

Breaking the Silence - Giving a voice to the victims and survivors of abuse in Halton

**citizens
advice**

Halton

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Executive Summary

Recent figures for the Police and Crime Commissioner show Halton as an outlier within the wider Cheshire area, with significantly higher reported incidence of domestic abuse crimes. The figures show an increase from 2023/24 over the first 3 quarters of the year.

Much work has been done both locally and nationally to bring domestic abuse to public attention. This report builds on that work and listens to the voices of local residents who have experienced domestic abuse first hand. They tell us their stories and experiences, looking at what works well and where improvement is needed.

Our participants faced numerous barriers to accessing support, often leading to delays in leaving harmful environments. While some sought help after a single incident, others endured abuse for years.

Key barriers included

- Lack of awareness - many did not recognize non-physical abuse or know what services existed
- Fear of retaliation - particularly threats to children or fear of escalating violence.
- Distrust of services also played a significant role. Women often feared involvement from social services or police would worsen their situation or lead to blame and judgment.
- That services were impersonal, or inaccessible due to language, or cultural insensitivity. Survivors from minority backgrounds and the LGBTQ+ community felt especially unsupported.

Overall, there was a need for faster, more empathetic, culturally competent, and survivor-led support especially in ensuring early intervention and long-term recovery.

Recommendations

- (i) **A challenge to all professionals** - All public facing staff (especially in the public & voluntary sectors) should proactively ask about domestic abuse as part of their interactions with the public.
- (ii) **A multi-agency, one-stop hub** - within an existing anonymous setting, so that people can get support from all relevant agencies under one-roof.
- (iii) **Raising awareness** - More needs to be done to empower local residents to identify elements of abusive relationships e.g. coercive financial control.
- (iv) **Promoting help** - We need to make it easier for people to find out what local (and national) sources of help and support there is available.
- (v) **A Package of Support** - Abuse does not end when the perpetrator leaves. We recommend developing increased capacity at Citizens Advice Halton so that victims who do not meet the threshold of IDVA support, can access quality-assured information, advice and support from a trained adviser to rebuild their lives.
- (vi) **By and For Services** - One size does not fit all. Service users need to trust that services are for them and can understand their unique needs.

Domestic Abuse as a National Issue

Over the past five decades, the legal framework addressing domestic abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the UK has undergone significant transformation, reflecting a deeper societal understanding of abuse and its impact. Legal reforms have increasingly centred on victims' needs and introduced mechanisms to enhance protection.

The Family Law Act 1996 marked a pivotal development with the introduction of Non-Molestation and Occupation Orders. These provided legal recourse for individuals facing threats, harassment, and violence. Non-Molestation Orders often include a power of arrest, while Occupation Orders can be enforced via arrest warrants. Although not infallible, these measures often serve as critical interventions, offering victims a temporary reprieve and the opportunity to seek stability.

Further progress was realised with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which broadened the definition of abuse to include coercive control and emotional harm, and extended protections, particularly in family court contexts.

Despite legal advancements, domestic abuse remains a pervasive issue. The National Centre for Domestic Violence estimates that one in four women and one in six men experience abuse in their lifetime, yet fewer than 24% of incidents are reported. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (year ending March 2024) recorded around 850,000 police-reported cases. Young adults (under 25) and disabled individuals were found to be disproportionately affected.

However, actual prevalence is likely far higher. According to the ONS, an estimated 2.3 million people experienced abuse in the past year—nearly three times the number of police reports. Most concerning are findings from the Domestic Homicide Project, which documented 262 domestic abuse-related deaths in 2023/24. Notably, suspected victim suicides exceeded homicides for the first time, a shift possibly linked to improved reporting and recognition, though still likely underestimating the true extent.

Domestic Abuse in Halton

In April 2025 Cheshire Constabulary shared their data on the number of recorded domestic abuse crimes happening within the area they covered. This data showed that in the first 9 months of the financial year (2024/25) there had been 1,853 recorded domestic abuse crimes in Halton (14.5 crimes per 1000 of the population). This figure was on target to exceed the number of domestic abuse crimes recorded in the previous financial year by a significant margin.

The Cheshire Constabulary crime figures mark Halton out as an outlier within the Cheshire area, with between 40-50% more domestic abuse crimes per 1,000 of the population than our neighbouring Local Authority areas of Warrington, and Cheshire West and Chester.



Ella's story

"It was what you call a perfect relationship to be honest. We'd stay in hotels. He'd pay for all the hotels, the food. He was so loving, it was just perfect."

There was never a single trigger, but the relationship deteriorated over a number of years.

"At first he was like 'I can't cope with you any more, you're too much'. He kept saying he was leaving. He'd packed his bags so many times. I would be distraught and scared and crying."

"Something happened all the time, so you would think that after this it would just be

fine, but then something else happened and it was always someone in his family died, or his family didn't have any money for food, but I just thought it would stop soon and then you know, it would be fine. I'd feel sorry for him as well."

