

A close-up photograph of a person's hands in a blue suit jacket, holding a black pen and writing on a document. The background is blurred, showing other people in a courtroom setting.

**STANDING
TOGETHER**

against domestic abuse

**Better for victims,
better for courts**

A guide to Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts

Welcome

Welcome to this guide to Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts (SDACs). We hope you find it informative, engaging and inspiring and that it helps bring to life how the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) model helps prioritise the safety of victims and children and bring more offenders to justice.

The processes you'll see during your court visit build on two decades of work from Standing Together. In that time, we've developed a deep understanding of the response to domestic abuse within the criminal justice system. We're dedicated to protecting victims and witnesses and practical about finding best practice solutions to the challenges we face.

In the following pages, you can read about the context of our work, the CCR model and how SDACs complement and support the Domestic Abuse Best Practice Framework (DABPF). The second part of the guide (pages 16 onwards) provides a detailed account of how SDACs and key professionals work in practice.

We'd like to thank the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster City Council, whose dedication and generosity have kept our local work in operation. We would also like to thank the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for funding the Mentor Court Project, which has enabled us to broaden our reach, share our knowledge and support areas to improve their response to domestic abuse. We would also like to thank Treebeard for their ongoing support with our mapping work.

We sincerely hope that your experience and this guide inspire you to promote and develop the SDAC model in your everyday work. If this is the case, get in touch and we can support you to make this happen.

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SECTION 1

Why we need better justice for victims of domestic abuse

Domestic Abuse is no ordinary crime. But, historically, the criminal justice system has failed to cater to its specific needs, including the dynamics and complexities of domestic abuse and the impact of coercive control. Domestic abuse-related cases are challenging to prosecute, and attrition and withdrawal rates are high. Too often, victims' and survivors' experiences are chaotic and unproductive, exacerbated by frequent changes to the criminal justice system and key professionals.

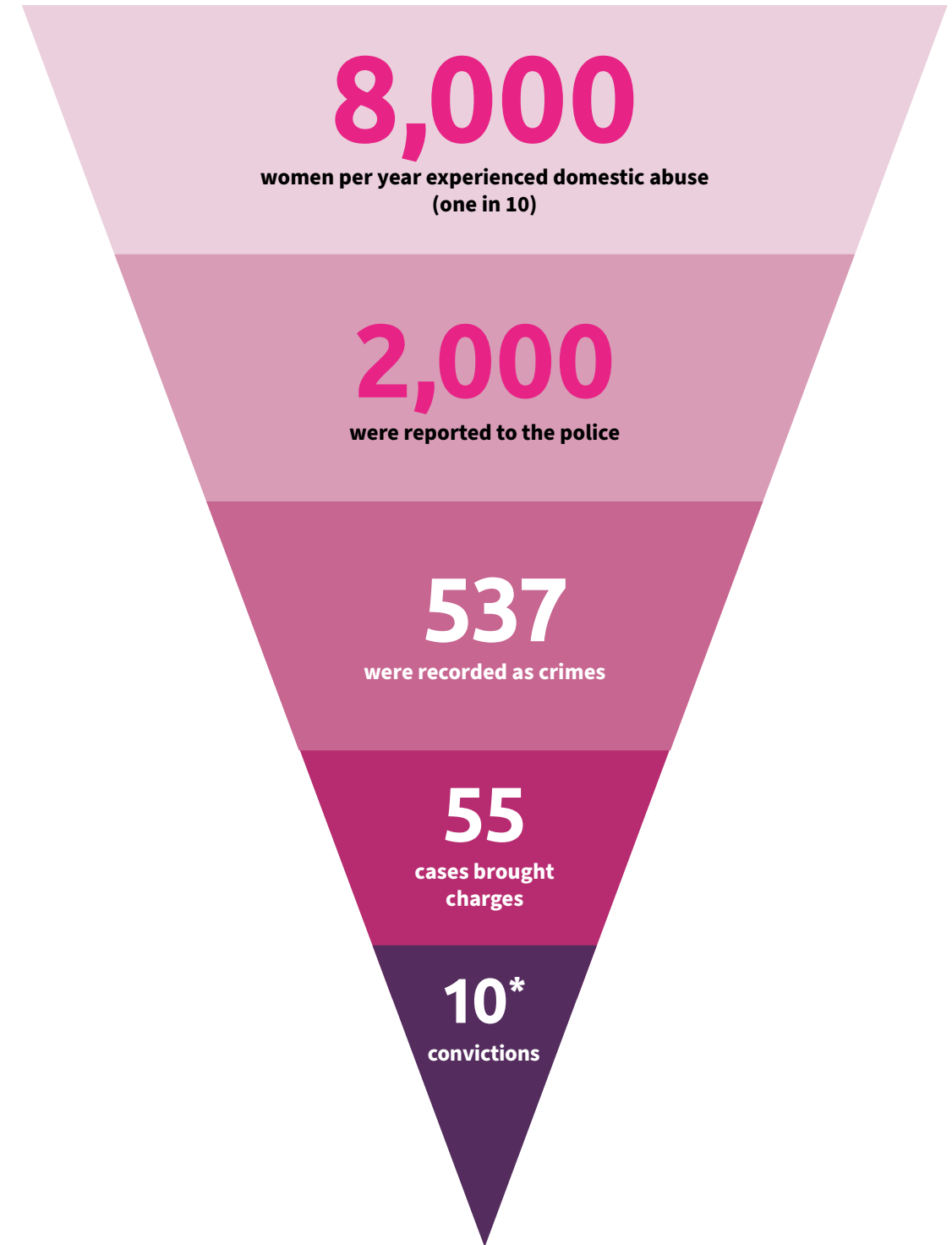


3 in every **4**

victims of domestic abuse are women.

