

## Victims and Prisoners Bill – provision of child-specific advocates for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence – new Freedom of Information (FOI) data

### Summary

- Too many children are victims of sexual abuse and domestic abuse, however they often face a postcode lottery when trying to access child-specific advocates, including Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisers and Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (CHIDVAs and CHISVAs).
- Evidence shows that **1 in 5 children will be exposed to domestic abuse before turning 18 years old**,<sup>1</sup> and that **1 in 20 children will experience child sexual abuse in their childhood**.<sup>2</sup>
- An FOI request by Barnardo's found just **16.9% of all advocates** commissioned to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual abuse by police and crime commissioners in the financial year 2023-24 **were there to specifically support children**, in the form of CHIDVAs and CHISVAs.
- Further, the FOI found that more than an additional **1900 FTE CHIDVAs and almost 500 FTE CHISVAs** were needed to sufficiently support the number of child victims of domestic abuse and the number of child victims of sexual abuse identified by local authorities.<sup>3</sup>
- A coalition of children's charities is calling on the Government to place a duty on commissioners to commission sufficient, specific support and advocacy services for child victims.
- We are also calling for the Government to place a duty on the Ministry of Justice to develop statutory guidance for the roles of Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisers and Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisers.

### Background

Sexual abuse and domestic abuse have a devastating impact on children. The effects can be complex and wide-ranging and for many, stay with them for the rest of their lives.<sup>4</sup> For example, as adults, victims and survivors of child sexual abuse may experience mental health problems, drug or alcohol issues, and difficulties with employment.<sup>5</sup>

Further, as set out in Barnardo's *Not Just Collateral Damage* report,<sup>6</sup> children who are exposed to domestic abuse continue to experience mental and physical health problems throughout their childhood and into adulthood. One study found that over half of children who had been exposed to domestic abuse (52%) had developed behavioural problems, over a third (39%) had difficulties adjusting at school and nearly two thirds (60%) felt responsible or to blame for negative

<sup>1</sup> Home Office, 2018. [Children affected by domestic abuse to benefit from £8 million fund](#)

<sup>2</sup> NSPCC, 2021. [Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse](#)

<sup>3</sup> 1918.3 FTE CHIDVAs and 497.3 FTE CHISVAs are required to sufficiently support the number of child victims of domestic abuse and the number of child victims of sexual abuse identified by local authorities.

<sup>4</sup> NSPCC, [Effects of Child Abuse](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Barnardo's, 2020. [Not just collateral damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children](#)

events.<sup>7</sup> Studies also show that in adolescence, children and young people who have been exposed to domestic abuse can experience higher rates of interpersonal problems with other family members, and have an increased rate of risk taking and anti-social behaviour, such as school truancy, early sexual activity, and substance misuse.<sup>8</sup>

Too many children are experiencing abuse before the age of 18. In the year to 31 March 2023, data from local authorities' child in need assessments across England shows that:

- 48,780 risk assessments identified concerns regarding child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation and child on child sexual abuse.<sup>9</sup>
- 160,140 risk assessments identified concerns about the child's parent/carer being the victim of domestic abuse – just under one third of all episodes with assessment factors recorded.<sup>10</sup>

However, these figures do not represent the true scale of abuse, and are likely a vast underestimate of the prevalence. Many child victims go unidentified due to various reasons, including victim-blaming attitudes, and a reliance on children making disclosures of their abuse. Studies estimate that:

- 1 in 5 children will be exposed to domestic abuse before turning 18 years old.<sup>11</sup>
- 1 in 20 children will experience child sexual abuse in their childhood.<sup>12</sup>

With the population of children in England and Wales being approximately 13.7 million this means that **more than 2.7 million children will experience domestic abuse before they turn 18**, and **approximately 686,000 children will be sexually abused**.<sup>13</sup>

### What are child advocates?

CHIDVAs and CHISVAs play a vital role in supporting child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation and domestic abuse. They offer child-specific support with the practical challenges and emotional trauma of abuse and exploitation, including helping children to understand and navigate the criminal justice process, acting as a point of contact with criminal justice agencies, signposting support services and providing emotional and wellbeing support.