Ella's partner had access to her bank accounts, after one shopping trip, Ella's partner refused to give back her bank card, this triggered her to look into her finances and she discovered her partner had taken out over 15 different loans and credit accounts that she had no knowledge of.

It was Ella's therapist that first identified the financial abuse and helped Ella report the

issues to her social worker and they in turn referred her to the police and an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA).

In the final few days the abuse escalated.

"I just remember coming down the stairs and he was in my face. He was shouting and he was swearing, he was saying I've got problems in the head. Just making it out as if I was mentally ill basically. He pulled down his zip and said I'm going to pee all over your things."

Ella's partner was arrested but released within 24 hours, with bail conditions not to contact Ella. So instead, he started contacting Ella's children and mum and dad.

"He said your mum deserves R-A-P-I-N-G, and then he started emailing, saying he's going to send people to the house to R-A-P-E me and my children. He's going to burn the house down."

Ella now has a non-molestation order and her former partner will soon stand trial for the abuse, but for Ella the delay in getting justice is too long.

"If you think about it and you're the victim and you are waiting 9 months to get justice and to stop them doing it to other women and you are waiting 9 months. It's a long time isn't it. You can't move on."

Purpose of this Report

The purpose of this report is to listen to the voices of local people who have experienced domestic abuse and to hear their views about those parts of the support system that are currently performing well, and those that do not meet their needs or expectations.

Our recommendations are based on what our research participants told us about the type of services that would work best for them.

Methodology

A large sample set of potential participants were identified from Citizens Advice Halton's case recording system, including clients who had disclosed experiencing recent domestic abuse as part of the ordinary advice process.

Those clients were contacted by a trained member of our team and invited to participate in this research. Where possible this was by the same person who undertook the initial advice interview.

Seven participants agreed to be interviewed via their preferred channel (video conferencing, telephone or face to face), with conversations taking between 30 and 90 minutes depending on what issues were disclosed.

At the close of interviews participants were offered details of further support.

Participants received a follow up call 24 hours after the initial interview to ensure that they had not experienced any negative effects as a consequence of discussing their experiences.

Terminology and Limitations of this report

Throughout this report we have used the terminology "victim" and "survivor" interchangeably. That decision is not intended to devalue the experiences of our participants who are still experiencing abuse, however it reflects that many of the needs of our participants do not end when they leave the relationship, but continue to affect them afterwards, in some cases for the remainder of their lives.

Limitations

- This report does not offer a voice to the many victims of abuse who have not yet been able to seek support or do not know what services to turn to.

- The sample set of participants is overwhelmingly made up of cisgendered, heteronormative women, with only a single exception. Domestic abuse is by no means limited to this group, however the vast majority of resources are focussed in this area. This limitation is discussed further in recommendations for improvements to domestic abuse services as we firmly believe that services should be equally accessible and available irrespective of who you are.
- The sample size for this report is relatively small. There are a number of factors impacting this; however overwhelmingly we heard that as a by-product of abuse that victims felt alienated and unable to speak out. We are therefore incredibly grateful to the small number of women who took the time to tell us their story and hope that their experiences allow others to seek support in the future.

Nature and Impact of Abuse

Despite the relatively small number of participants interviewed, the range of experiences disclosed varied widely.

All of our participants had experienced a range of abusive behaviours. This most commonly included coercive control and emotional abuse. However, the women we spoke to told us of their experiences of physical and sexual harm, financial abuse and stalking. The behaviours reported encompassed all of the abuse types contained within the Act.

“He hasn’t physically hurt me but I think mental abuse is worse because physical you can get over, you’ll be in pain but it will get better each day. But the mental side of things your pain doesn’t go better and to be honest it has destroyed me as a person.”

Despite this only one participant was able to report that their partner had been convicted of an offence related to domestic abuse.

Since escaping domestic abuse, the lives of our participants remain detrimentally affected. Two of the women who spoke to us experienced neurological conditions and seizures as a consequence of abuse and at least one had been diagnosed with PTSD.

All of the women we spoke to indicated that they now suffered with mental or physical health problems that had started as a result of their experiences. Most of those conditions were likely to affect them for the remainder of their lives.

Despite the subject of this report, our participants did share some hope for the future. One told us about how they had secured a new safe home, another was building her confidence again and hoped to deliver support to women experiencing abuse in the future.

One of our participants told us that their experience of abuse had happened, they had survived, but they would not let it define them in the future.

Barriers to Accessing Support

All of the women we spoke to have taken the first steps to escaping their abusive relationships, however the route to seeking support was rarely the same. For some, a single incident was enough to trigger them to seek support. In other cases, our participants experienced escalating abuse for in excess of a decade before they felt able to escape.

There was no universal solution to providing a roadmap out of abuse and several of our participants told us that they had multiple interventions with services before making the decision to leave their partners. Furthermore, there were many examples in which our participants described interactions with a variety of organisations or services where the abuse could have been picked up and support offered but none ever was.

