

The Journey of Probation Domestic Abuse Interventions

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Summary: Domestic abuse can have a devastating effect on individuals and families. In Northern Ireland the police respond to an incident of domestic abuse every 19 minutes. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has developed a number of programmes to tackle male perpetrators of domestic abuse. This article describes the programmes that have been developed, and discusses the evaluation of the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP). This evaluation has helped PBNI develop its approach to tackling domestic abuse.

Keywords: Domestic abuse, programmes for male perpetrators of domestic abuse, evaluation, Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme, Northern Ireland, courts.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that domestic abuse is perpetrated in many forms and within many types of relationship (World Health Organization, 2012). In Northern Ireland in the 1970s, following the implementation of equality legislation, it was the feminist movement that initially influenced the definition, legislation and identification of what has been previously referred to in society as ‘domestic violence’, and consequences for individuals who perpetrated it. Following public acknowledgement of this significant social and personal problem, it became apparent that the behaviour perpetrated by abusive individuals did not take the form of physical violence alone but included psychological, financial and sexually abusive behaviours. For these reasons, the term ‘domestic abuse’

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has become widely used as it encompasses all behaviours and not solely violence. It has been defined as

Threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation) by a current or former intimate partner or family member. (Department of Health and Social Services Northern Ireland (DHSSNI) and Department of Justice, 2013)

With the increase in the identification, conviction and subsequent sentencing of domestic abuse perpetrators in courts in Northern Ireland came the emergence of perpetrator programmes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A high number of referrals from the courts for male perpetrators of domestic abuse to address their offending behaviour through PBNI community supervision generated a need to offer the opportunity for change and rehabilitation in group-work programmes. Research tells us that group-work programmes for male perpetrators are more likely to be effective than individual work (Harper and Chitty, 2005).

Probation programmes

PBNI delivers a range of group-work programmes and individual interventions with the purpose of facilitating change with individuals under supervision who are court mandated to engage. Probation programmes are designed to address aspects of an individual's personality, attitudes and behaviours that are linked to offending behaviours. These factors not only contribute to offending but are often the underlying reasons for difficulties in many other areas of their lives.

PBNI developed its programme to address domestic abuse, the Men Overcoming Domestic Violence Programme, in 1998 with the aim of reducing reoffending in adult male domestic abuse perpetrators. This programme was replaced in 2009 by the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP), which is a National Offender Management Service (NOMS) accredited programme. Due to developments in domestic abuse interventions and how best to target male perpetrators, NOMS developed the Building Better Relationships (BBR) programme, which was rolled out in PBNI in 2015. In addition, PBNI has developed alternative interventions to target domestic abuse among non-adjudicated males

through the Promoting Positive Relationships Programme, as well as an educational approach through the Respectful Relationships Programme.

PBNI's approach to effective intervention when working with male perpetrators of domestic abuse is fundamentally an integrated approach. The participants in a programme consent to the sharing of information with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Social Services in cases where children are involved. In addition, the men provide the details of their victims and current partners to their Probation Officer, who refers victims or potential victims to a Partner Links Worker. This approach enables complete interagency support and supervision, which enhances the risk management of the men.

Evaluating programmes

The evaluation process has helped inform the evolution of PBNI's domestic abuse programmes. A review of the IDAP programme over a five-year period was influential in informing how best to offer male perpetrators of domestic abuse effective intervention. The lessons learnt from the delivery of IDAP have been crucial.

The evaluation design was based on mixed methods of quantitative data derived from IDAP databases and qualitative data derived from interviews and a focus group. This evaluation consists of three main strands: Effectiveness, Processes and Systems, and Victim Impact. Many debates exist about how effectiveness can be measured. In the past, reconviction rates for individuals who have completed programmes have been utilised; however, there are issues to consider in relation to conviction rates for domestic abuse, and the effectiveness of any programme that aims to positively change behaviour cannot be measured by reconviction rates alone. 'We cannot be sure of the apparent programme effect or separate effect of other components. The success of the programme appears to be relegated to the intervention system as a whole' (Gondolf, 2002: 208). The IDAP evaluation attempted to expand on this by considering the perpetrators', victims' and professionals' views when asking if domestic abuse programmes work (Westmarland and Kelly, 2013).