Children in care, a child living in a mental health setting and a child in custody all have the right to request an advocate, albeit this isn't always upheld. However, this recognition is not given to child victims of the most serious crimes, including child sexual abuse and exploitation and domestic abuse.

<sup>7</sup> SafeLives, 2014. [In plain sight: The evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse](#)

<sup>8</sup> Stiles MM, 2002. [Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children. American Family Physician](#)

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education, 2023. [Children in Need reporting year 2023](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Home Office, 2018. [Children affected by domestic abuse to benefit from £8 million fund](#)

<sup>12</sup> NSPCC, 2021. [Statistics briefing: child sexual abuse](#)

<sup>13</sup> According to Census 2021 data, the population of 0-19 year olds in England and Wales is 13,727,427. [Office of National Statistics, 2022. Estimates of the population of the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland](#)

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

Barnardo's FOI request which received 33 full responses from 43 Police and Crime Commissioner's offices, shows that CHISVAs and CHIDVAs are not sufficiently recognised or invested in, and a gap remains between the identified number of child victims of domestic abuse and child sexual abuse, and the number of child-specific advocates commissioned. This means that child victims are facing a postcode lottery in access these vital services.

The abuse that young people experience can and is likely to look different to the abuse that adults experience, impacting them in different ways. This requires a separate response which can include different risk factors, safeguarding processes and separate safety planning.

The role of ISVAs and IDVAs is well established,<sup>14</sup> and as found in the FOI, the roles are significantly more invested in than CHIDVAs and CHISVAs. IDVAs and ISVAs are primarily commissioned and trained to support adult victims and survivors, and can often have demanding caseload. Expecting them to also support child victims – who require a different response – will make this caseload heavier.

A report from SafeLives found that existing adult domestic abuse and support are not always equipped to meet children and young people's needs, and do not provide this child-specific need.<sup>15</sup> It is not sufficient for adult ISVAs and IDVAs to be seen as able to provide support for child victims of sexual and domestic abuse. Data from SafeLives shows that last year, just 1% of clients accessing IDVA services were under the age of 18 – despite the high prevalence of domestic abuse in this age group.<sup>16</sup>

The Children's Coalition working on the Victims and Prisoners Bill, led by the NSPCC, is calling for the Government to use the Bill to:

- Place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient, child-specific support services and advocacy services for child victims of abuse and exploitation. The advocacy services should include but are not limited to CHISVAs, CHIDVAs, and Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs). ([Amendment 108](#))
- Place a duty on the Victims Commissioner and the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment into support services for child victims to ensure full transparency. ([Amendment 109](#))
- Develop separate statutory guidance for the roles of CHIDVAs and CHISVAs, as per Clause 15 of the Bill.

<sup>14</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2023. '[Patchwork of Provision](#)' [How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales](#).

<sup>15</sup> Safe Lives. [Safe Young Lives: Young People and domestic abuse](#)

<sup>16</sup> SafeLives. [Insights Idva dataset 2021-22: Adult Independent domestic violence \(Idva\) services](#)

## Findings

You can find the methodology in the [annex](#).

In response to our FOI request, we found that the following number of FTE CHIDVAs, CHISVAs, IDVAs and ISVAs were commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioners:

CHIDVAs			CHISVAs			Co-commissioned CHIDVAs and CHISVAs with local authorities		
2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
62.5	77.9	75.75	80.4	102.08	104.71	6.5	14.4	15.4

IDVAs			ISVAs			Co-commissioned IDVAs and ISVAs with local authorities		
2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
356.1	397.32	409.12	264.61	312.45	330.06	173.45	201.1	222.31