Narrowing the justice gap

The SDAC model in West London aimed to address the huge gap between the number of victims experiencing domestic abuse and the number of offenders being brought to justice.



The SDAC model seeks to ensure that the criminal justice process focuses on the safety of victims and survivors of domestic abuse throughout the coordinated process, and helps ensure that perpetrators of abuse are held to account.

*Estimated figures for Fulham

SECTION 2

Standing Together and the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) model

Standing Together is a national charity working to end domestic abuse. We have seven aims:

1

To increase the safety of domestic abuse victims and survivors in the short and long term

2

To increase the safety of children who live with domestic abuse

3

To hold abusers accountable for their actions

4

To ensure that responsibility for holding the abuser to account lies with statutory and voluntary agencies, not the victim or survivor

5

To provide accountability for the public, victims and survivors, and agencies for how domestic abuse is handled

6

To test and develop effective policies, procedures and practical measures that can be integrated into the ongoing work of agencies

7

To ensure that each agency, while retaining its independence, works in an integrated and coordinated way with others to achieve these objectives

We deliver on our aims by championing the CCR model

No one agency can tackle domestic abuse alone. The CCR model helps services to work in partnership so we can see the whole picture. This allows us to keep victims and survivors safe, hold abusers to account, and prevent domestic abuse.

The CCR enables a whole system response to a whole person. It shifts responsibility for safety away from individual victims and survivors to the community and services that exist to support them. It supports the principle that perpetrators must be held to account for the harm they inflict and offered routes to change their abusive behaviours. Most importantly, we advocate that every agency has a responsibility – individually and working with other agencies – to support victims of domestic abuse.

The CPS domestic abuse charging rate has decreased every year for the last

3 years



Standing Together operates to promote the CCR nationally across a range of policy areas. We:

- coordinate two **Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts** in West London, contribute to the **Impact Project** (see page 8), and help deliver the **Mentor Court Project** from 2021-2023 (see page 9)
- chair **Domestic Homicide Reviews** (DHRs) across England and Wales
- coordinate **Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences** (MARACs) across five London boroughs
- improve the housing sector's response to domestic abuse nationally through the **Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance** (DAHA), the **Whole Housing Approach**, and the **Housing First and Homelessness Project**
- lead the **Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) coalition**, which brings together organisations and activists working at the intersections of faith, race, ethnicity and VAWG
- pioneer the **Whole Health** response to domestic abuse in line with the **Pathfinder Toolkit**, local health work and our **Macmillan project**, which improves services for victims and survivors affected by cancer and domestic abuse

SECTION 3

Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts and our wider criminal justice work

In 2002, Standing Together helped set up the first London SDAC at Hammersmith Magistrates' Court, initially as a pilot project. Two decades later, Standing Together continue to coordinate the SDAC in West London.

In 2012 we established another SDAC at Westminster Magistrates' Court. Following the closure of Hammersmith Magistrates Court, both SDACs continue to operate within Westminster Magistrates' Court.

Today, we coordinate SDACs every Thursday at Westminster Magistrates Court, serving the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and every Tuesday at Westminster Magistrates Court, serving Westminster borough, City of London and British Transport Police domestic abuse cases.

We believe this effective, operational partnership is the only way to get the best results from the criminal justice process.

The Impact Project

The Impact Project is a partnership of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, criminal justice system agencies, and the charities Advance and Standing Together. It is integral to the work of the SDACs in West London.

The Impact Project focuses on improving the progress of cases through the criminal justice system, ensuring efficient and effective justice for offenders and fast, proactive support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse who report to the police.

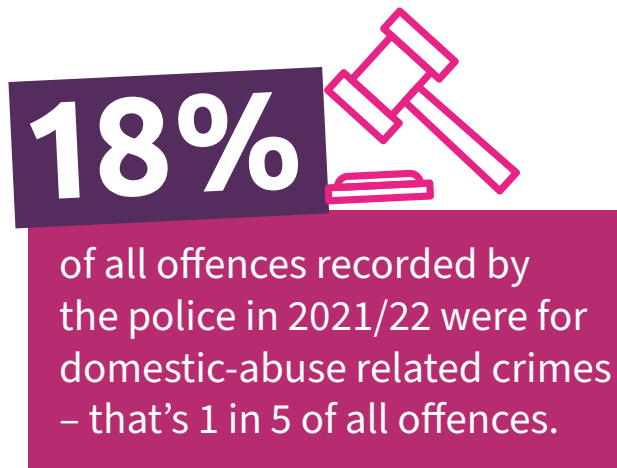
The vision and success of the Impact Project are a result of dedicated, specialist professionals who have come together to share information and take action. This has included specialist Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), trained police officers within the Public Protection team, and a Performance Review Coordinator to monitor and improve the criminal justice system's response to domestic abuse.

