



Responding to family violence/ domestic abuse: lessons from Greater Manchester (UK) and Victoria (Australia)



Key points

- The evidence base on how to respond to perpetrators of family violence/domestic abuse is extremely limited.
- Differing views on the causes of family violence/domestic abuse (and therefore the interventions needed to prevent it) are challenges to policy implementation.
- Political leadership and financial resources are crucial, but successful implementation of interventions to prevent family violence/domestic abuse also requires a trained workforce, agreed multi-agency working, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- There are ongoing tensions regarding funding for victim-survivor support, which remains limited. Additionally, there is a struggle to balance accountability and the support needs of family violence/domestic abuse perpetrators.

Summary

In 2021, Greater Manchester Combined Authority was the first local authority in England to develop a ten-year Gender-Based Violence Strategy.

This strategy was informed by learnings from Victoria (Australia) where significant reform around family violence/domestic abuse* had previously been undertaken following the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016). The Royal Commission report recommended strengthening prevention, supporting victim-survivors, and holding perpetrators to

account. Building on this approach, Greater Manchester's strategy adopted a similar focus. Drawing on the experiences of practitioners and policy makers in Greater Manchester and Victoria, this study identified challenges and opportunities in responding to family violence/domestic abuse perpetrators.

* This report uses the phrase "family violence/domestic abuse" to incorporate Australian terminology (family violence) and UK terminology (domestic abuse).

Background

Research into the support needs of family violence/domestic abuse victim-survivors is now well developed, although funding fails to match demand and excludes victim-survivors with no recourse to public funds. However, knowledge is extremely limited regarding how best to respond to perpetrators of family violence/domestic abuse and to coordinate multi-agency responses.

Across the globe, responding to gender-based violence, in particular family violence/domestic abuse, has risen up policy agendas over the last 50 years. Yet effective intervention strategies directed at perpetrators remain elusive. Ending or even reducing family violence/domestic abuse requires interventions to prevent offending, prevent reoffending and support desistance. Despite some evidence on the effectiveness of behaviour change programmes, they are not widely available and often fail to reflect the diversity of support needs required. Their success also depends on how well victim-survivors and children are supported. Disagreements exist about the appropriateness of behaviour change programmes, about how best to encourage and sustain behaviour change, and about what to do with those not assessed as suitable for behaviour change programmes. Both the Victorian Royal Commission and the Greater Manchester Strategy have had to engage with these debates and challenges in their attempts to develop more holistic, responsive approaches to family violence/domestic abuse.



What we did

The aim of this study was to explore Greater Manchester's response to family violence/domestic abuse, with a particular focus on how responses to perpetrators featured within the strategies and their implementation.

The study also aimed to understand how the Victorian reforms had unfolded ten years on from their introduction, from the perspective of policy makers and practitioners. The team sought to learn lessons for implementation and future policy and practice

development in Greater Manchester.

Phase 1 of this study was completed between May 2023 and July 2024 in Greater Manchester and June to October 2024 in Victoria, during which the research team interviewed 26 practitioners and policy makers across Greater Manchester and 39 in Victoria. Phase 2 involved a case study of practice in one area within Greater Manchester (including the voices of victim-survivors) and a knowledge exchange visit involving practitioners from Greater Manchester visiting Victoria.

Key findings

Political leadership and financial investment were seen as vital to successful policy implementation in both countries.

The key challenges were:

- **Keeping a strong focus on support for victim-survivors while also providing the support required to create behaviour change among perpetrators.**
- **Different views on how to hold perpetrators accountable while providing support to them to change their behaviour.**

A thematic analysis highlighted three broad themes:

The importance of political leadership and financial investment

Participants across both Victoria and Manchester highlighted the importance of executive level buy-in and establishing cross-sector stakeholder partnerships in giving clear strategic direction and creating momentum for reform. Political will involves not only financial investment but also investment in time, resources and evaluation. These were viewed by participants as key to bringing about change.

Ensuring support for victim-survivors while also investing in behaviour change work

While both strategies recognised investment in interventions for perpetrators as necessary,

some practitioners in Greater Manchester expressed discomfort shifting resources toward behaviour change while victim-survivors still struggled to access support. These concerns were compounded by limited evidence on the effectiveness of behaviour change interventions. Both areas incorporated feedback from victim-survivors into the policy process, which was seen as positive. However, questions were raised by some stakeholders in Victoria about the real benefits seen by victim-survivors ten years on.

Family violence/domestic abuse perpetrators: balancing 'accountability' and 'support needs'

A Victorian Commission recommendation was to keep perpetrators 'in view' by expanding interventions whilst holding them to account. However, some practitioners felt little progress had been made due to a lack of a) innovation and b) a skilled workforce. The Greater Manchester strategy offers opportunities for centrally-commissioned pathways into interventions, and many interventions focus on both structural and individual factors while simultaneously holding people to account for their actions. However, differing views on the causes of family violence/domestic abuse (and therefore the interventions needed to prevent it) are challenges to policy implementation. Participants were hesitant about fully embracing a model which also acknowledges and responds to the needs of perpetrators. In addition, participants in Victoria spoke of the need for ongoing evaluation of practice alongside an independent monitor whose role it was to gauge the progress of policy implementation.

Next steps

Greater evidence on ‘what works’ to reduce offending and more open discussions about the root causes of family violence/domestic abuse (and therefore the interventions required) remain challenges. Lessons learnt in Victoria such as the need for a skilled workforce and ongoing monitoring and evaluation can help guide implementation in Greater Manchester and beyond.

The findings show progress and political will to support more responsive and holistic approaches to perpetrators. However, Victoria’s experience of implementing Royal Commission recommendations over the past decade suggests that top-level buy-in alone does not guarantee effective policy implementation. Key lessons from the Victorian implementation process highlight the importance of evaluation and ongoing progress reporting in achieving strategic goals. This was especially recognised by interviewees in the value accorded to the role of the independent implementation monitor. As Greater Manchester is earlier in its journey, applying this learning could help establish milestone evaluations, strengthening implementation, and reinforcing its commitment to the strategy and the communities it serves.

The findings from Greater Manchester reveal that the complexity of family violence/domestic abuse and its causes continues to challenge service optimisation and holistic responses inclusive of victim-survivor and perpetrator needs. Addressing this requires deeper communication between services to build communities of practice that keep the perspectives of victim-survivors at the centre but perpetrators firmly ‘in view’, helping to identify what works, for whom and when. Various local interventions and programmes offer a menu of options for practitioners,

victim-survivors, families and perpetrators. However, effective intervention depends on clear pathways, strong coordinated community responses and agreed responses for all risk levels.

As the UK Government prepares to launch and implement its strategy to halve violence against women and girls within ten years (of which family violence/domestic abuse forms a major part), the lessons learnt over the last ten years in Victoria and the ongoing work in Greater Manchester are particularly valuable to take into consideration.

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For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

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