Our participants highlighted several incidents of good practice.

Two participants told us that signs of abuse had been identified by their healthcare professionals (therapists, dentists and health visitors). Both spoke highly of the support that was offered by these services and how promptly their cases progressed after healthcare professionals became involved.

My dentist at the walk-in centre, they knew something was wrong, they picked up on it straight away, I showed them the messages and I got so much support from my dentists. I think things like that are really helpful.

"The support was amazing. I can't explain how grateful I am to them."

Others told us that they had turned to employers, family and friends or local advice providers like Citizens Advice for guidance on where to go.

"I had support from my manager from work, so she changed my shifts...I don't do weekends now and she understands when I take like a few days off when they are sick because I'm a single mom now I don't have any friends or anyone who can help me out when they are sick. So at least they understand"

There were however a number of barriers identified by our participants, which prevented them accessing support sooner.

Overcoming these barriers must be seen as a priority to avoid potential detriment to others seeking advice and support;

(i) Lack of Awareness

Our participants, looking back with hindsight, were able to pinpoint incidents throughout their relationships where abuse took place. However most told us that when they lived it on a day-to-day basis, they were blind to much of the abuse, it just felt normal.

Even some types of abuse which might appear more obvious to an outsider, such as physical violence, were often misinterpreted as accidents or as part of some type of intimacy.

The isolating effect of domestic abuse meant that many of the women interviewed did not have a trusted person to confide in about their experiences or have anyone in their lives who was likely to pick up on changes in their personality or wellbeing.

Moreover, many of the women we spoke to were simply unaware at an early stage in their relationships, what abuse was. We heard participants telling us that they were not aware of financial abuse or coercive control until a professional highlighted the issue to them.

There was also a significant lack of knowledge about available services to help people experiencing domestic abuse. One participant told us that it would be helpful if there was a helpline they could call confidentially to discuss what was happening to them. Another told us that there were no services in Halton.

"I didn't know what help was out there... I still don't"

For those who had been able to find services online they told us that online information could be difficult to navigate or was not always available in an accessible format (easy read or translated). Another participant told us that they often struggled to verify whether the online information they found was from a legitimate source.

(ii) Fear of Retaliation

Those experienced with working within the sphere of domestic abuse, will be all too familiar with the paradox faced by those leaving abusive relationships, that the steps to escape abuse are fraught with risk of escalating the abuse further.

One of the women we spoke to told us that her abuser threatened to harm her children or remove them from her care if she reported abuse.

Others explained that even after they had left the relationships, they remained concerned that taking any action would prompt abuse the restart.

"If I start the Court or divorce or anything, because he doesn't want to pay anything. I'm afraid that he will be again like more abusive. I don't want again that situation.

So, I'm trying to avoid that.

Obviously, I want divorce. But I'm afraid if we go to Court or something that it's going to be complicated."

The women we talked to told us about the importance of understanding **a roadmap out of abuse**, so that they can clearly see the steps that need to be taken and can minimise the risk for themselves.

Examples included better access to legal advice around non-molestation orders or information about priority access to secure housing for those fleeing abuse.

(iii) Distrust of Services

Much of the local support offer for Halton is administered by the Local Authority. This approach has a significant benefit in allowing the Authority to package support around the service users and the intention is one that we broadly support.

Unfortunately, for our client group the lack of independence in the support offer was also a significant barrier. One woman told us that she delayed seeking support for domestic abuse because she did not want her children's social worker to find out. She told us that when the social care team became aware they did not offer any support, they just told her if she did not leave that they would remove the children.

Others felt that adult safeguarding responses acted as a barrier to accessing services.

"When you do offload to people, you would be worried that they will then say, 'Oh well, I've got a duty to report this, because of your safety'. That duty needs to not be there, because that is why people won't ring.

"If you ring the police, because you fear for my safety and you bring the police. That's not what I wanted to do. If I wanted to ring the police I would have rung the police. I'm ringing you to talk, to offload to."

One participant raised concerns about the way in which meetings with the Local Authority domestic abuse team were conducted. They told us that the manner and tone of conversations lacked compassion and that they felt blamed by the adviser for not leaving the situation at an earlier stage.

"The domestic abuse person, the woman from the team sort of made you feel like it was your fault for staying too long. Yeah, and that you could have left earlier."

Others highlighted the barriers that legal process both criminal and civil create.

"When you speak with someone, even here, at Citizen Advice. Even now you saying 'Police'. But when you say Police it sounds too much, like 'Oh my God', you know."

"Immediately you think about arresting, about court, about a lot of things, you know? It's the sound too serious when you say about police, you know, so you are trying to avoid that as much as possible?"

For many of our participants these limitations on support meant that they stayed longer in abusive relationships or took no steps to obtain justice.

(iv) Services do not meet their needs

For many the police were the first service they contacted about domestic abuse, however for the majority of our participants the support offer fell far short of their expectations.