Applying the SDAC model nationally

In 2021, The Department for Culture, Media and Sport awarded funding to Standing Together through the Tampon Tax Fund. The money has funded a two-year project designed to promote the SDAC model across England and Wales. The project funding ends in spring 2023, but we continue to implement the excellent work it initiated.

The key aim is to improve victims' and survivors' experiences of the criminal justice system and support the delivery of the Domestic Abuse Best Practice Framework in three ways.

- 1 Developing the existing SDACs at Westminster Magistrates Court into a 'Mentor Court'**. The Mentor Court accelerates progress in partnerships and demonstrates how to understand and implement the SDAC resource manual. Stakeholders are invited to observe the court in session and participate in a learning session about applying the SDAC model in their local area.
- 2 National mapping work** builds a picture of existing SDACs in England and Wales by undertaking court visits and talking to stakeholders. We set up a database to identify where SDACs exist, and we offer capacity building expertise to support court partnerships in enhancing or establishing SDACs.
- 3 The Mentor Court Project** also funds the provision of Criminal Justice IDVA who provide specialist support to victims and survivors navigating the SDAC. Standing Together's coordinators work closely with the Criminal Justice IDVAs to ensure that victim's needs are always addressed.



SDAC aims and outcomes

The SDAC has five main aims, each building on the last.

1

To increase the effectiveness of each partner agency's specific role in dealing with domestic abuse

- Effective case management
- Reducing delays

2

To bring offenders to justice

- Ensuring that appropriate measures are considered to hold individuals accused of domestic abuse accountable for their ongoing behaviour
- Enabling swift and effective breach proceedings
- Ensuring compliance with court orders
- Addressing repeat offending

3

To consider the needs and safety of victims, survivors and witnesses

- Better enabling victims, survivors and witnesses to access and navigate the criminal justice system
- Addressing safety consistently and offering support at every stage of the process
- Imposing clear, enforceable bail conditions
- Ensuring that the victim, survivor or witness is kept informed at each stage of the criminal court proceedings
- Addressing repeat victimisation

4

To enable a coordinated response both from agencies supporting victims, survivors and witnesses AND from agencies dealing with individuals accused of domestic abuse

- Holding each other and partner agencies accountable for protocols
- Facilitating communication between all partner agencies
- Agreeing procedures as required
- Identifying issues and coordinating actions
- Sharing information and data

5

To share the experience and good practice of the SDAC Partnership with other agencies and projects locally and nationally

- Publishing good practice guidance and other reports about the court's operation and outcomes
- Briefing the judiciary and training staff involved with the court
- Sharing knowledge and experience through our website and attendance at local and national meetings and conferences.
- Facilitating external visitors to the SDAC
- Evaluating the court and the partnership's overall operation

The SDAC six essential elements

It is not enough to cluster all domestic abuse cases into one courtroom. SDACs are a partnership model and must adhere to a robust framework to be effective.

The following six elements are essential for any SDAC to meet its purpose.

