

Call handler and front counter staff response to a domestic abuse incident

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First published 16 September 2015 Updated 24 March 2022

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14 mins read

The following information provides advice to staff working in communication rooms. Many of the same considerations also apply to front counter staff dealing with members of the public who attend the police station in person to make a report or to seek a place of safety.

Introduction

A call handler may need to spend longer on a domestic abuse call than other calls because of the need to deal with the call in context. Providing a high-quality response should take priority over any pressure to move on to other calls.

Domestic abuse victims may appear hysterical or overly calm. This should not be taken as an indication of the level of seriousness of the incident, as all victims respond differently.

The importance of history and context

Effective response to a domestic abuse incident depends on understanding the context in which the report has been made. An absence of recorded previous police contact does not mean there is no history of abuse. Victims may experience significant abuse before reporting for the first time and it is likely that the incident giving rise to the call is not the first, whether or not previous incidents have been reported. It is important that the police response deals with the immediate incident and the history.

For example:

- Has the perpetrator abused any previous victims (serial perpetrator)?
- Is this the first call out or one of many?
- Has there been a previous risk assessment and how was it graded?

- Has the victim been subject to **MARAC** in the last 12 months?
- Is there an agreed codeword to request police help without putting the perpetrator on notice, for example, asking for a pizza or taxi?

The call handler needs to be able to find this information easily.

Forces should consider creating and maintaining a running narrative for each victim and perpetrator which can be accessed immediately on the force system. This would avoid the need to ask the victim to repeat a full history on each occasion, thus saving time. This makes the process easier for the victim and ensures that the attending officer has the information needed to inform an accurate risk assessment of each incident.

If a victim is working with an **independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA)** or other domestic abuse specialist, they are advised to call the police before a situation escalates to violence. Calling at an early stage does not mean the risks are lessened.

Force systems should, as a minimum, allow known victims to be flagged. Forces should consider having system prompts for the call handler when the known victim flag is selected during a call.

Some domestic abuse incidents are reported by a third party, for example, a relative, a neighbour or a witness in the street. Call handlers should be alert to the possibility that the caller may be unsure of what they are seeing and describe the incident as something different, such as antisocial behaviour, when it is in fact a domestic abuse incident. Where there are indicators that the incident may be domestic in nature, call handlers should look behind what is being reported and check for related calls or history.

Staff working in contact and dispatch centres should be trained to identify and grade domestic abuse incidents appropriately. The inappropriate logging of domestic-related incidents as, for example, a concern for safety, criminal damage or antisocial behaviour, can cause delay and place victims at risk. The training should emphasise that abuse is not only physical and should ensure that staff are familiar with more subtle forms of abuse such as **controlling or coercive behaviour**.

Perpetrators sometimes call 999 themselves to make a **counter-allegation** by:

- falsely alleging that they are the victim of an assault in order to pre-empt an assault allegation against them

- reporting an assault on themselves, which is actually an act of self-defence or resistance by the primary victim

Safety issues

The first priority of the police in responding to a domestic abuse incident is to protect the victims and any other persons at risk, including children and police officers.

Call handlers

To ensure the safety of those reporting domestic abuse, call handlers should:

- prioritise the safety of the victim and children (giving safety, first aid or other advice as appropriate)
- keep the victim or caller accurately informed of the deployment of officers

The emergency call may be made from a public place or somewhere such as a hotel room that is unfamiliar to the caller, rather than a private dwelling. The call handler should seek information about the location to enable prioritisation and keep it under continuous review, as conditions may change quickly in an insecure environment. Agreed procedures should be in place to respond quickly to:

- an open line/silent call
- an agreed codeword
- activation by the victim of a [TecSOS phone or equivalent device](#)
- activation by the victim of an intruder alarm at their home address
- activation of a proximity tag or other monitored GPS device worn by the abuser

If the suspect is still present at the scene

Keep the caller on the line. Any background noise from a 999 call will automatically be audio-recorded and could be used as evidence. It also helps in monitoring the incident and ensures that officers arriving at the scene have the most up-to-date information about the situation.

If the suspect has left the scene

- Advise the caller to lock and secure the premises where possible, taking their mobile phone with them or, if using a fixed telephone line, keeping it open so that any continuation of the incident can

be heard.