One client told us that their partner was arrested, but allowed out on bail after less than 24 hours, so they did not have time to take steps like changing locks, or looking at property hardening measures. They felt the arrest just aggravated the abuser and placed them at even greater risk.

Others told us that the police officers had promised to provide follow up information, however this was never received.

"When I spoke to them, they said they couldn't help me."

"They've never offered me anything..... I did speak to someone, but they said they couldn't help me because I hadn't sought help myself ... When I left, I've gone and done it myself."

Our participants told us that they would often have to repeat their story to multiple different providers, often within the same organisation. This resulted in participants reliving trauma continuously just to access the next step of the support ladder.

One client told us that they had been offered counselling to help them come to terms with their experiences, however the therapist encouraged them to explore unrelated traumas and focussed on the wrong issues. They told us that the counselling had resulted in them experiencing a worsened mental state.

“They started bringing up stuff about my best friend that committed suicide a couple of years ago. I don't want to talk about that. So then I was just like, no, I'm not.

“But every time we went afterwards. I didn't want to speak about it. She just kept circling back to that instead of the situation that I was supposed to be there for. So I just stopped going”

Three of our participants noted the level of paperwork involved fleeing abuse, whether that be court applications, legal aid, witness statements or something else. This was so overwhelming for some participants that they had disengaged from that aspect of their case.

In one case the Dash questionnaire was singled out for criticism as being a box ticking tool used to avoid providing support if not deemed a high enough risk. Our participant stressed that early intervention and prevention services are as important if not more so in preventing domestic abuse in the future.

Almost all of our participants had been told about helplines for victims of domestic abuse, either by ourselves, by other services, or through their own research. However, only a minority had spoken to those services and those who had offered mixed reviews of their benefits. We heard various reasons for why participants felt unable to use these services, however often the barriers included access and fears that partners would check call logs.

“I don't think they should be ringing you, they should wait for you to ring them. Yeah. Don't be ringing and putting that person in a position where he's going to go. 'Who's that? Who's that?' And that's it then.”

Those who did access helpline services told us that they struggled to open up in short phone calls, or that they would never speak to the same adviser again, so although they felt listened to, very little was progressed. In the case of minority groups, the LGBTQ+ community, or male victims, the only real option to access tailored services is via helplines. This barrier therefore is likely to significantly affect those parties.

For many of the women we interviewed, speed was the most important factor in receiving practical interventions. Whether that is the time to implement property hardening measures, respond to calls or secure resettlement. However, too often this expectation was not met. Our participants reported processes involving undue bureaucracy and an excessive risk aversion that prevented efficient resolutions. In one case the use of MARAC meetings was singled out as being an ineffective tool because of the timescales involved in convening these and the absence of practical responses.



(v) A Lack of Diversity.

Those of our participants who were not British Citizens, they told us that when they did receive support it was often difficult for them to access this for several reasons;

- There was a lack of cultural understanding within support services
- Leaflets were generally only available in English
- Helplines primarily offered English language services.

We heard from those participants that they delayed seeking support to escape domestic abuse as they were uncertain of how this would affect their status in the UK and feared that it could leave them stateless, or without money or housing.

The only participant who identified as being LGBTQ+ raised significant concerns about the local offer.

They told us that because the perpetrator of abuse was female, that their experiences were trivialised and ignored. They did not feel that they received validation from support services, or that their experiences were given the same weight as other victims of abuse.

Participants from minority backgrounds were highly critical of the professional support they received. This was in stark contrast to other participants interviewed as part of this research, who praised the intervention of professional services and highlighted the importance of that support in escaping abuse.

Our client voices echoed that of many of the professional services acting in the sphere of domestic abuse which help minority groups or others who do not comfortably fit within the VAWG framework. They told us of the need for “By and For” services and a need for understanding of cultural norms. Many highlighted the importance of lived experience in being able to provide support. The perceived absence of this level of understanding meant that participants felt services were not for them. This issue may go some way to explaining the limitations within the sample set described above.

We contrast the lived experience of our participants with the most recently published [Equality Impact Assessment](#) from Halton BC, dated April 2021. The assessment which looked at the local delivery of domestic abuse services concluded that neither race nor sexuality would impact on the users access to services. Our participants could not support the conclusion of that assessment. We note that we have been unable to test the limitations brought about by gender, however it is averred that similar issues are likely to apply in this case.



(vi) Leaving always means loss

It was a sad reality for many of the women we spoke to that they stayed with an abusive partner for far longer than they needed to because leaving always means loss and uncertainty. In many cases our participants found it easier to accept their “normal”, rather than the risk of what they might face in the future.

Participants told us of continuing emotional ties to relationships, despite the abuse. This tie often led to them accepting unacceptable behaviours for extended periods.

