

## **Domestic Abuse, Victim Blaming & Re-victimization**

This report covers the topic of victim blaming and re-victimization primarily within the context of children social services.

This is part of the set of reports we have written around the topic of children social services asking questions that have been put to us multiple times by parents and families who have had child social services involvement.

To gain a better understanding of the miscommunication between families and children social services the reporter asked 44 different freedom of request questions, some of these questions were linked by topic or worded slightly differently to see if the reporter would gain different answers. There are 207 child social services FOI areas around the UK. When we say FOI child social services areas the reporter is referring to the main councils and or organisations you can send freedom of information requests to. Northern Ireland residents have to send their FOI requests to 1 of 5 health trusts.

Due to the way some areas work if you send multiple questions within a 30 day period they combine the multiple requests into a single request and then cite the 18 hours time limit as a reason for refusal. Other reasons for refusal include requesting an opinion, requesting information that is not readily available in a format that can be easily accessed, needing to individually check files and of course asking questions they believe are subjective in nature.

This resulted in 74 FOI responses outright refusing to answer any questions. We were advised to send these requests directly to the councils instead as they could, if inclined to do so answer the questions without a time limit. Not being deterred the 44 questions were sent to the individual councils, explaining the FOI predicament and requesting they answer the questions if possible. The responses from these enquiries were not much better than the FOI ones. In some cases we were accused of trying to insight hatred and biased towards children social services.

Family Lives Matter would like to thank the FOI areas who kindly responded to our questions as they showed a willingness to engage in our research towards better understanding.

## Family Lives Matter

Under the topic of Domestic abuse, Victim blaming and re-victimization we asked the following 6 questions.

1. How often does child social services victim blame a domestic abuse victim / survivor?
2. Are child social services biased against domestic abuse victims/ survivors when their name is mentioned at a future date? Do child social services accept that people can change once away from the abuse?
3. How long do you need to be separated or divorced from a domestic abuse perpetrator before child social services accept that you have nothing to do with your abuser? Accept you are a separate entity
4. What is the council's position on Victim blaming and does the council believe that it is down to the victim to stop their abusive partner from abusing them
5. Is there any evidence, reports or statistics in regards to how many victims of child/domestic abuse end up committing suicide due to victim-blaming / shaming, or re-victimisation by child social services, Cafcass or ex-partners allegations? information, statistics from per year from 2010 either calendar or financial year is acceptable. If there is no evidence, reports etc is this an area child social services or any other governmental body are looking into?
6. Does the council or child social services believe there is a connection between domestic abuse/ violence and the victim suffering from Stockholm syndrome? Has the council or social services done any studies to prove or disprove this theory?

These questions will be answered individually using the information we gathered during our FOI and council requests as well as looking at the viewpoint of families.

Before we look at the answers to these questions it is important to understand the terminology the reporter is using in regards to victim blaming and re-victimization as there appears to be some confusion as to what these things entail. Most people and councils understand what constitutes domestic abuse. However, we will also include information pertaining to this at the end of this report to ensure we have covered each topic.

## **Victim Blaming.**

Victim blaming and re-victimization have many cross over points but it is imperative that we understand both as separate entities if we intend to tackle the problems.

Most people believe that victim blaming only occurs when rape is the deciding factor of the abuse and that it only happens to women. This is a false narrative, a myth.

Males can be victim blamed just as much as females and victim blaming does not only occur in regards to rape victims. Victim blaming happens more than people would like to admit and covers a wide range of incidents including traffic accidents, robbery, assault, bullying, prejudice related incidents as well as rape and domestic abuse. This is not a substantial list of possibilities resulting in the victim being blamed.

Victim blaming is exactly what it says, it is when the victim is blamed for what they have been through. It is when the victim is told how they could have avoided the issue or stopped the perpetrator rather than taking the perpetrator to task over their actions.