- Agree a key word for the caller to signify that the suspect has returned.
- Take a full description of the suspect and circulate it to officers in the area

When assessing call priority, it should be borne in mind that the perpetrator may have left temporarily while the 999 call was being made but could return at any time. They may be waiting to see if police officers arrive at the scene. They may also be forcing the victim to say that the perpetrator has left and everything is fine.

If the caller is a child

Obtain essential information from the child about what has happened, with a focus on safety. Key questions could include the following.

- Are you hurt?
- Is anyone hurt?
- Is the person who did it still there?
- Where are you now?
- Are you scared?
- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Who else is there? What are their names?

If necessary, give safety advice such as to hide in a room until the police arrive.

Check all that is known about the address and the people involved.

Grade the call and deploy resources according to force policies.

Front counter staff

In some areas, front counter staff may have responsibilities akin to a call handler or first responder in terms of gathering information. They should follow local procedures and be guided by the advice provided for those roles in the APP. The following considerations are those common to all front counter staff, irrespective of local variance in the responsibilities attached to the role.

Front counter staff dealing with reports should, as a priority, establish if the victim and any children are at immediate risk or have time constraints, for example, if the person has attended the police

station while the abuser is asleep or at work, or if the victim is being timed by the perpetrator while on the school run or at an appointment. Waiting in those circumstances may increase risk to the victim, which must be flagged to the responding officer. This may be particularly relevant in cases where an interpreter is needed. As soon as front counter staff become aware that a victim wishes to report domestic abuse, they should take the victim out of public view to reduce the risk of the abuser seeing them or finding out that they have attended the police station.

Checklist: Key considerations for front counter staff taking a report of domestic abuse

If the report is made by a victim:

- take them out of public view to reduce the risk of the abuser seeing them
- establish if the victim and any children are at immediate risk, for example, if they are fleeing the perpetrator
- establish if the person making the report is subject to time constraints and flag this to the responding officer if applicable so that the report can be prioritised
- if the victim is unable to wait for an officer to become available to speak to them, establish when and how they can be contacted without placing them at further risk
- if they are believed to be at risk of serious harm if they leave without being seen by an officer, response should be prioritised

If the report is made by another person, for example, a concerned family member, friend or neighbour, they may also be at risk if the perpetrator discovers that they have reported the abuse and similar considerations apply.

Confirmation of information

Call handlers should adopt the following approaches when confirming information about domestic abuse incidents.

- If it is safe to do so, check if the victim or caller is out of earshot of the suspect and any children.
- Be alert to a sudden change in the conversation or voice indicating the perpetrator is back in earshot. Be prepared to ask, 'Are they back in the room? Just answer yes or no'.
- Confirm regularly throughout the call what the caller is saying or seek clarification where details are difficult to understand.

- When telephone calls are cut off, this requires an urgent reassessment of the call grading as the safety of the caller might be further threatened.

Remember to convey a reassuring attitude to the caller, as they may be feeling apprehensive about making contact with the police and worried that they will not be believed.

Checklist: Information gathering

Full details of the incident and of all parties involved should be recorded and flagged appropriately on the incident log, in line with local policy. Call handlers or report takers should seek, record and disseminate the information listed below. In situations where fast deployment is required, an abridged checklist may be used to identify risks associated with the deployment, and then further information can be gathered once the immediate risk has been managed.

- Location and identity of the caller or person making the report.
- Location of the incident.
- Location of the suspect, victim and children.
- Whether the parties are injured.
- Severity of any injury and whether medical assistance is required.
- Identity of all parties involved including the victim, children and suspect (for example, names (correctly spelt), sex, dates of birth, home addresses, telephone numbers).
- Whether there are any children normally resident at the address and, where present, if they are safe.
- Whether any weapons have been used (in particular firearms or knives, although any object used as a weapon is relevant).
- Whether any weapons are available to the suspect and whether the suspect or another household member holds a licence for a firearm.
- Whether communication difficulties exist, for example, if English is not the caller's first language and officers will require an interpreter.
- Whether there are any special needs, for example, mental or physical disability.
- In what capacity the parties are involved.
- Whether any person present appears drunk or has taken drugs.
- Whether there is any history of domestic abuse or other relevant offending.
- Description of the suspect.
- If the suspect is believed to have left the area and, if so, where they are believed to have gone.