However there are other losses that our participants told us about that acted as barrier to them leaving the abuse;

- Loss of settled accommodation and the things needed to set up a new home.
- Leaving behind possessions
- Loss of memories (lost photos / sentimental items)
- Loss of personal documents

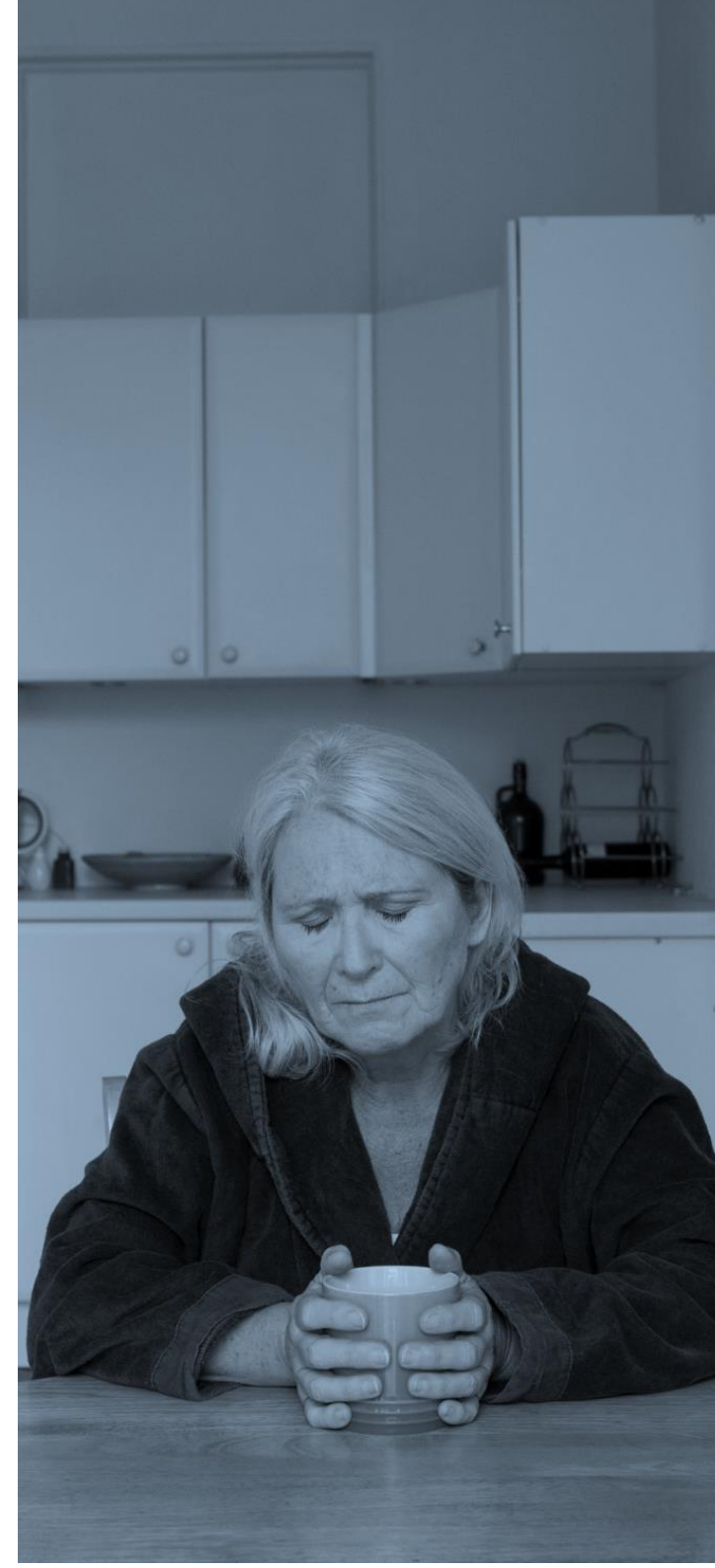
Our participants also noted that they would be left without access to income to live on.

Several of our participants also voiced feelings of guilt about how their children would be affected and this prevented them from moving on.

***“I can remove his parental rights, change our name and things just to completely cut ties, but I don't. I don't wanna take that away from her. [She's] a daddy's girl.*”**

“So, for me it's hard because I don't want to take that away from her, if that makes sense. I get upset when I think about it.”

Several of the women we spoke to were still going through this loss more than 12 months after they escaped the abuse. One woman told us that all of the support ended as soon as the partner was removed. We heard that there was little assistance to rebuild your life or to start again.



What Could Good Look Like

We invited our participants to tell us what an ideal domestic abuse service would look like. Many of the things asked for by our services users should come as no surprise;

(i) Validation: By and large our participants wanted to be believed and have their experiences validated. The majority of participants valued being listened to as being more important than interventions.

“You just need someone next to you saying ‘You can do it’.”

(ii) Single Point of Contact: Our participants told us that having a single named point of contact was crucial to accessing support, it helps to establish trust and assists in maintaining a consistent level of care throughout the process. Most importantly for our participants it would minimise the need to relive trauma through continuously repeating their experiences.

