

Coordination of Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts

Standing Together coordinates two SDACs in West London: the Specialist Domestic Abuse Court (SDAC) at Hammersmith and the Dedicated Domestic Abuse Court (DDAC) at Westminster. In this briefing, we will outline how the courts work; the specific role of the court coordinators provided by Standing Together; and information on the benefits of and challenges faced by SDACs.

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1. How the court works

Specialist domestic abuse courts (SDACs) ensure the presence in the court room of specialist staff who have been trained on the specific management of domestic abuse cases, as well as the presence of victim and witness support agencies. These elements assist the justice process and helps ensure that victim safety is prioritised as an outcome. Within an SDAC Court, this information can be shared quickly and efficiently, and expertise about domestic abuse applied in a systematic, well-regulated, and timely way. Although domestic abuse cases can be more time-consuming than other cases, an SDAC model helps to ensure the right information is available quickly and the appropriate safeguards are considered to prioritise victim and survivor safety.

The SDAC coordinator is vital both on the court day itself, but also outside of the courtroom. Criminal justice sector (CJS) partners benefit from data and observation collected by the SDAC Coordinator to address gaps between CJS services and agencies and to share information effectively. This operational partnership working ensures the component parts of the CJS are working to their best effect.

The SDACs also have multi-agency DA Court Partnerships which include the following agencies: Police, CPS, HM Courts Service, National Probation Service, Witness Care and ADVANCE IDVA service. Judiciary are represented by DA Link Magistrates and a DA Lead District Judge. STADA coordinate the Partnership and convene the DA Court Steering Group which meets on a quarterly basis. The Court also convene a bi-annual meeting to ensure consistency between the two DA Courts.

Court-coordinators ensure this multi-agency partnership is maintained, implementing protocols and processes around partnership working, training of key CJS personnel and ensuring the roles and responsibilities of agencies are clearly defined. They also share best practice of SDACs locally and nationally.

The courts coordinated by STADA

STADA coordinates a Dedicated Domestic Abuse Court (DDAC) every Tuesday at Westminster Magistrates Court serving Westminster borough, City of London and BTP DA cases. STADA coordinates a SDAC every Thursday at Westminster Magistrates Court serving LBHF and RBKC. The Court Team also track all DA cases including DA criminal trials.

Both the SDAC and the DDAC are best practice examples of an SDAC operating within a broader CCR structure in response to domestic abuse. Both courts run in accordance with the original 12 components set out in the SDVC resource manual (see our briefing on the history of the SDAC model for more information). Below are some key features of the courts.

	Westminster DDAC	Westminster SDAC
Length of operation	Since 2002	Since 2012
Type of listing	Cluster court Weekly – Every Thursday	Cluster court Weekly – Every Tuesday
Area covered	LBHF and RBKC	Westminster, City of London, and British Transport Police (BTP)
IDVA at Court	Yes – Dedicated Criminal Justice IDVA ¹	Yes – Roster of IDVAs attending court
Operational Group	Court Management Group meeting quarterly	Court Management Group meeting quarterly
Strategic Steering Group	Tri-Borough VAWG Strategic Group	
Protocol	Protocol for the Specialist/Dedicated Domestic Abuse Courts at Westminster Magistrates Court	
Dedicated CJ personnel	<p>Police: No specific dedicated officer; however the SDAC and DDAC coordinators are co-located at the Community Safety Unit and help with gathering information to support expeditious case management. Additionally, the Impact Project Case Development Analyst role dovetails with the role of the SDAC coordinator to support effective communication between police, CPS and the Court</p> <p>Her Majesty’s Courts Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nominated Legal Advisors who act as points of contact for 	

¹ We are grateful for the Impact Project, funded by LBHF Council, which aims to improve CJ outcomes for DA cases through better case-building, early referrals to specialist support service, and links to the SDAC.

	<p>members of the partnership and as DV champions for their colleagues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two Magistrates who act as DV Liaison Magistrates and represent the Magistrates on the Court Management Group <p>Crown Prosecution Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated Prosecutor for the SDAC - Two designated Prosecutors rostered for the DDAC <p>Probation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated Probation Officer for the SDAC and DDAC, providing consistency of expertise and information-sharing
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2. The role of SDAC coordinators

However comprehensive the multi-agency protocols of an SDAC are, it is the management of information flow between agencies on court days which truly tests court effectiveness. This is the role of the SDAC coordinator, and many of the practical tasks which enable court days to run smoothly happen behind the scenes. At the Westminster DDAC and SDAC the operational coordination is provided by Standing Together. Their work includes:

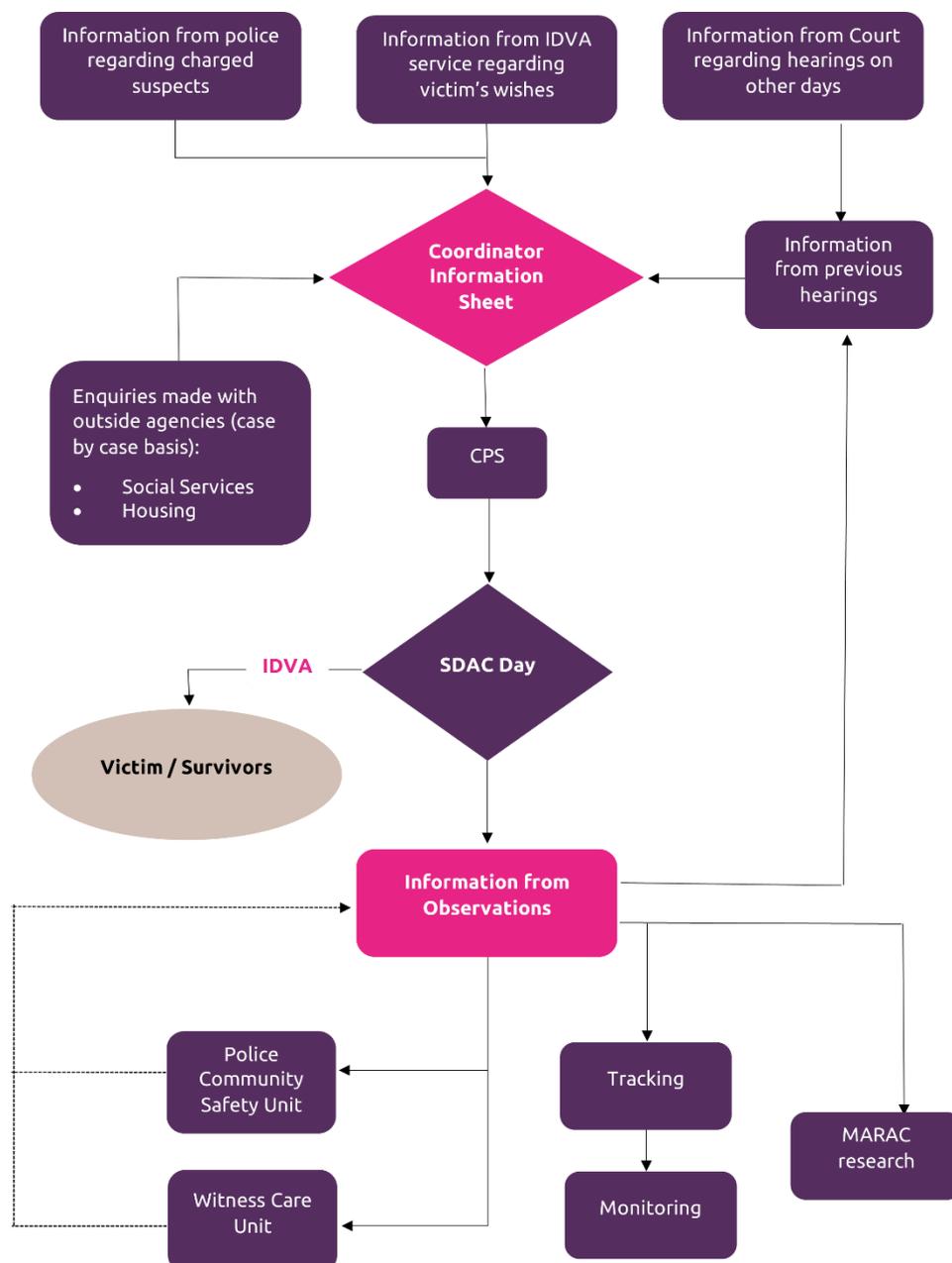
- Liaising with the different agencies that work in the court
- Monitoring practice in the court to ensure that the protocol is adhered to
- Capturing good practice and identifying areas for improvement, particularly in relation to the safety of victims and their children
- Facilitating enquiries and risk assessment when applications are made to the court to vary or remove restraining orders
- Conducting Annual Reviews of the DA Courts, with data reports, for all partner agencies
- Providing a single point of contact for all agencies working within the DA Court before, during and after the court days.

Court coordinators attend court every week, observing proceedings and ensuring that relevant and appropriate information flows between agencies to ensure safe decisions are made. They maintain records of the information provided by various partner agencies, to track cases accurately and ensure gaps in knowledge are filled. Coordinators also deliver a weekly observation summary to court practitioners and their managers, detailing how each case in court was handled and summarising whether agreed safety and best practice indicators were followed. Information from the weekly summaries is subsequently collated into a quarterly report presented at the next DA Court Management Group. The report identifies trends, issues, and practice concerns.