From these figures, we have calculated that **just 16.9% of all advocates commissioned to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual abuse by police and crime commissioners in the financial year 2023-24 were there to specifically support children, in the form of CHIDVAs and CHISVAs.**

This is despite children being disproportionately affected by these forms of abuse; for example, children are the victims in 40% of all sexual offences, yet make up just 20% of the total population.<sup>17</sup>

### Sufficient CHIDVAs and CHISVAs to meet the number of child victims of abuse

To understand whether the number of CHISVAs and CHIDVAs commissioned by PCCs is sufficient to meet the demand, we have used the Child in Need assessment figures up to 31 March 2023. Whilst these are not representative of all children who have experienced domestic or sexual abuse, they do show the number of children who are visible to statutory agencies.

Evidence suggests that a safe annual caseload for CHIDVAs is 80 cases, as children's cases on average need a greater length of support than adults' cases.<sup>18</sup> This is therefore the caseload that we have used when estimating how many CHIDVAs are needed to support children identified by child in need assessments.

For CHISVAs, evidence is limited as to what a safe annual caseload is for advocates to hold, however there is some data available as to what the average is. For an ISVA services in the Midlands, an average annual caseload carried by

<sup>17</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2023. [Dataset: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales](#)

<sup>18</sup> SafeLives. [A Safe Fund: costing domestic abuse provision for the whole family](#)

each ISVA is 60 cases.<sup>19</sup> Further, a job description from The Blue Door set out that it is recommended that a CHISVA carries a caseload of 80–100 cases per year.<sup>20</sup> Based on this, and the evidence for CHIDVAs, we have used a recommended caseload of 80 cases per year for CHISVAs to hold when estimating how many CHISVAs are needed to support children identified by child in need assessments.

### CHIDVAs

Using the figure that 160,140 risk assessments identified concerns about the child's parent/ carer being the victim of domestic abuse in the year to March 2023, and a case load of 80 cases per CHIDVA, we estimate that **2001.8**

**CHIDVAs** are needed to provide a sufficient response for child victims of domestic abuse each year.

However, just **83.5 CHIDVAs** were commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioners in the financial year 2023/24, meaning that an additional **1918.3 CHIDVAs were needed to sufficiently support the identified number of child victims of domestic abuse.**

### CHISVAs

Using the figure that 48,780 risk assessments identified concerns regarding child sexual abuse in the year to March 2023, and a case load of 80 cases per CHISVA, we estimate that **609.8 CHISVAs** are needed to provide a sufficient response for child victims of child sexual abuse each year.

In the financial year 2023/24, just **112.4 CHISVAs** were commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioners, meaning that **an additional 497.3 CHISVAs were needed to support the identified number of victims of child sexual abuse.**

Of course, PCCs are not the only authority that commissions CHIDVAs and CHISVAs, and local authorities also play a role in commissioning these roles. However, evidence shows that local authorities also do not commission a sufficient number of CHIDVAs and CHISVAs, with a recent FOI by the NSPCC finding that less than one quarter of local authorities said that they provide dedicated support for children and young people in the form of an ISVA/IDVA.<sup>21</sup>

For more information, please contact Jess Edwards, Senior Policy Adviser for Childhood Harms, Barnardo's at [jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk)

### Annex: Methodology

Barnardo's wanted to understand how many Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (CHIDVAs) and Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (CHISVAs) Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have commissioned over the past three financial years – 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2023-24.

<sup>19</sup> The Heroine Collective, 2019. [Women's health series: Independent Sexual Violence Advisors](#)

<sup>20</sup> [The Blue Door. Role description for a Children's Independent Sexual Violence Adviser](#)

<sup>21</sup> The Independent, 2023. [Gap in support for young people who have suffered abuse – NSPCC.](#)

We issued a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, which was sent to all Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and closed on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

We received 38 responses to our request from the 43 Police and Crime Commissioners we approached. Of these, 33 provided us with a full data set. We used the responses from PCCs with the full data sets to inform our findings.