“I think it should be one building, one building that has different things in it like, because domestic violence comes in so many different ways you know, physical, not physical.... people lose their houses, people lose this, lose that, lose their money.

“Everything should be under one roof where you know you can go, and you're gonna feel safe. And they're gonna sit there and they're gonna listen to you and they're gonna help you with what you need. With all of the different things.”

(iii) Practical Support: Several of the women we spoke to talked about being left with “mountains of paperwork”, or forms that they did not know what to do with. In some cases this prolonged the period of time that they spent with their abuser and in others it meant they simply missed out on valuable help.

Our participants stressed the importance of practical assistance to fill in Court form, to apply for re-housing, or to access benefits and grants.

Practical support also included steps to make our participants feel safe in their homes. The women we spoke to stressed the importance of having property hardening measures including cameras, fire retardant letterboxes, reinforced locking and panic buttons fitted at the earliest possible opportunity.

(iv) Timely Interventions: The women interviewed for this report told us that they felt time was of the essence in providing support. For many that meant same day support. They stressed that delay allowed them to minimise their experiences and meant that they were more likely to avoid making difficult decisions.

(v) “By and For” Services: Empathy and understanding were crucial elements for the women we spoke to. Some of our participants indicated a preference for speaking to others with lived experience of going through abusive relationships and having survived. Others told us that it was important for them to speak to people who understood the cultural implications of leaving an abusive relationship, or who understood how support might be affected by their circumstances.

Crucially we heard from the women in this piece of research that they preferred to receive support from someone who was perceived to be of the same gender.

Sarah's Story



Sarah met her partner in 2017. They worked together becoming friends and later forming a relationship.

In 2018 Sarah fell pregnant, and this was the trigger for abuse. They had a gender reveal party, he was using cocaine all day and then started being abusive. Sarah was unaware of his using drugs prior to that time.

The abuse got worse throughout the pregnancy.

"I was not allowed to talk to other men and I was expected to become a domestic servant serving drinks and meals when he returned from work each evening, even when I was working later. If I broke these rules then he became aggressive, throwing objects around the house and at me"

After the birth of their child Sarah's partner continued to use cocaine more heavily. Sarah could not ignore the issues anymore when it started to affect their daughter.

"I came home late in the evening. I left her with him for a few minutes. He was just playing computer games. She became unsettled and disturbed his playing so he shoved her Moses basket across the living room floor. She was uninjured, but I started packing to leave immediately"

When Sarah made the decision to leave the abuse escalated further.

"He was shouting at me, and he grabbed me by the throat, forcing me up against the garden fence."

Sarah was supported by the local domestic abuse services but the support soon ended after Sarah secured a new home. However, the abuse escalated further, "he threatened to burn down my home with me and our daughter in it. He used my personal information to gain access to money in my name and used knowledge he acquired during our relationship to make online transactions"

Sarah was stalked by her ex-partner for 3 years after their relationship ended. "He followed me as I took our young daughter for a walk. He continued to follow us for about 20 minutes.

We had to hide in a Children's Centre. He told his friends and family to take pictures of me and her when we were out. He would send these to me, if there was another man, even in the background the abuse would be worse."

There have been no further incidents in the last 12 months, but Sarah told us that she is terrified of doing anything that would draw attention to her or her daughter in case it starts again. Sarah is trying to get debt advice to deal with the debts she has been left with by the relationship but is scared some of the options will mean her address is on a public register.

The role of advice agencies like Citizens Advice Halton

As we have seen throughout this report, the lasting impact of domestic abuse is often overlooked. For many of the women we spoke to, maintaining economic stability was a key factor in extending the period of abuse.

What we heard from our participants was that there are currently significant voids in services which can only be met by an adequately funded advice provision;

(i) Comprehensive Information and Practical Guidance

Our participants consistently stressed the importance of practical assistance to navigate the complex issues they faced after experiencing abuse. Citizens Advice is uniquely positioned to provide this, offering crucial support in several key areas:

Debt and Budgeting Support: We heard a number of participants tell us how their partners had sought finance in their names, or

how they were coerced into taking on additional debts. Citizens Advice can assist participants to dispute those liabilities, or make protective registrations with CIFAS to minimise the risk of further abuse. In 2024/25 Citizens Advice Halton supported participants with almost £20 million of debts, including advice to write off or challenge liability.

Other participants told us that they needed help to manage budgets and balance their spending.

"I've lost all concept of money, didn't know that money, I didn't even know how to go and do a shop. I couldn't even go and do like a week Shopping."

Advice services like Citizens Advice are already delivering budgeting advice, supporting hundreds of participants to better understand their bills and to develop a better financial literacy.

Welfare Support: Participants told us they were often left without access to income and needed help to rebuild their lives economically. Citizens Advice Halton can provide critical assistance such as applying for Universal Credit, which passports participants to further help with prescriptions, healthy start vouchers and other forms of local social welfare. This is particularly vital for those who have experienced financial control or are

leaving with limited resources. One participant told us she had "lost all concept of money" and needed help with basic tasks like shopping. Another highlighted how Citizen's Advice helped her apply for Universal Credit to cover childcare costs, allowing her to work and manage her children's schooling.