IDAP's roots are in cognitive behavioural therapy, and the theory that influenced the programme was Dutton's Nested Ecological Theory (Dutton, 1995). Nested Ecological Theory acknowledges the many systems and factors that influence how an individual may interpret relationships, and how 'power and control' within abusive relationships

are influenced by what one may experience as a child growing and wider social influences such as media, policy and religion. The programme shares the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project philosophy (Pence and Paymar, 1993) of embedding a treatment programme within the context of a system that is supportive of that programme consistent with the Nested Ecological Model. The programme was aimed at adult males convicted of domestic violence within heterosexual relationships. The principal programme targets for change were distorted thinking, emotional mismanagement, social skills deficits, problems in self-regulation, and motivation to change.

IDAP was delivered to men in the community who were subject to Probation supervision, in five delivery sites throughout Northern Ireland. The programme was nine months in duration and required significant commitment from participants. The pre-programme and six-month post-programme follow-up work was undertaken by supervising Probation Officers. The primary aims of the programme were to identify, challenge and change men's abusive behaviour.

In summary, the IDAP evaluation highlighted that within a five-year period, 391 regional court referrals were made to the programme. Convictions that led to a referral fell into violent and non-violent categories, reflecting the physical and non-physical behaviours a perpetrator will engage in to instill fear in a victim. Of the 391 referrals, 22% of individuals breached the conditions of their supervision before starting IDAP. Of the 330 individuals who started IDAP, 25% breached the conditions of their supervision while attending the programme and did not finish it. Alcohol and mental health were cited as significant contributory factors in 60% of breach reports submitted to court. This equates to an overall completion rate of 67% in the five-year period evaluated.

Perspectives of the systems and processes

Supervising Probation Officers

Resulting from the complexities of individuals' lives, family and relationship circumstances, the systems put in place to supervise clients need to lend themselves to the sharing of information for risk management purposes and also for the safety of the victim and their children. Supervising Probation Officers are responsible for the initial court assessment of an individual's likelihood of reoffending, as well as consideration of suitability for community supervision and an assessment

of suitability for the programme. To inform their assessment, the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA) is completed to help determine the risk a male perpetrator may present to potential victims.

The SARA is a clinical checklist of risk factors for spousal assault. It comprises 20 individual items identified by an extensive review of the empirical literature and of articles written by clinicians with experience in evaluating men who abuse their partners (Kropp *et al.*, 1995).

The IDAP evaluation found that the majority of Probation Officers indicated that the SARA was an effective tool for assessing suitability for a referral to IDAP. However, a need for ongoing training to support staff in assessing risk was identified. Probation Officers also identified alcohol/drug use, mental health, learning difficulties, not being fluent in English and denial of behaviour as issues that affect their clients who do not complete the programme.

Based on the growing evidence base and an increase in our understanding of domestic abuse, risk assessment tools have been revised. Probation recognised the need to introduce a robust, structured professional-judgement approach to assessing domestic abuse risk, leading to the roll-out of the Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER) (Kropp *et al.*, 2010).

B-SAFER provides evidence-based decisions in relation to risk factors identified in the literature to be pertinent to the perpetration of domestic abuse, and, using professional judgement, the assessors identify risk management plans. Studies of B-SAFER have indicated that inter-rater reliability is good to excellent for professional judgements concerning the presence of individual risk factors and overall levels of risk (Kropp and Hart, 2004).

IDAP facilitators

To deliver a PBNI domestic abuse programme, staff must have previous experience in group work and in supervision of or intervention with individuals engaging in domestic abusive behaviour. Staff require core skills training in the delivery of group work, as well as specialist training in the domestic abuse programme. Programme integrity is maintained with the aid of staff supervision and treatment management.

Facilitators' feedback in regard to the operational systems surrounding IDAP indicated that consistent practice across the region is important. Practitioner meetings occur every two months and aim to share information between all professionals involved in the lives of the IDAP

participants and the victims/partners (i.e. case manager, programme manager, programme facilitator, psychology, Social Services and Women's Aid). At these meetings, the progress of each participant is discussed and any increase in risk to the victim/partner is explored. This promotes an integrated approach, which is essential to managing client risk.

Facilitator feedback at this stage identified the need for a motivational module at the beginning of the programme that could assist in increasing the completion rate. In addition, the parenting module could be strengthened with the inclusion of work exploring the effects of abuse on children. These elements are incorporated into the BBR programme and help provide a holistic approach to managing the men. Facilitators also recommended future joint training with the police, Women's Aid–Women's Safety Workers (WSWs) and other agencies to ensure that what is learned in the group can be reinforced by other professionals in contact with the men.

PBNI is committed to service user involvement and obtaining feedback on learning taken from programmes attended. Such feedback has included the following.

