPN is an emergency non-molestation and eviction notice which can be issued by the police, when attending to a domestic abuse incident, to a perpetrator. The DVPN issued by the police has immediate effect and lasts for 48 hours. Within 48 hours the police must apply to a magistrates' court for the court to make a Domestic Violence Protection Order, which, like the DVPN, contains a non-molestation provision and prevents the perpetrator from returning to the home. This can last a further 28 days.

The aim of the DVPN/DVPO is to create a breathing space for the victim and a window in which specialist domestic abuse services might, perhaps for the first time, intervene to provide support.

DVPNs (which were enacted in the Crime and Security Act 2010) have been available for police to use since March 2014. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 contains new measures – Domestic Abuse Protection Notices (DAPN) and Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPO) – which are more flexible than DVPN/DVPOs. These measures are not yet available to be used but will in future supersede DVPNs/DVPOs.

IDVPN/DVPO pilot – review

Between February and December 2021 Thames Valley police referred 43 cases to the Court IDVA under the DVPN pilot project.

When subsequently attempting to follow up with the victims referred, the Court IDVA was able to make contact with and support 34 victims and to ascertain that a further 3 already had IDVA support and did not need further advice or safety planning. A further 6 were not contacted: 2 because they were referred at the start of the pilot when processes were not in place, and the referral was received too late (the 28 days of the DVPO window were about to expire); 2 were not suitable for inclusion in the pilot – in one case because the DVPO was not granted by the court, the other because it related to neighbours who both abused alcohol and had an 'on/off' relationship (this was their 4th DVPN); in 2 cases it proved impossible to make contact. In relation to these latter two cases, in one, Turning Point confirmed that the victim had gone to a rehabilitation centre and was safe, in the other the Court IDVA was simply unable to make contact, and it was known that the victim had not previously wished to engage with the IDVA service.

All of the 34 victims whom the Court IDVA was able to contact were offered safety planning and support and advice about their options. 30 (88%) accepted this further support.

A key aspect of the Court IDVA's role was to provide advice about securing longer term safety measures, including long-term court orders before the DVPO expired. This led to 13 non-molestation orders being granted, either through the victim applying themselves for a non-molestation order with the support of the IDVA (these were normally cases where there was no entitlement to legal aid), through referral to specialist legal aid solicitors, or in one case by way of a referral to DV Assist.

Several cases involved additional, intensive support, aligned with other protective processes. For example, one case involved an application for a prohibitive steps order and support related to child contact, and one was linked with a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference and Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme application, more commonly known as Clare's Law.

Of the cases where no further court order was sought at the expiry of the DVPO:

- 2 perpetrators were already constrained so that no further immediate legal measures were needed (one was recalled, the other sectioned under mental health legislation)
- 3 victims moved out of the county and were safe
- 2 victims did not want to apply for a non-molestation order immediately but felt safer knowing it was an option
- 2 were being protected through the MARAC processes and/or current police involvement
- 7 had ongoing support through the high risk IDVA service reinforced by specialist advice about court options
- 1 is an ongoing case with significant support and a non molestation order application may be made in future (see observation re complex cases below).
- 4 (12%) were offered advice on non-molestation orders but declined and have reconciled with their partners.

Two cases demonstrate the particular benefit of the Court IDVA's expertise in dealing with complex cases. The first involved intergenerational abuse by adult children towards older parents. An elderly couple in their eighties have been supported by the Court IDVA and are considering applying for a non-molestation order in relation to their son. The second complex case involved a learning disabled couple, one with a physical disability the other their carer. There has been a significant amount of interaction between the Court IDVA and adult social care. A non-molestation order has provided clarity about the seriousness of the issue and the boundaries of behaviour which is proving helpful for them both.

Feedback about working with the Court IDVA from a Local Police Area Commander

The Oxon Court IDVA is very experienced, knowledgeable and engaging. She has seized opportunities to raise the profile of her role with Police and has delivered presentations to front line response teams explaining different civil orders and her role in assisting victims to obtain them. This has directly improved Officers knowledge and confidence in explaining orders to victims and how best to signpost them.

She has also completed some additional partnership work with Police as part of a safeguarding car pilot through weekends in November. This included attending some live incidents with an Officer to provide safety planning, following up with some victims who had expressed a desire to withdraw and regaining support for investigation, and being available to the Police teams for tactical advice on cases they were carrying and victim support and management. She received some very positive feedback from each of the teams she worked with and victims benefitting from her attendance.

As Domestic Abuse lead on Cherwell and West LPA I cannot emphasise enough the value of the Court IDVA picking up the post DVPO Victim follow up. In many cases, the person the order protects may be much more likely to engage with an IDVA than an Officer, and the expertise and accessibility of the IDVA provides much improved continuity and effectiveness in supporting the person at risk to obtain a more permanent means of protection'.

