

An Unexpected Indicator of Success: Complaints from Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

Safe & Together London Partnership Evaluation Briefing Three

Maria Garner & Liz Kelly, 2025

When we do start to work perpetrators, they'll complain against the practitioner by saying that they are on mum's side... it's really uncomfortable for our workers to constantly be dealing with complaints and I think it's making them not want to work with perpetrators (Supervisor).

This briefing has been produced as part of Year 3 evaluation of the Safe & Together (S&T) London Partnership project¹, which seeks to transform responses to domestic abuse in children's social care in six London Boroughs. It reflects on the noticeable increase in complaints from perpetrators in the boroughs with the longest engagement with S&T. To explore this, we convened a cross borough action learning set of complaints staff and draw on other evaluation data in relation to the impacts of complaints on front line staff, emerging good practice and how boroughs can fortify and scaffold both systems change and staff confidence. Increased complaints from perpetrators should be an anticipated part of implementation, which while reflecting evidence of changed practice, requires scaffolding of

¹ <https://www.respect.org.uk/pages/safe-and-together-london-partnership>

support and disruption within teams and local authorities in order that S&T is not undermined.

The Emergence of an Issue and Impacts

S&T seeks to move away from practices which have responsibilised non-abusive parents for their own and their children's safety² by framing perpetration as a harmful parenting practice which needs to change. Tools in this process are documenting patterns of abuse within case files, increased engagement with perpetrators and actions for them within protection plans. What S&T implementation prompted was increased complaints by perpetrators, a clear resistance to being held to account for their behaviour. Waltham Forest recorded a 700% increase in formal complaints from perpetrators since S&T was introduced in 2019³, with many more informal complaints directed at social workers.

The increase can be seen as evidence of changing practice but if not handled carefully carry the potential to undermine S&T and narrow space for intervention⁴. Interviews with social workers revealed the reverberations for worker safety and their capacity to maintain the pivot to perpetrators. Supervisors and team leaders were aware that the intent of the perpetrator in making a complaint was to undermine being held to account by intimidating the social worker. Being steadfast tested confidence in a new approach, especially for newly qualified and/or minoritised workers, and without scaffolding within teams and local authorities risked avoidance of the perpetrator and trepidation about working in congruence with S&T.

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvr7fcsw.12>

³ Butterworth, L., (2004) Holding the Space for Intervention: Exploring the Impact of Domestic Abuse Perpetrators Complaints on Social Work Practice. Unpublished MA dissertation, London Metropolitan University.

⁴ See previous footnote

‘Taking it all the way’: What the Complaints Look Like

A set of common conventions in terms of content, style and tone of complaints were identified in the action learning set (see figure 1). Most complaints contained several of the features, and a number can be read in terms of notions of entitlement. The threat to ‘take it all the way’ was often linked to complaining to Social Work England or the ombudsman. Concerns were also raised about victim-survivors being manipulated into making a complaint themselves, potentially severing the partnering work of the social worker and effectively isolating the victim-survivor further.

Figure 1: Common conventions of complaints from perpetrators of abuse

Lengthy and overwhelming	Unrealistic expectations of wait times for a response	Copying in MPs and other unrelated parties	Statements/threats to ‘take it all the way’
Counter allegations of violence	Raising issues about victim-survivors’ parenting	Denying using abuse and violence	Taking issue with being called a perpetrator
Accusations that the social worker sided with the victim-survivor	Taking issue with social services intervening	Questioning content of reports to the family court	Disputing aspects of the child protection plan referring to their abusive behaviour
Threatening to report the social worker to Social Work England	Playing social work team off against complaints team	Unreasonable number of emails and phone calls	Rejections of referrals to behaviour change programmes

Discussions about existing complaints processes and recording systems across boroughs revealed little consistency making it difficult to track trends, which meant boroughs were not well placed to respond to this implementation challenge. The complaints staff in the ALS opted to develop a framework for more joined up responses.

Building a Framework of Responses

I'm not sure where the support will come in or if I'm just too far out on a limb and I need to know not to swallow Safe & Together completely and then run out there with it because I'm all on my own.... I'm not, I've got a really good management team but the system is the system, and it has its limitations (Social worker).