Immediately following the DA Court Day, the Coordinators give specific case information quickly to Community Safety Unit (CSU) officers and other relevant agencies working with the case (e.g.

children’s services), regarding restraining orders and bail conditions which are essential to the safety of victims and their children. This ensures timely communication at a point where this is often lost. The Court Coordinators are co-located within police stations as a point of contact and subject matter experts, available to answer questions from police officers and provide training and support as needed.

Court coordinators track all cases that go through the SDAC and DDAC and beyond, providing updates on cases to police and support agencies to help inform the victim and to ensure all agencies are up to date with what has happened in the SDAC. In addition, tracking cases allows the coordinators to gather performance data against which the aims and objectives of the SDAC can be measured and analysed. The diagram below demonstrates how court coordinators organise the flow of information:



3. Benefits and challenges of the SDAC

Benefits of the SDAC model

Domestic abuse is no ordinary crime, and the criminal justice system has traditionally failed to take account of its specific nature. For victims and survivors, the CJS can feel ineffective, alienating and chaotic. DA cases are challenging to prosecute with high attrition and withdrawal rates, but SDACs demonstrate that targeted action to help CJS agencies understand the specific patterns of domestic abuse, coercive control and stalking can reduce these rates effectively. The specialist court model seeks to ensure that the criminal justice process is focused on the safety of the victims of DA and that perpetrators of abuse are held to account.

Data shows that within the SDAC model:

- More defendants are prosecuted and therefore brought to Court
- More defendants are convicted
- There is a higher proportion of early guilty pleas. This reduces case length and resource required to prepare for trial, and reduces the risk of victim re-traumatisation at trial
- There are fewer hearings per case
- The length of a case from start to finish is reduced
- More victims are given access to specialist IDVA support

Challenges faced within the SDAC context

The SDAC and DDAC face a number of ongoing challenges. Constant personnel changes within different agencies interrupts relationship building and makes establishing consistent ways of working difficult, as well as a lack of understanding from agencies about the need to prioritise DA cases on SDAC days. Some of the key areas of concern which Standing Together have observed include:

1. Training for frontline police

Frontline police officers are likely to represent to victims of domestic abuse the face of the criminal justice system. They must have a sound understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse, the ability and confidence to identify risk, as well as a believing approach to the victim. High officer turn-over and lack of time for in-depth training are barriers to a consistent and high-standard training offer in our areas. The Standing Together coordinators are based within the Community Safety Unit at Charing Cross Police Station and work closely with the unit, not only to provide ongoing consultancy and support to its investigating officers but also to understand where training for frontline officers appears most necessary.

Additionally, over the last few years, the DDAC coordinator has worked closely with City of London police and British Transport Police (BTP) to raise awareness of the SDAC process. As

a result, there has been an increase in the number of City of London and BTP cases flagged as DV coming into the DDAC. Both City of London and BTP have representatives at the DDAC Court Management Group. Ongoing efforts are being made by the coordinator to provide training to officers from these two forces.

2. IDVA resources

An SDAC cannot function effectively without an IDVA provision. Funding for this provision therefore needs to be adequate and long-term. All SDAC agencies should be aware of the importance of IDVAs and consideration should be given to this provision when agencies are making internal decisions. These decisions can have a serious impact on these voluntary sector agencies.

In London and beyond, many courts cover more than one borough or area, which can be problematic when there are different provisions and referral criteria to IDVA services. This can create confusion and can lead to a gap in support for victims. Consideration should be given, whenever possible, to the provision of a dedicated IDVA who could, especially in a court serving several areas, act a single point of initial contact for victims and facilitate their access to relevant local support services.

3. Recognition of the importance of the coordinator role

The coordinator is key in identifying gaps and barriers in the SDAC process and in helping the SDAC partnership resolve operational issues. In a context of increasing financial constraints facing wider DA and VAWG partnerships, the importance of their role risks being undermined, especially as most of their work is carried out behind the scenes. While much government policy identifies the need for public services to work in a more joined-up way, this kind of working requires dedicated resource to bring agencies together, encourage accountability and ensure regular reviews and adherence to best practice. Coordination must be resourced as an essential element of any SDAC partnership to ensure agencies can collaborate effectively.

4. Changes in agency structures and wider resources

Over the last decade, some of the key agencies that are fundamental to the successful operations of an SDAC have undergone considerable changes to their structures and seen their resources significantly reduced. These include, to name but a few, the privatisation of the National Probation Service, the move from Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) to Building Better Relationships (BBR), court building closures, and inconsistencies in the provision of witness services in London.

Such changes have a direct and indirect impact on support for victims of DV, their access to justice and safety, and institutional mechanisms in place to hold perpetrators to account. A robust governance structure is vital to ensure that even through periods of change, the core components of an effective CCR are upheld. The connections between agencies and systems become clearer than ever in difficult operating contexts.