- Whether any court orders apply.
- First account of what the caller says has occurred (recording it verbatim).
- Details of the demeanour of the victim, suspect and others present, and background noise (including shouting, words spoken).

Call handlers should make appropriate checks of IT and/or paper-based systems for any previous reported domestic abuse history and other relevant information:

- previous risk assessments
- PNC checks for both the suspect and the victim (paying particular attention to any markers or alerts),
- the PND
- bail conditions
- civil injunctions
- court orders relating to child contact
- child protection intelligence systems – child protection register (in Wales), local authority children's services information on children subject to a child protection plan (in England)
- ViSOR
- any record of current or previous [MARAC](#) involvement with the victim, for example, if they have a [MARAC](#) flag on the local force system, where such a flag is used

Preservation of evidence

When the call handler has established that the victim is safe, some basic advice should be given about preserving the crime scene until the police arrive. Depending on the nature of the incident, this could include:

- not moving anything (or allowing others to do so)
- not cleaning up or tidying the house
- not washing or taking a shower
- not changing clothing
- not allowing children, relatives, neighbours or animals to enter areas where the incident took place (where possible)

Deployment

An immediate response should be sent to a domestic abuse incident, subject to any risk indicators to the contrary. It is not normally appropriate to make an appointment for a victim of domestic abuse to attend the police station instead. Any delay increases the likelihood of the victim changing their mind or being intimidated in the meantime and it is common for victims to fail to attend.

There is some good evidence to show that where officers responding to domestic abuse are equipped with body worn cameras the proportion of sanctioned detections resulting in a criminal charge increases. The impact of attending officers wearing BWV on the views and experiences of victims has not yet been explored however. Forces may want to consider whether officers equipped with BWV should be routinely assigned to domestic abuse incidents.

For further information see College of Policing (2015) [The Essex Body Worn Video Trial](#), Owens, Mann and McKenna.

Checklist: Deployment

Call handlers should:

- prioritise the safety of those at the incident, members of the public and officers
- ensure that medical assistance is en route, where appropriate
- make sure that support (backup) is available for the officer(s) attending the incident, where appropriate
- inform the caller when an officer(s) has been dispatched
- inform the officer attending of all relevant information (see checklist below)
- inform the caller when police have arrived at the scene so that the officer(s) can be safely admitted to the premises

Checklist: Details to be provided to the attending officer

Information to be provided to the attending officer includes:

- details of any children present
- the results of the IT and/or paper-based search outlined above
- whether the victim has a [MARAC](#) flag
- any communication difficulties (language, hearing, speech)

- any other factors that may affect the police response, for example, injury, the presence of weapons (especially firearms), drug or alcohol use
- a description of the suspect, where necessary
- whether supervisors are aware of the incident, in accordance with local policy
- what the victim/caller first said to the call handler – this will help the officer if the victim minimises the incident on arrival because of fear or intimidation

Providing these details helps attending officers to tailor their response to the specific situation and to make victims as safe as possible.

Call handlers should ensure that they accurately relay the information provided to them by the caller. Inappropriate comment or interpretation can lead to a less effective response by the attending officer.

If the suspect is believed to have left the local area, this should be specifically flagged to the attending officer so that contact can be established and appropriate information exchanged with relevant police forces to ensure the victim's safety.

All domestic abuse-related computer-aided dispatch (CAD) entries must be closed with a reference number. They should not be closed until contact has been made with the victim and a risk assessment carried out. Where the original call indicates that a domestic abuse incident or crime has taken place, an incident or crime report should be completed using the appropriate force system. The only time an incident or crime report will not be required is where there is reliable evidence to refute the original information.

Principles for telephone or video first response to domestic abuse

There is a strong theoretical case for adopting telephone first response (TFR) and 'emerging' empirical evidence base for video first response (VFR) to some incidents of domestic abuse (DA) that would otherwise receive a 'slow time' deployment. Evaluation evidence from two forces for TFR showed greater disclosure of abuse, permitting a more comprehensive identification of risk and better recording of crimes with TFR.

See [Principles for telephone or video first response to domestic abuse](#) for further information.

Tags

Domestic abuse