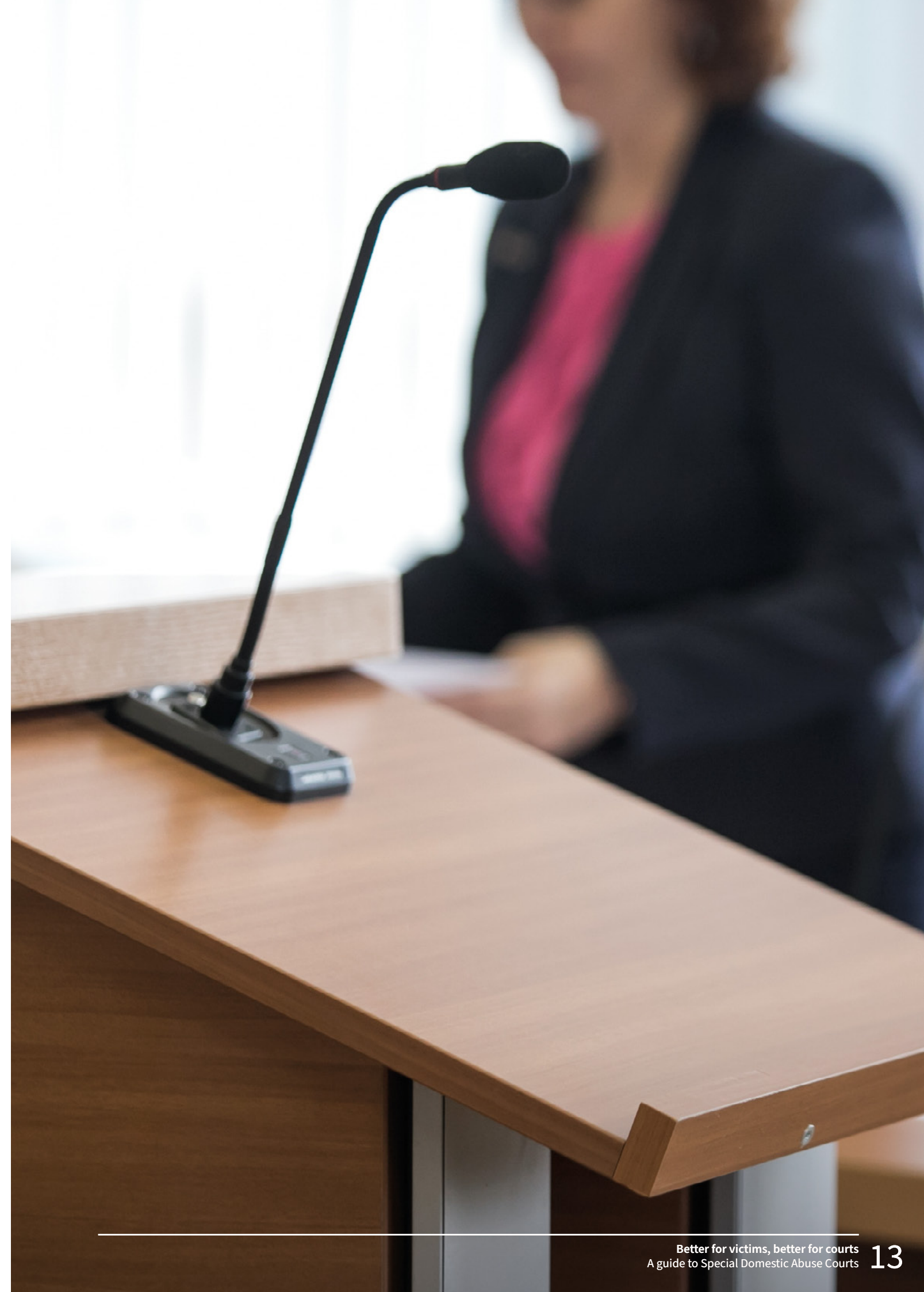
- 1 A coordinated response and partnership working**
Before a case arrives at the SDAC, it should have passed through a system where all agencies work together.
- 2 Multi-agency protocols and procedures**
Agreed policies, procedures and protocols must be developed before starting an SDAC.
- 3 An SDAC Coordinator**
An independent coordinator with knowledge of SDAC protocols and a detailed understanding of domestic abuse and the criminal justice system should be in place.
- 4 Monitoring, feedback and evaluation frameworks**
Changes and improvements should be based on objective data, criteria for success and safe practice analysed throughout the criminal justice system.
- 5 Domestic abuse advocacy services and IDVAs**
Victims and survivors should be referred to an appropriate IDVA service as early as possible.
- 6 A focus on victim, survivor and witness safety issues**
SDACs should work with agencies, victims and survivors to increase the safety of victims and survivors and lobby for change.

Turn to page 16 for more information on the people and processes involved with effective SDACs

Meeting all six criteria is usually only attainable through years of dedicated partnership work. But implementing any of them is a step in the right direction.

“I am confident that the Specialist Domestic Abuse Court at Hammersmith Magistrates Court saved much human misery and doubtless saved some lives too.”

District judge





SECTION 4

The Domestic Abuse Best Practice Framework

In 2018, the National Criminal Justice Board (NCJB) rolled out the Domestic Abuse Best Practice Framework (DABPF). It was jointly written and committed to by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), Police, and HM Courts & Tribunal Service (HMCTS) and comprises four evidence-based components.

The DABPF components

1. A clear multi-agency/community approach which addresses risk management and safeguarding procedures
2. Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) support
3. Trained and consistently deployed staff across all agencies
4. In-court services: proactive witness services/pre-trial familiarisation visits/appropriate use of special measures

At Standing Together, we welcomed the DABPF for its sound recommendations, and we have worked to understand and highlight how it interacts with and complements the SDAC.