"So, I come here, in Citizens Advice to ask for some help. [They helped me] apply for Universal Credit as well. They're paying me for after school club as well, so that's covered me a lot, so I can still work normally and be with kids in the afternoon and all weekend, so I can see already the change [in the children]"

In 2024/25 our Welfare Rights advisers helped participants to access over £4 million in unclaimed benefits and nearly £1.5 million in grants and charitable support.

Housing Assistance: Our participants often faced the loss of settled accommodation and the challenge of setting up a new home. Citizens Advice Halton can help individuals understand their housing rights, access emergency accommodation (like refuges), apply for housing, and secure properties. This can involve practical guidance and support in getting the necessary documents to support priority housing bands and assisting with setting up bills and basic household needs.

We repeatedly heard the importance of our participants feeling safe in their homes and the need for swift practical interventions, including property hardening. Our Advice workers are well placed to advise on, coordinate and liaise with other organisations to get physical safety measures such as installing security lights, changing locks, and securing fire retardant letterboxes. Support can also extend to workplace safety measures and employers' roles and responsibilities for their workers.

Legal Guidance and Navigating Bureaucracy: Many of the women we talked to felt overwhelmed by "mountains of paperwork" and a lack of understanding regarding legal processes. Citizens Advice Halton advisers are trained to inform individuals about their legal rights and options, such as non-molestation orders, parental rights, and the process of divorce, including how to access legal aid, especially when domestic abuse has occurred.

Access to comprehensive legal advice can be a challenge, with individuals sometimes unaware of their entitlements or needing help navigating complex paperwork. Citizen's Advice in-house services are well-placed to support people through these often-complex processes.

(ii) Emotional and Psychological Support

Our participants consistently valued being listened to and having their experiences validated, often more than immediate interventions.

Listening and Validation: A primary function of the Citizens Advice service is to provide a non-judgmental and empathetic listening ear, and to offer tailored advice to each person's individual need. This is highly valued, especially when individuals feel disbelieved, embarrassed, or blamed by others, as some reported feeling from other services. These are core values embedded across the Citizens Advice network.

"Sometimes it's even enough to just listen and give you emotional support. That's very important and encourage you to keep going, to try to be calm"

Emotional Encouragement and Confidence Building: The lasting impact of abuse often leaves individuals struggling with mental health problems and a loss of confidence. The advice sector can help individuals regain confidence, providing the "push" and "hand-holding" necessary to undertake practical tasks like shopping or re-engage with social activities after experiencing isolation.

(iii) Accessibility and Confidentiality

Participants highlighted several key characteristics of services that would make them more accessible and effective:

Reduced Stigma and Anonymous Access: Our participants told us they wanted discrete, face-to-face services that did not explicitly label them as "victims of domestic abuse," or where other service users would necessarily understand they had experienced abuse.

They preferred services embedded into other discrete organisations which they could access anonymously and where they would get a safe, confidential space and feel secure enough to disclose abuse without fear of repercussions from their abuser or societal judgment.

"If I would have known there was somewhere I could go that was confidential, where I could go and speak to someone. Then I would have gone. Because that would have helped me"

Citizens Advice shares a commitment to safeguarding, however our independence from other statutory organisations means we can have open and frank conversations with our participants about the limitations of confidentiality and provide them the opportunity to make informed decisions about what they wish to disclose.

Inter-agency Liaison: For those who can access help from an IDVA, they will receive support to navigate between organisations and liaise with relevant providers. However, this support only exists for those with the highest assessed risk.

“Here Citizen Advice, you can give really a lot of information and advice and really all the staff are nice and polite and don't force you to talk about something if they see that you are upset. They just trying to help you always.

First time when I come here, I was really like, afraid that it's gonna be maybe too late, you know? So yeah, I get a lot of information here and I can, especially [to] people who are not from this country, recommend to come first here because here they can get the most information what they need...”

The advice sector is not bound by an assessment of risk, so can act as a single point of contact, speaking on behalf of the individual to various agencies (e.g., social services, police, housing) to coordinate support and prevent conflicting information or the need for the individual to repeatedly tell their traumatic

story. This helps victims navigate complex systems when they are already overwhelmed.

Continuity of Support (Single Named Adviser): Many of the women we spoke to highlight the importance of a single point of contact. This helps to build trust, reduces the burden of repeatedly recounting traumatic experiences, and fosters a stronger relationship, allowing the adviser to “get to know you”. An advice casework service is able to deliver this support.

Multiple Access Points: The majority of participants preferred a face to face service, with access to both pre-arranged appointments and drop-in sessions for immediate advice. Helplines are also seen as vital for those unable to leave the home or needing urgent, discrete support, although some participants noted challenges with opening up in short calls or not speaking to the same adviser. The most important issue for our participants was that their issue was handled immediately, due to perceived risks linked to call backs.