Complaints processes which anticipate and manage those coming from perpetrators of domestic abuse whilst upholding social work practice standards, hold the intervention space for social workers to practice in line with S&T, whilst scaffolding for complaints teams is also needed. Complaints staff recognised the importance of providing support and reassurance to children's social care teams and highlighted areas that needed attention: that statutory guidance paid limited attention to the system being weaponised by domestic abuse perpetrators; independent adjudicators and the ombudsman being unfamiliar with S&T principles. Within the partnership boroughs complaints professionals have already begun to harness their accumulated knowledge to narrow perpetrators space to manipulate the system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Emerging good practice



Good relationships between social work teams and complaints teams were seen as crucial, as was balancing a right to complain and unpicking the tone of complaint from grounds for the complaint. Building on their existing experience professionals, were remarkably skilled at recognising vexatious complaints as part of a pattern of abusive behaviours and identified potential ways to fortify worker confidence and narrow space to manipulate. This included:

- ❖ Acknowledging and integrating complaints as part of everyday practice through joint working across social workers, quality assurance, supervisors and complaints teams
- ❖ Attending to emotional needs by recognising that complaints can be de-stabilising, whilst at the same time to be expected
- ❖ Aligning systems by ensuring S&T congruent policies and practices across adjoining systems and processes

The potential to reject under unreasonable complaints guidance in the Children's Act was considered worth exploring further, alongside basic S&T training for independent adjudicators. Another next step was for partnership boroughs to track complaints consistency and comparatively. This led to the creation of the attached tool to be piloted in the partnership over the next year.

Safe and Together (S&T) London Partnership Project: Evaluating Complaints from Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

The S&T London partnership project aims to effect sustainable systems change in responses to domestic abuse in children's social care. By 'pivoting to the perpetrator' and partnering with victims-survivors, S&T works through three basic principles:

- ❖ Keeping children safe and together with the non-offending parent
- ❖ Partnering with the non-offending parent
- ❖ Intervening with the perpetrator.

Boroughs with the longest history of working with S&T, have seen an increase in complaints from perpetrators and there may be some benefits in tracking these and using this to develop practice learning. This proforma (which could be converted into Excel) is a suggested way to do this.

S&T Draft Proforma for Recording Complaints from Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

Complaint Details	
Date of complaint:	
Case Identifier: (only needed if separate from case management system)	
How long has the case been held in children's social care?	
Less than 6 Months.	6 - 12 Months More than 12 months
Does the complainer have a history with the DA services in the borough? Y /N/ Unknow:	
Did the complaint include: (answer all)	
Taking exception to being referred to as a perpetrator? Y/N	
Disputing whether they had used violence/abuse? Y/M	
Questioning the right of social care to intervene with them? Y/N	
Disputing aspects of the child protection plan referring to their behaviour? Y/N	
Complaints about a report to the Family Court? Y/N	
More general complaints about the local authority? Y/N	

Specific complaints about the actions of a social worker? Y/N
Argue that since the police NFA'd the case children's social care should not be involved? Y/N
Did they make counter accusations about the parenting of their partner (e.g., substance misuse, mental health), neglect of children? Y/N
That they were not involved in assessment or other aspects of the case? Y/N
Anything else not listed above?
Details of investigation
Was the complaint resolved before stage 1? Y/N, If yes, how?
Was it resolved at stage 1? Y/N. If Y how?
Did you need to clarify the desired outcome? Y/N
Did you have an early meeting with the social work team to ensure a common approach that limits any attempt to manipulate? Y/N
Was the complaint investigated? Y/N If Y, what stage did it get to? 1/2/3 Was it upheld? Y in part Y in full N If yes, what was upheld?
During the process
Number of emails from the complainer?
Number of phone calls from the complainer?
Did the complainer copy in others? (e.g. Mayor, MP) Y/N, if Y who?
Did the complainer threatened to 'take it all the way'? Y/N
Did the complainer have unreasonable expectations of process? (e.g. response in 24 hours) Y/N. If Y, what?
Learnings
What are the learnings for practice from this case?
Any other relevant information from this case?