Where domestic abuse is concerned this includes statements or questions like 'Why didn't you leave?', 'why did you stay with him/her?', 'Couldn't you tell what was happening.', 'Why didn't you report this to the police/ doctor etc.' These are examples of questions or statements asking why the victim didn't do something and where the victim is blamed for not stopping the abuse. Instead of doing this the authorities or people in general should be asking the perpetrator questions like 'why did you hit your partner?', 'Do you believe that is the correct way of behaving?', 'What would you do, feel like if someone did that to you?'

Telling a victim of domestic abuse that they have failed to protect their children is another form of victim blaming. These are parents who through no fault of their own have been degraded to the point of not being able to speak out, protect themselves or have felt they have nowhere to turn.

We understand that this is a controversial view point but it is also true. Domestic abuse victims already beat themselves up because they feel like they are a failure and they feel this way because it is how they've been made to feel.

No one goes into a relationship with the knowledge that they are entering an abusive relationship. By the time they realise they are in an abusive relationship most no longer have a support network and feel they won't be believed.

## Re-victimization

If you look up the word re-victimization online looking for a definition you'll be met with lots of information that states this is when a child who was abused goes on to become a victim of domestic abuse, or when a rape victim is raped more than once.

But, let's look at this a little closer. The real definition is to make someone a victim again. In the context of emotional and mental abuse this includes continually bringing up the trauma they've already experienced in a negative way.

When talking about domestic violence this can also include the authorities continually bringing up what that person experienced during the domestic abuse situation, not accepting that they are not the same entity as the abuser, not accepting that they are no longer with the abuser in some way.

Accusing the victim of being the abuser is another example. To expand on this example, a parent is the victim of sexual abuse by their partner and then get told they have a lack of sexual boundaries because they were sexually abused or, worse still, is when the victim of sexual abuse is accused of being a sexual abuser without any evidence. Which goes back to the very old and unsubstantiated thought process of because you've been abused you'll go on to abuse. There are thousands of abuse victims who never go on to abuse another person. Just because a few abuse victims do end up as abusers themselves due to not being given the right help doesn't mean that all abuse victims go on to abuse others.

Which is like saying because you've been burgled you'll go on to burgle other people. Utter nonsense in most cases.

Most domestic abuse victims will go on to suffer from PTSD. This can range from mild cases that do not last very long to severe cases which continue for years if not the rest of the victims life. When they are constantly faced with having their trauma brought back up by the authorities and used against them (Yes, bringing this up constantly as a statement of fact is seen as using it against them) then this brings back the trauma, which re-victimizes them. RE in re-victimize stands for recurring. Which, brings us back to the official standpoint found when searching the meaning online . A recurring victim.

What most people do not realise that this can cause more damage than the original incident because over time the victim starts to believe they will never overcome the original trauma even after therapeutic intervention.

## Family Lives Matter

How often does child social services victim blame a domestic abuse victim / survivor?

Not surprisingly there are no statistics regarding this question. FOI responses stated it would take over 18 hours to check each file individually to look for victim blaming.

The responses received included a number of 'we do not record this information'. 'Social services do not blame victims of domestic abuse, do not operate a blame culture'.

Other responses included that the child social services offer support to both the victim and perpetrators of domestic abuse throughout the assessment process. That they work to help the children who have witnessed the domestic abuse.

One of our favourite responses was the number of councils that told us it is not good practice for any victim to feel as if they are to blame for the abuse and where they try not to blame the victim, we should speak to victims of domestic abuse who have also had child social services involvement to find out how many of them felt blamed by social services.

On the other end of the scale were the councils who stated the question was based on a premise that child social services do this routinely and that all we wanted was to have this quantified.

As such the responses gained were child social services do not victim blame. Please take note that there were 74 councils who refused to answer any of our questions and many others who refused to answer this question.

Yes, we have spoken to families who have been in domestic abuse situations as well as having child social services involvement and our findings are that over 80% felt as if they were victim blamed.

However, it also needs to be stated that many of the people we have spoken to have historic cases, which means over five years have elapsed since their cases.

As such, along with the new domestic violence act we hope that the issue of people feeling victim blamed by the local authority starts and continues to fall.

This does not detract from the number of families who felt victim blamed over the years.