I learnt so many things, seriously, recognising the anger and stuff like that; just shortly afterwards you know once you have actually done it [the programme], when you are coming home sitting on a train: why didn't I think of that before? So it did make you think and bring out a lot of things that were possibly already there, I just needed it pointed out to me.

It has affected me in everything, I learned that it can be transferable, you don't necessarily need to be in a relationship, it could be somebody on the street. It is all about your attitude and how you present yourself and how you come across and how you deal with other people, you know, they are all transferable. Even when I think about recognising women's fear, it's transferable – it's just about getting the brain to click a wee bit quicker.

From this it was recommended that an exit interview with clients would be an added advantage in terms of the overall evaluation of programmes.

Public Protection Units

When men were first assessed for a place on the IDAP programme at

the pre-court stage, they were required to read and sign a statement of understanding. This statement allows Probation to share information with the PSNI regarding the men's allocation, attendance, completion and withdrawal from the programme. Specifically, Public Protection Units (PPUs) consider the risk assessment of domestic abuse perpetrators and put in place the relevant safeguards for perpetrators and victims. The purpose of this sharing of information was to inform the police that a man is attending the IDAP programme, enabling a 'notify if' to be highlighted against the participant's name on the PSNI system if they should come to police attention. The 'notify if' should also allow the PSNI to contact Probation if the participant is in a relationship that has not been disclosed to Probation so that this can be addressed with the perpetrator and potential victim.

Overall, PSNI indicated that they welcome information sharing from PBNI about individuals who are attending the IDAP programme. Respondents indicated variations of practice in different police districts in respect of 'flagging' clients who are attending the programme, and would welcome standardisation of this regionally. Those who attended practitioner meetings indicated that the model was quite effective.

If police are aware who is on the programme, we can inform Probation when reoffending occurs and vice versa – Probation may be aware of another incident and it may not be reported to police.

Social Services

IDAP operates in five areas throughout Northern Ireland. A representative of Social Services attends practitioner meetings as a single point of contact for information being shared between PBNI and Social Services in cases where children are known to Social Services.

There can be challenges with this model due to the differing boundaries in Northern Ireland between PBNI, Police and Social Services. Social Services operates five trusts regionally.

There had been difficulties in accessing the social workers involved in cases; for example, due to the movement of a child from one team to another. One social worker said that the system of a single point of contact was effective for the sharing of information. However, future practice and evaluation must include feedback from all social workers in all Trust areas, and representatives should attend practitioner meetings regionally to ensure that all relevant information is shared.

Participants

The evaluation aimed to obtain the views of participants through semi-structured interviews with clients who have completed the programme and clients who did not complete. Through random selection, telephone contact was initially made with three clients who had completed IDAP; only one took part in an interview. None of the seven men who did not complete the programme agreed to take part. The issue of limited participant feedback and the need to incorporate feedback in future practice was raised.

Victim impact

The role of the WSWs was essential to any work with male perpetrators of domestic abuse. Bullock (2014) interviewed WSWs based across 10 Probation areas and highlighted differing practices, resulting in tensions in terms of sharing information about risk. 'In principle, the safety of the partners/ex-partners should be at the very heart of IDAP' (Bullock, 2014). PBNI strongly advocated for a dedicated worker to carry out this role, working closely with programme staff. Over time, the WSW role has developed into a PBNI-funded role, called Partner Links Worker, which has been vital in keeping potential victims safe.

The IDAP evaluation used a range of methods (focus groups, questionnaires, analysis of psychometrics and IDAP databases) to explore the systems and processes in place for this role in Northern Ireland and the effectiveness of the programme from the perspective of the WSWs. Information received from WSWs during a focus group provided insight into the potential impact a man attending a perpetrator programme can have on a victim and/or current partners. Key themes that emerged included the following.

Referrals

Telephone contact was reported as the best means of establishing initial contact with the victim/partners.

It is really important sometimes to get that initial voice at the end of a phone so that you can really explain what your role is and what your contact with them is about, rather than them being fearful.

Communication

Throughout the duration of clients' involvement in IDAP there is a need for WSWs to have regular communication with Probation Officers, Social Services and the victim/current partner. Attendance at practitioner meetings and communication via telephone and secure email were identified. The importance of confidentiality was highlighted.

I think there are things that I would discuss with women that I wouldn't share with Probation, not necessarily because of any other reason other than it involves events in their lives and it is not directly related to their partner. So perhaps it's about Probation understanding what they can share with us and what we can follow on from that.