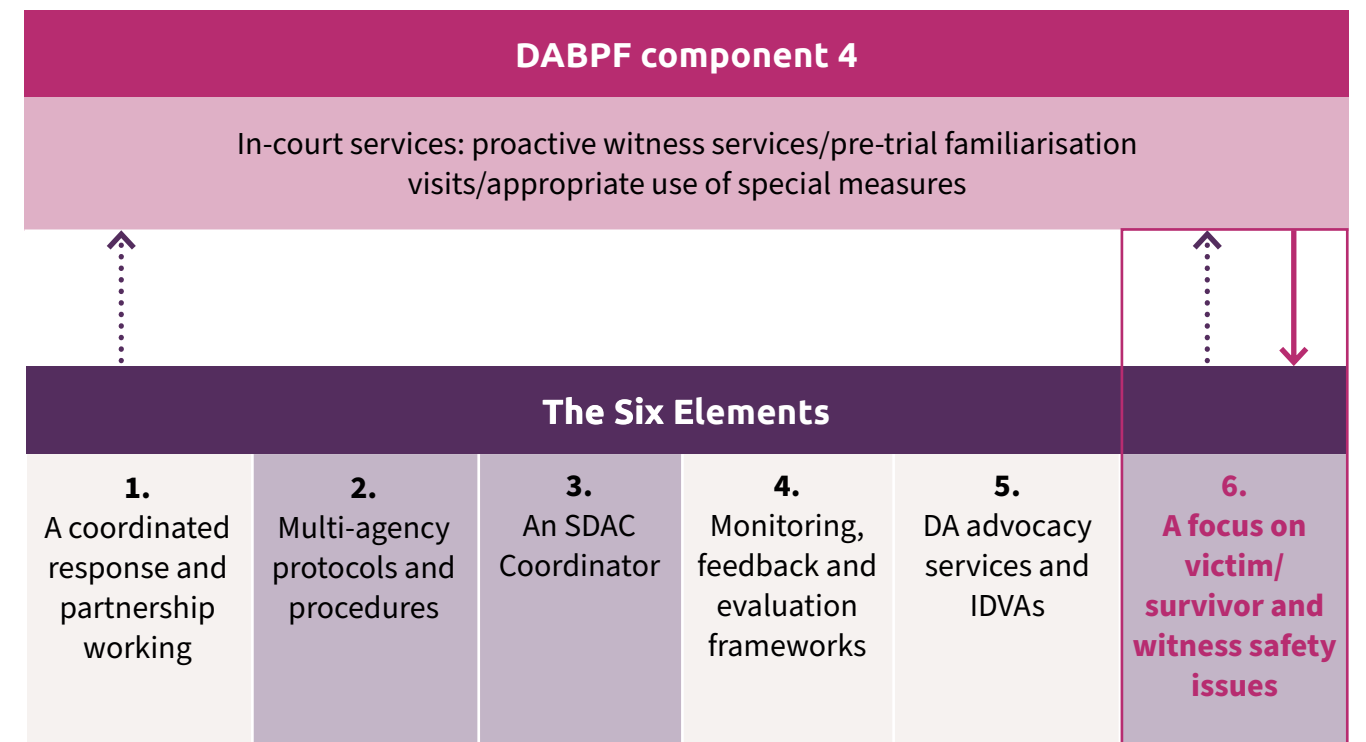
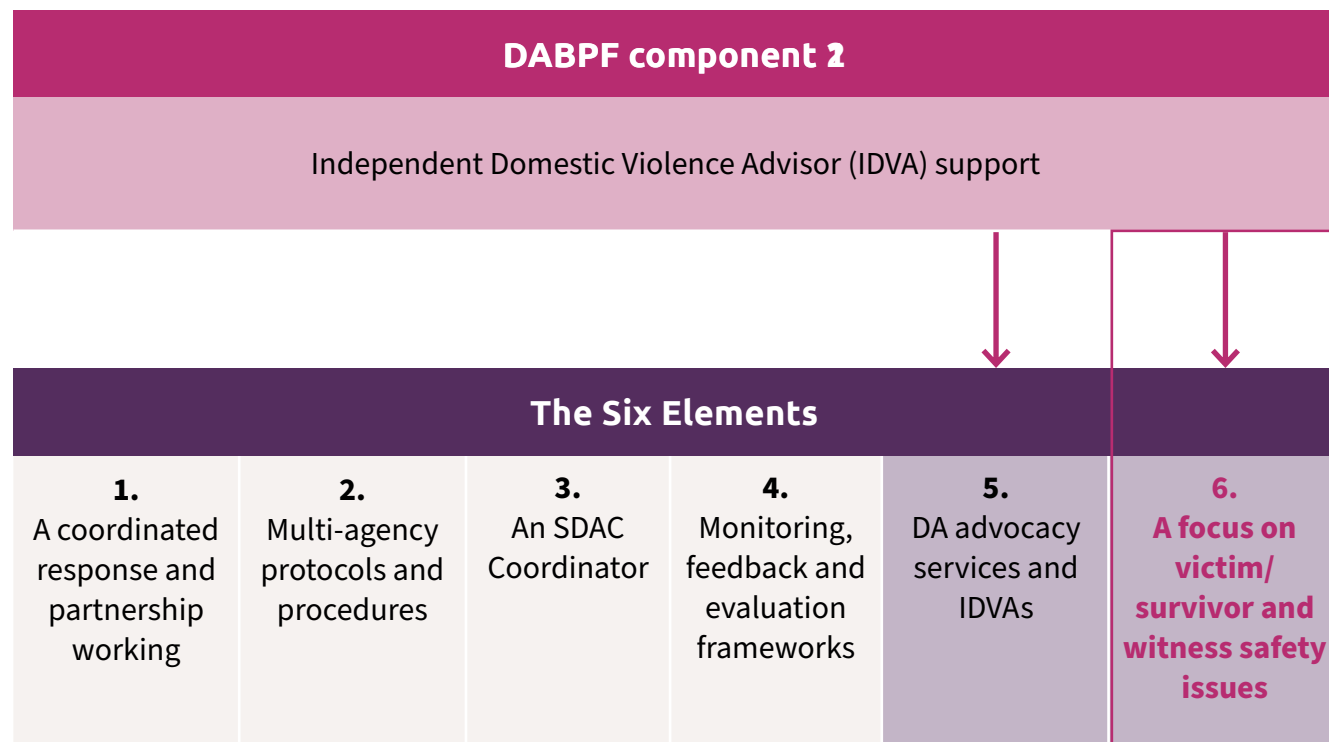
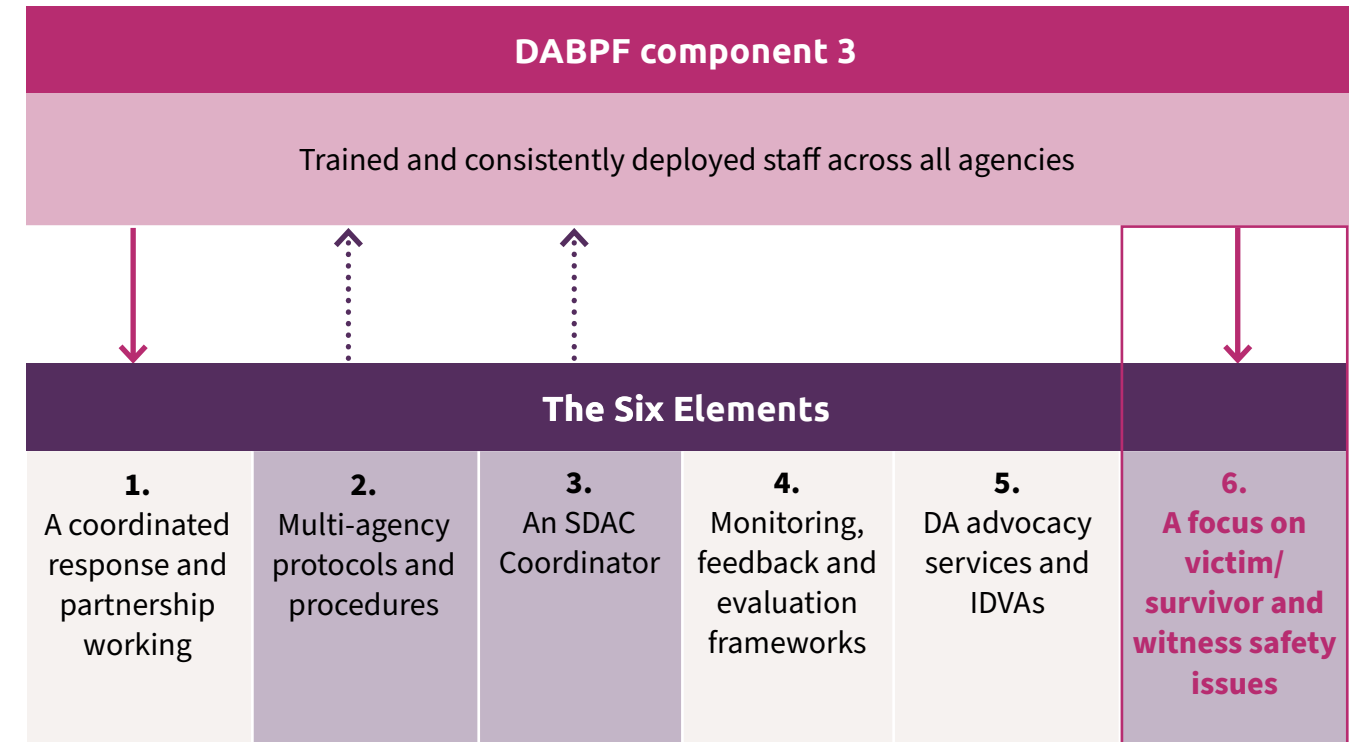
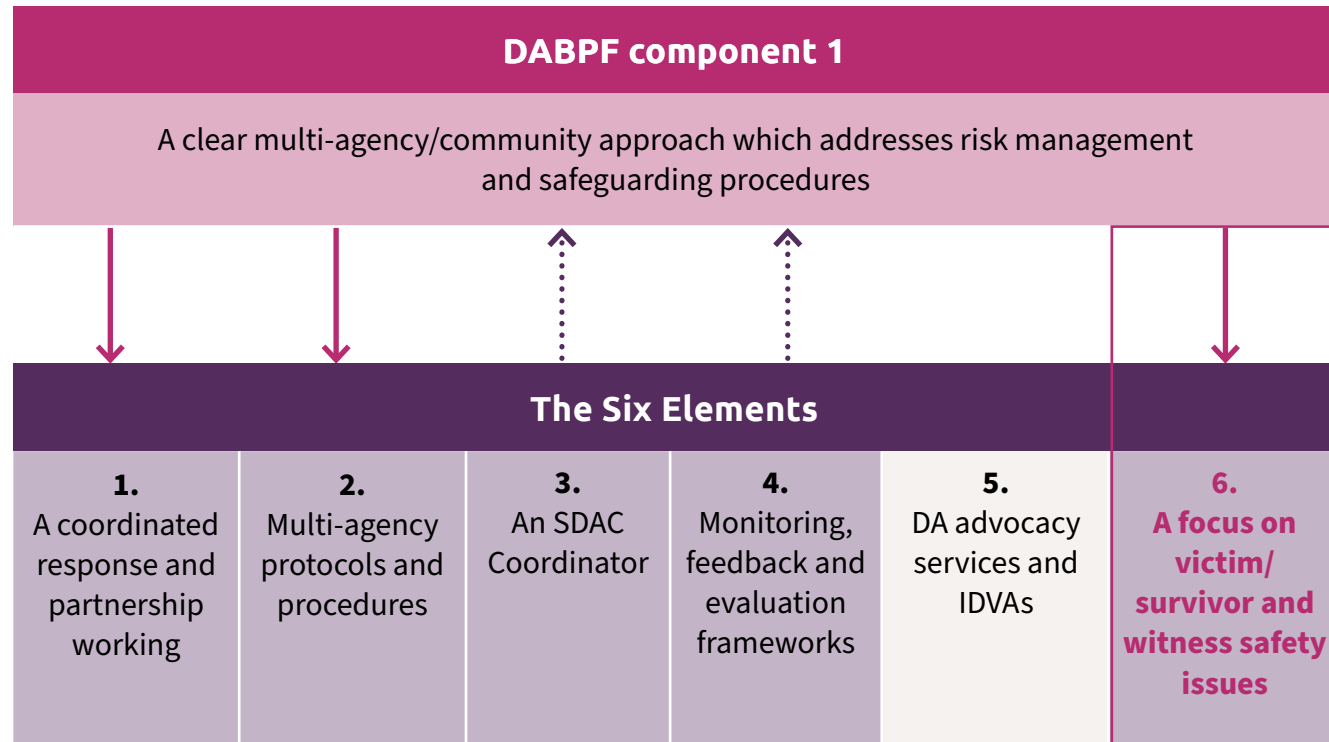
“[SDACs are] gold standard domestic abuse practice... for those areas wanting to improve their response to domestic abuse even further.”