In conclusion

Agencies like Citizens Advice Halton can serve as a vital lifeline, offering comprehensive, accessible, and confidential support across various domains – financial, housing, legal, and emotional. We can step in where institutional responses are perceived as unhelpful or too formal, acting as a crucial bridge towards healing and independence for individuals who feel isolated, disbelieved, or overwhelmed by their experiences.

There are examples of successful projects run by Citizens Advice services where they have been commissioned to provide a dedicated, fast-track, Information, Advice & Advocacy support service to people experiencing domestic abuse (e.g. in Warrington).

Such services have been found to reduce the demand on stretched IDVA services and allow greater opportunity for early intervention before a point of crisis is reached.

At a time when Citizens Advice Halton is having to significantly scaling back its universal offer, we would encourage commissioners and funders to explore the benefits of commissioning a targeted Information, Advice & Advocacy service for this vulnerable section of Halton’s society.

Recommendations

(i) A challenge for all professionals to proactively ask about Domestic Abuse.

Our participants told us that most commonly their gateway to leaving abuse was through a professional who identified the signs and took the time to ask.

There are examples throughout this report of good practice from medical practitioners and social workers, but too often these signs are missed, ignored or disregarded as insignificant. On average our participants experienced abuse for 8 years before receiving help. That is 8 years too long!

We would recommend the development of a toolkit including meaningful resources so that practitioners are empowered to ask service users about abuse and have available the tools to deliver meaningful interventions.

Medium to long term we would like to see all Local Authority, NHS and voluntary sector partners that engage with the public be

obliged to ask about experiences of domestic abuse and that this is a consideration within commissioning processes.

(ii) A dedicated base within an anonymous organisation

This report advocates for a cross Halton resource with a permanent base within an independent advice or support provider. This degree of separation is essential in engendering the trust of service users, whilst offering an appropriate degree of confidentiality and anonymity.

This directly responds to the lived experiences of survivors of abuse, who have tried to access local support systems in the recent past;

- Our participants told us they wanted discrete, face to face services.
- All of the participants told us they did not want services that labelled their services as victims of domestic abuse, or where other service users would necessarily understand they had experienced abuse.
- Our participants all told us that they wanted to see services embedded into

another discrete organisation where they could access anonymously and feel that what they discuss will not be shared.

- Several participants stressed that they would prefer a service that was independent of the Local Authority or the wider public sector due to fears over a duty to report possible safeguarding issues.

(iii) Awareness Campaign

For many of our participants, their experiences were normal relationships. Some told us that they were unaware that financial abuse or coercive control was actually domestic abuse.

Much has been done to bring domestic abuse to the forefront of the public's attention, but this appears to have missed a significant number of those who are living that type of abuse.

Participants valued hearing the lived experience of other survivors over leaflets and social media postings.

We would also encourage local educators to deliver better relationship training as part of the local offer at primary and secondary level.

(iv) Better promotion of Local Services

Several of our participants talked about the need for publicity of services in discrete locations, most frequently they discussed Doctor's Surgeries, Pharmacies and Local shopping facilities. These were locations where our participants felt they would be able to identify the information without being overly observed or seen by abusers.

We recommend the development of a multi-agency, multi-channel marketing action plan, which uses the lived experience of survivors to inspire others to seek support.

(v) A package of Support

Domestic abuse does not end when the perpetrator leaves, but for our participants that was often where the support ended. Our participants highlighted support needs including confidence building, budgeting, securing accommodation, access benefit entitlements, changing names, registering children with new schools, accessing grants and charitable support to rebuild a home, and dealing with residual debts. That role needs to be adequately resourced and cannot fall on existing Citizens Advice services, who have insufficient capacity to provide a fast-track dedicated service.

(vi) "By and For Services" that meet the needs of everyone they serve

The experience of one of our participants who felt that the gender of their abuser significantly influenced the support they received highlights the need for change. However, the absence of a male voice speaks at greater volume still.

Domestic abuse can affect anybody and local services need to reflect that a one size fits all model is unlikely to provide the best outcomes. We firmly believe that any universal domestic abuse service must be capable of meeting the needs of all service users fairly and without causing disadvantage.

Therefore, we would seek to compel all services to publish Equality Impact Assessment for how their services meet the needs of communities falling outside of the VAWG model and provide commitment to developing bespoke models to meet these service users' unique needs, going beyond helplines and remote delivery.

Final Word

We would like to express our deep appreciation for the bravery of all the women who told us their story, so that others may gain better access and quality of support in the future. Without their experiences nothing could change.

The challenge is now for us and our partners, at Halton BC, the NHS, local social landlords and the wider voluntary and community sector to do better.

We all need to work together to end the pattern of abuse which has blighted our community and to implement the changes needed to ensure that all victims of abuse receive the support they need.

**Citizens Advice Halton
June 2025**