Implications for the future

PBNI introduced the BBR programme in 2015 based on the need to broaden and develop our approach to domestic abuse. The IDAP evaluation helped inform the implementation of BBR and reinforced the need to maintain the system and processes known to work in the delivery of domestic abuse programmes. Two years after the introduction of BBR, it is evident that the robust integrated approach adopted by PBNI continues to promote effective practice. In order to maintain this, a number of areas require ongoing attention.

The wider social debate regarding the measurement of effectiveness of domestic abuse interventions for male perpetrators is relevant to the evaluation of programmes and systems in place to manage them (Bullock *et al.*, 2010). Data are made available to the Department of Justice to identify reconviction rates for clients who have completed or not completed a programme. This will provide insight into how many men have gone on to commit further domestic abuse offences.

A significant correlation has been shown between non-completion of the programme and substance use and mental health difficulties. Further research is being conducted in PBNI to better understand the factors contributing to drop-out, with the aim of increasing programme retention.

Breach of Probation supervision for these men is an important issue. Breach reports on those who failed to complete the programme indicated an inability to manage their emotions, and a lack of problem-solving skills and ability to cope. Unlike IDAP, the BBR programme includes a motivational module as well as individual sessions to explore possible readiness issues.

The IDAP evaluation identified the large number of families who had been supported with safety plans prepared when men were referred to the programme. While there are arguments for and against mandated programmes for domestic abusers (Dutton and Corvo, 2006), the evidence from the IDAP evaluation is that the programme has the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of families.

Since the phase-out of IDAP and the introduction of BBR into PBNI practice, the role of the WSWs has changed to PBNI-funded Partner Links Workers. The IDAP evaluation strongly evidenced the significance of this role in maintaining an integrated approach to the management of perpetrators of domestic abuse. As a result, PBNI has a dedicated Partner Links Worker who informs past, current and/or future victims in a bid to keep them safe.

The IDAP evaluation indicated that the systems in place with partner organisations are effective; however, practice may vary slightly depending on the police district or Social Services area. Partner organisations have indicated that the best practice should be rolled out regionally and that the sharing of information is something that all agencies welcome. As a result, the information-sharing agreement among agencies was formalised, promoting effective practice and joint working.

Further developments

The IDAP evaluation enables PBNI to review practice and the systems underpinning the efficacy of domestic abuse programmes. One aspect that has changed is the risk assessment process for domestic abuse perpetrators. PBNI recognised the shift in effective risk assessment, which has resulted in the implementation of B-SAFER (Kropp *et al.*, 2005).

B-SAFER systematically identifies factors that are relevant to a case, leading to management plans tailored to prevent violence. B-SAFER is based on more up-to-date literature, making decision-making more evidence-based, as well as considering victim vulnerability factors to help adopt a holistic approach to the management of clients.

Since the introduction of BBR and the increased knowledge of the need for participant feedback to inform best practice, feedback forms have been incorporated into programme delivery. The BBR programme has yet to be evaluated; when it is, the participant feedback will be crucial to understanding the impact the intervention has on clients.

Following on from the IDAP evaluation, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) offers BBR promoting continuity of domestic abuse programmes. The assessment and delivery models for BBR in custody and in the community are similar. Commencing treatment in custody is beneficial to the men and potential victims, and the work can be continued and reinforced while the men are residing in the community.

Areas for further development include ongoing awareness-raising among the judiciary in regard to the potential impact of sentencing decisions, as well as the high number of breach cases.

Conclusion¹

The IDAP evaluation helped highlight the complexities for individuals, victims/partners and agencies that are tasked with effectively assessing and providing intervention for medium- to high-risk perpetrators of domestic abuse. The findings highlighted implications and considerations for future practice, and on reflection have informed current practice.

The evaluation precipitated a review of PBNI's pathway for the assessment and treatment of male perpetrators of domestic abuse, leading to robust risk assessment procedures, which are standard across the services, as well as offering different levels of intervention to clients. Research on what works with male perpetrators of domestic abuse is ever evolving and informs practice. PBNI endeavours to continue to review and evaluate the impact of domestic abuse programmes, as the five-year IDAP evaluation has done.

It behoves all practitioners, researchers, policy makers and funders to be modest about their claims of success or otherwise of their own preferred approach or of other approaches. There is, as has been said 'weak evidence for batterer programme alternatives' (Gondolf, 2012), as well as evidence that research cannot show conclusively that current programmes and perpetrator treatment reduce domestic violence (Feder, Austin & Wilson, 2008). (Respect, 2014)

¹ The five-year IDAP evaluation was an internal evaluation, and quantitative findings will not be published outside the organisation.

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