## Family Lives Matter

Are child social services biased against domestic abuse victims/ survivors when their name is mentioned at a future date? Do child social services accept that people can change once away from the abuse?

Much the same as the last question, we received a lot of this doesn't fall under a FOI request as you are asking for an opinion type responses, along with the refused to answer ones. As such, we thank every council who offered a different type of response.

The other responses comprised of being told that the local authorities always work in the best interests of the child and that they follow government guidelines in this respect. They also told us that children social services agree that people can change once away from the abusive relationship but everything is looked at on a case by case basis for the best interest of the child.

This is where we do need to point out that when it comes to anything involving child social services the child is the main interest of the local authority as is rightfully so and that they are bound by law to take the best interests of the child over the best interest of the parent.

Does this mean that they should constantly bring up a previous domestic abuse situation, we would argue against this unless the parent has gone back to the abuser after years of separation. If you research any valid organisations such as womens refuge etc they have conducted studies and have years of experience dealing with domestic abuse victims and as such they understand that it can and generally does take a number of separations from the abuser before the victim manages to stay separated from the abuser. At one point I believe the statistics were that it took 7 attempts before the separations were successful. By this I mean women went back to the abusers on average 6 times before they finally got away for good. This was a number of years ago and it is hoped that this number has decreased.

This question relates to survivors of domestic abuse, ones who have managed to disengage from that abuse and rebuild or start to rebuild their lives. It has come to our attention from a number of sources that child social services cite previous domestic abuse as a reason to get involved with families. The FOI replies we received stated that previous domestic abuse is not always used as a reason for current involvement, that the history is however, taken into consideration and that they accept that people can change.

This would be an example of miscommunication between the local authority and the parent/s. The parent believes that the local authority is using prior domestic abuse as a reason to get involved and the local authority state this is only mentioned in an historical context.

Without looking into each case individually, it is impossible for the reporter to say which version of events is correct. As part of any child social services investigation any historical content is mentioned in case it holds a bearing on the current situation. However, if a parent manages to get away from a previous domestic abuse relationship it should be looked at from a positive viewpoint. Hopefully, local authorities view it in this light and state as much.

As there are no statistics regarding this issue it is difficult for the reporter to express an objective view for either side of the equation.

Family lives matter hope that by raising this question the local authorities will reevaluate the way they treat domestic abuse survivors and we are sure with the introduction of the new domestic abuse act this should soon become an issue of the past.

## Family Lives Matter

How long do you need to be separated or divorced from a domestic abuse perpetrator before child social services accept that you have nothing to do with your abuser? Accept you are a separate entity.

This is a good follow on question to our last one and as expected the responses we received ranged from this is not a FOI request to refused. Including a couple of councils who linked this to the previous questions and stated we were trying to substantiate an incorrect premise and causing misinformation to be spread to the masses. Got to love the way they leaped to an assumption based on fear of what we are trying to do.

The reporter does not understand how research and education is spreading misinformation.

Of course, we would like to thank those councils brave enough to answer our questions.

Other replies included the following.

That each case is dealt with on its own merit and that they follow the guidelines in the best interest of the child.

That there is no set time to be separated from an abusive partner as each case is different.

There are no protocols on this question.

Involvement relates to threshold not time.

That everybody is seen as a separate entity.

That it is not as simple as separation because perpetrators can still have an adverse effect on the child or children long after a separation has occurred. Especially where co parenting is involved.

Finally, there was replies that indicated it depends on what is currently being assessed and the outcome of parenting assessments.

As such, from a child social services point of view this does seem like a loaded question and the reporter can understand the lack of enthusiasm displayed by some areas in regards to answering this question. The reporter also believes that this links closely to the need for perpetrators of domestic abuse being held accountable for their actions instead of the victims needing to constantly prove themselves. If we want to take this a step further, looking at the answers we did receive there would be an indication against the role out of any parental alienation act as some parents will use this as a reason to continue the abuse they started whilst in the relationship, using the child as a weapon. This of course does not detract from the fact that some parent alienation cases are just and that parental alienation where no domestic abuse is involved or is used against the victim of domestic abuse is completely wrong.