DCI James Holden-White, Thames Valley Police

Conclusions

Court Idvas... spend the majority of their time working with survivors who are navigating the criminal justice system. They may be located or co-located within court buildings and typically offer support from the point of charge until the court proceedings have completed. They explain court processes, support special measures, advocate during proceedings, keep survivors informed about court dates, bail applications and court outcomes. Court Idvas offer any necessary support as a result of the domestic abuse or court proceedings, including emotional and practical support and referrals to other agencies. They will promote accessibility to court and justice through access to transport, childcare and safety. Idvas will risk assess on a continual basis to ensure safety plans are reflective of current risk and protective measures are in place to reduce any increase in risk. Court Idvas also keep the CPS and police updated with any additional information shared by the survivor such as witness intimidation.²¹

This description of the role of a Court IDVA is taken from a 2021 report by SafeLives which maps the provision of Court IDVA support across the country. The SafeLives report also evaluates the impact of Court IDVA services through a survey of victims.

The Court IDVA role

Reducing the Risk's Court IDVA service has, in its pilot period, performed all the functions described by SafeLives in their 2021 report, and has gone further. The Court IDVA in Reducing the Risk's service has proactively ensured as few gaps as possible exist in the provision of court safety measures for victims, by taking the initiative to apply for civil court orders (in particular non-molestation orders), and by inviting the court to vary restraining orders. The DVPN/DVPO pilot and system of automatic referrals from uniformed police is a novel arrangement which has become a key aspect of the Court IDVA service through which a wide variety of victims have been reached and assisted at the start of a court process.

Impact of the service

In the SafeLives research, where survey respondents had received specialist domestic abuse court support, 64% of those that had been through the magistrates' court were somewhat or very satisfied with the support they received. This increased to 75 % of those who had received assistance through the Crown Court.

This evaluation of Reducing the Risk's Court IDVA pilot project did not survey service-users about their satisfaction with the service, but has examined in detail the nature of the support offered to victims, gathered feedback and documented the referral of 40 victims to onwards support services. The Court IDVA's assessment is that ~90% of victims were safer and more confident as a result of their referral to the service. This report fully supports SafeLives' view that "dedicated court support provides better outcomes for victims"²². The court process can be extremely difficult for domestic abuse victims. It is clear that being supported by a domestic abuse specialist with expertise in the court process, in safety planning, and in

²¹ From "Understanding Court Support for Victims of Domestic Abuse", June 2021, a research report by SafeLives and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Court-Support-Mapping-Report-DAC-Office-and-SafeLives.pdf>

²² SafeLives 2021 report, p. 6.

providing emotional support, can be transformative for victims when navigating the justice system, and that the primary goal of the service - to relieve the fear and anxiety of victims as they go through the court process and to promote their safety and wellbeing - has been met.

Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse believed that a Court IDVA service would also have benefits for the justice system. It is clear from this pilot project that the Court IDVA service helps to ensure that perpetrators are held to account. During the pilot, victims have stated that they would have withdrawn their support from a prosecution were it not for the Court IDVA's involvement. On three occasions, the victim simply attending court (having been supported to do so by the Court IDVA), appears to have led directly to a guilty plea. More broadly, as relationships with the judiciary have become established, the Court IDVA has increasingly been asked to assist the court during hearings, which has in turn given her more opportunities to promote the victim's voice and the victim's welfare. The Court IDVA's relationship with Thames Valley Police is now well-established and the value of the service to them is extremely high.

Benefits of the specialist IDVA court based focus

The Court IDVA provides a distinct function from that of non-Court IDVAs who work intensively with high-risk victims from a point of crisis until their support is no longer needed – which may include support through the courts. Two-thirds of the referrals to the court based IDVA in the pilot period were from victims who had not previously had any support from specialist domestic abuse services. Some of these referrals derived from the Court IDVA's presence in court, either directly (she heard about a case when attending the DA court and followed-up with Witness Care Unit to prompt them to refer the victim to her), or indirectly. Through her presence at court, the Court IDVA was able to build strong relationships with Witness Care, the Witness Service, and with judges, which in turn strengthened referral channels from them to her. Finally, referrals of victims from a broad range of risk categories came about because of the success of the DVPN/DVPO pilot project with Thames Valley Police.

The Court IDVA's expertise and confidence in working in the court system and her regular attendance at court also accounts for some of the benefits to the justice process from the service. The focus means the Court IDVA can more easily assist the court, and can build relationships of trust through which the court increasingly comes to rely on her. The process has self-reinforcing benefits: the more the Court IDVA is entwined in the justice process, the more she can ensure the victim's voice is heard in that process, which both benefits victims and helps ensure perpetrators are held to account

The victim's voice can easily be lost in the criminal justice process. The Court IDVA is the sole professional in the court environment whose purpose is to be present at proceedings for the victim. By ensuring that victims are kept informed about court hearings promptly, fully and empathetically, she reduces the extent to which they are overlooked. By her active steps and interventions in the proceedings on behalf of victims she helps give them a voice. Where criminal proceedings 'fail', from the victims' perspective, by spanning the civil courts, the Court IDVA can help turn a disempowering process to one that promotes the victim's safety.

In summary.

This review of the role and activities of one Court IDVA over a thirteen month period, and associated outcomes, is intended as a 'deep dive' to complement and illuminate data already available. While not a full research study, it brings detailed evidence for the value of this court based role and the difference it makes for victims of abuse, for police and for the courts.

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