This would also indicate that more needs to be done to protect domestic abuse victims and their children. If the time of separation is not a deciding factor because of other elements how can the local authority or the government reassure victims that they are being seen as a separate entity to the perpetrator of the domestic abuse? As the reporter knows of parents who have been separated from the abuser for 5 years plus, children are in the care system but they are made to feel as if they are still involved with the abuser. These issues need to be urgently addressed.

Moreover, when children become adults and have their own children the actions of an abusive parent, now grandparent, (that they do not have contact with) should not be used against the original child of that abuser. Example. Parent A abuser of parent B has child C. Child C grows up and has child D. Child C has had no contact with parent A for years but local authority use the behaviour of parent A as an indication of how child C will parent child D. Or parent B is classed as the same threat to child D as parent A even though parent A and B do not have contact with each other and haven't for X number of years.

## Family Lives Matter

Is there any evidence, reports or statistics in regards to how many victims of child/domestic abuse end up committing suicide due to victim-blaming / shaming, or re-victimisation by child social services, Cafcass or ex-partners allegations? information, statistics from per year from 2010 either calendar or financial year is acceptable. If there is no evidence, reports etc is this an area child social services or any other governmental body are looking into?

Unfortunately there are no statistics in relation to this question available from any source. It would appear that no one has conducted any research in relation to this area of query. Just as the reporter found whilst doing the statistical analysis of child social services the information is sorely lacking when it comes to suicides.

It would also appear that there are no plans to conduct any studies into this query.

For anyone who has lost a parent as a child you will understand the devastating effects this can have on future life. This is even worse when a parent loses a child.

Suicides are notoriously harder to process because those left behind struggle to understand the reasons behind the untimely death of a loved one.

The reporter also understand the difficulties in regards to collating this kind of data but still believes this is a vital endeavour for both child social services as well as psychology.

Society in general and the local authority need to understand the correlation between victim-blaming, re-victimization and victim shaming against the number of suicides to fully comprehend the consequences of these beliefs.



## Family Lives Matter

Does the council or child social services believe there is a connection between domestic abuse/ violence and the victim suffering from Stockholm syndrome? Has the council or social services done any studies to prove or disprove this theory?

Before we discuss the results from the FOI requests it would be beneficial to explain what Stockholm syndrome is.

Stockholm syndrome was first recognised in 1973 when 4 employees were held captive at a bank for six days in Stockholm, where one of the captives stated they trusted the captives but not the police. This was further proved in many other similar cases including hijackings. Psychologists expanded on their theory by looking at victims of domestic violence, abused children, cults, prisoners of war etc and by the 21<sup>st</sup> century this was widely accepted.

One of the effects of Stockholm syndrome is when the captive builds a strong emotional attachment to their captive, doing what they are told without question and going out of their way to protect their captive. When looking at this in relation to domestic abuse it is easier to understand why these victims do not simply leave the abuser and take or go back to the abuser once they have left. It would also explain why the victims withdraw police statements or refuse to press charges. Although, nowadays this is more commonly classed as trauma bonding it is the reporters belief that Stockholm syndrome is more apt. This is where some will point out that trauma bonding is another name for Stockholm syndrome. Either way this appears to be a neglected influence when it comes to child social services.

Apart from the general responses stating that this question did not fall under the FOI request guidelines most councils who did answer this question unilaterally agreed that they have not looked into any connection between the two and no council has conducted any studies into this connection.

The reporter believes it would be beneficial for these studies to be conducted as it would help child social services understand the dynamics of domestic abuse situations, help the victims of domestic abuse free themselves from this abuse, enable the local authority to direct the victims to the correct type of therapy needed to be beneficial to the child or children involved and ultimately help keep children within the family. Which, according to the children's act is the best outcome for the child where possible.

It would also help to establish a better level of trust and understanding between parents and child social services.

From a parents point of view they might be more incline to request or accept help from the local authority if they knew they'd be treated fairly and not discriminated against for being a domestic abuse victim.

Local authorities could receive the correct training to pick up on trauma bonding or Stockholm syndrome which again would create a better working environment.

## Domestic abuse.

Domestic Abuse is one of the main reasons children are removed from their homes. This is a separate issue to child abuse, although, they are often confused.

Domestic abuse relates to the abuse between the adults in a household. Whereas, child abuse relates to the abuse between an adult and a child.

The reason domestic abuse is such a high risk to children being removed is because even if the child does not actually get physically hurt they can be witnesses to the domestic abuse and therefore it is classed as mental and emotional child abuse.

This is then classed as 'risk of future harm' and is accepted without any evidence. Parents and other people class this as the crystal ball method. Because it can be neither proved or disproved.

Types of domestic abuse include the following: Financial, physical, emotional, mental and sexual. Although this is not a comprehensive list and many experts will state other names or add other categories. These are the main categories we believe most domestic abuse will fall into.

**It is not down to the victim to make the abuser change their behaviour.**

If you are a victim of domestic abuse, we advise you to leave and take your children with you as soon as it is safe to do so. We understand this can be difficult. You are not alone. The abuse is not your fault.

**Financial abuse:** This at a very basic level is where the abuser controls the finances, keeping hold of the victims bank cards, or puts them on an unrealistic budget. Puts all bills in the victims name so they get in trouble when bills are not paid.

This is anything to do with money.

**Physical abuse:** This at a very basic level is where the abuser hits, punches, slaps, scolds, burns or otherwise causes physical injury to the victim deliberately.

Now, this is where we believe using the word deliberately can be misinterpreted. An abuser will often state that the victim made them do it as such making out it was accidental. How can you accidentally punch someone?

If it causes an injury and happens more than once it's physical abuse.

**Emotional and Mental abuse:** Although these are two separate issues there is a lot of overlap between the two. As such we have placed them together.

At the very basic level of Emotional abuse the abuser will judge the victim over what they wear, who they talk to. They will control the victim's behaviour, invade their privacy, manipulate the victim etc. This is done to break the victims spirit and make them easier to control. This can also include isolating the victim from friends and family, whilst making it sound as if the abuser is only doing it to stop the victim being hurt or upset by them.

Mental abuse takes this a step further because it breaks the mind of the victim. This can include threats of physical and sexual harm if the victim doesn't not comply to what the abuser wants. Sometimes, this can include threats to harm any children within the home if the victim does not comply.

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This can also include gaslighting; making the victim fear for their own sanity. Moving objects and saying they haven't moved them. Deleting appointments and making the victim think they never wrote it down.

These constitute the worst kinds of domestic abuse because there are no physical signs. We have heard many stories where the victim stated they wished they'd had something to show others to prove what was happening. 'Why didn't they just hit me, then I could have shown the bruise and said look what is happening'.

You need to remember that the abuser will come across as caring for the victim. Making it look as if the victim is scatter brained or forgetful. Degrading the victim more in front of other people, whilst sounding so compassionate.

Both of these types of abuse cause the victim to stay quiet because they don't think anyone will believe them and because of the threat level they also fear repercussions if they do speak out.

**Sexual abuse:** This can include anything from touching to full intercourse. We believe it should also cover revenge porn.

No, means NO and if you have told someone no to sexual touching, intercourse, taking or sharing intimate photos then they should accept that you have said NO and refrain from doing it.

It doesn't matter if you have been together a day or ten years. It doesn't matter if you are going out, casual hook ups, dating, living apart, living together, engaged or married. If you have stated NO they shouldn't do it and if they do it is abuse.

You should never feel as if you have to comply with another persons wishes or desires in this respect. If you think you can't say no because the other person will hurt you physically, throw a strop, call you names or basically belittle you for not wanting to continue or comply then it is abuse.

The reporter took this information directly from the family lives matter website section on domestic abuse.

In conclusion this report took certain questions posed by parents, raised them with the local authorities under freedom of information and correlated the responses from both sides of the equation.

It is hoped that both sides will have a better understanding in regards to the questions posed and answers received.