Lionel Idan, Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor

100



domestic abuse crimes are reported every hour.



SECTION 5

SDACs in practice

A coordinated response

An SDAC is not just what happens in one courtroom on one day, it is a **coordinated response** across all agencies over a period of time. The SDAC will benefit an ‘out of area’ domestic abuse case which falls into the court for a single hearing, but such cases will not experience a detailed and coordinated system of processes embedded in multiple agencies across the case.

A coordinated response means that a case will have passed through a system with agencies working together to agreed aims, processes and protocols before it arrives in the courtroom. It allows for detailed information gathering and tracking of cases which informs practice in the court.



Starting with the 999 call, the key steps for a coordinated response include:

- Effective evidence gathering in the very early stages (the ‘golden hour’)
- Case preparation
- Information sharing, in line with confidentiality and information sharing protocols to prioritise safety
- Ongoing risk assessment and risk management
- Thorough support for victims and survivors between giving a statement and the trial
- Keeping victims and survivors informed of decisions affecting their safety and about case outcomes
- Informing the court of updates from victims and survivors about their safety

Key agencies at the core of this partnership working include:

- HMCTS
- The Police (including specialist units focused on domestic abuse and witness care)
- The CPS
- Domestic abuse advocates, including IDVAs
- Witness support agencies
- The Probation Service

Partnership in practice

It’s easy to use the word ‘partnership’, but to put the needs of victims, survivors and witnesses first, a partnership must work in practice. To be **accountable**, an SDAC must have protocols, monitoring, regular meetings, structured information sharing, and a process for remedying issues.

Good accountability practices include:

- **Protocols:** clear and agreed documents outlining the structure of how each agency will operate within the partnership, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities

- **Data:** clear and up-to-date data to indicate whether protocols are being adhered to
- **Operational framework:** a robust framework of meetings to ensure communication and accountability, which might include:
 - A strategic partnership group
 - A delivery group
 - A court steering or operational group
 - A witness support group



The coordinator

An independent coordinator should oversee the coordinated response of effective partnerships. Being independent of all agencies in the system is critical for facilitating good partnership working. The coordinator's role is wide-ranging, encompassing the following necessary tasks:

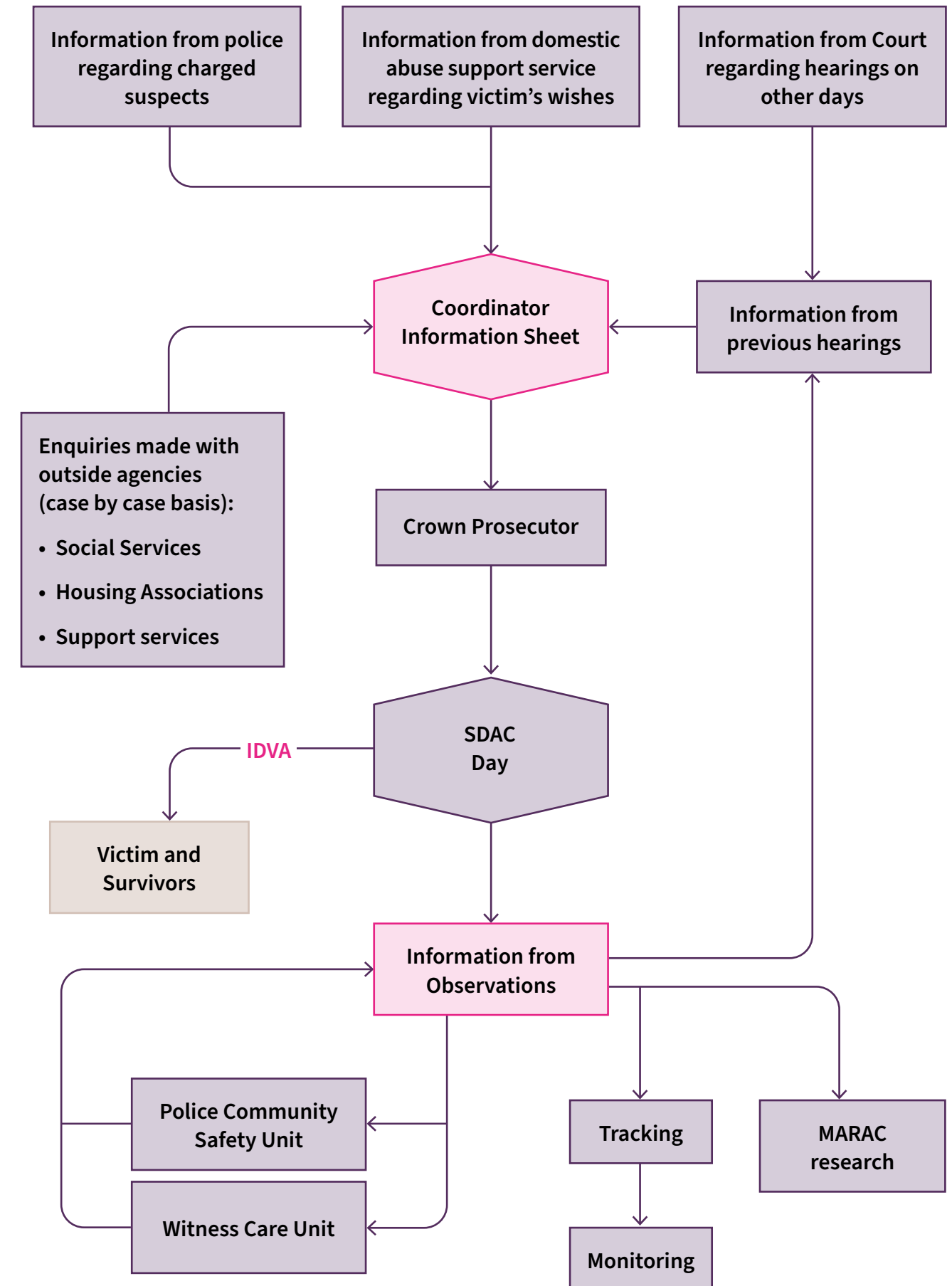
- Taking a proactive and collaborative role on all partnership issues, including identifying problems and proposing solutions
- Developing and implementing practical services and resources to support partner agencies in and around the court, such as training, data collection and analysis, identifying practice issues, and servicing the partnership
- Providing regular feedback to managers and frontline staff about observed good practice and areas requiring improvement
- Taking the lead role in the negotiation and implementation of protocols
- Ensuring the focus on victim and witness safety is maintained throughout the entire SDAC process
- Developing and maintaining effective processes for information sharing (via protocols) between agencies who are involved in supporting victims and witnesses using the court
- Delivering briefing and training to partners, to increase understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and each agency's roles and responsibilities in the SDAC
- Identifying key champions to sponsor and sustain institutional change
- Securing leadership within HMCTS, such as the Head of Legal Services and other senior staff from partner agencies
- Sharing best practice ideas and experience locally and nationally

Each SDAC at Westminster Magistrates Court employs a coordinator to fulfil the above tasks, along with others, including:

- Updating and maintaining the SDAC case filing system
- Recording case results, including bail conditions, further adjournments, and sentencing
- Checking case files in advance of court and preparing an information sheet for relevant practitioners, highlighting areas of concern
- Observing and recording court practice decisions focusing on specific subject areas, including bail, sentencing, special measures applications, witness summons applications, reasons for case withdrawals or discontinuance, delays, case file preparation issues, and reasons for cracked and ineffective trials
- Identifying and cascading good practice by partner agencies
- Administrating the operational framework
- Monitoring how the SDAC multi-agency protocol is being followed in the court
- Identifying any gaps in procedure and whether protocols need to be refined

“The court coordinator is not passive in terms of waiting for information. They will chase up if something is not right.”

CJI evaluation of Westminster SDAC (2022)



The Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA)

An Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) can have a crucial part to play in a victim or survivor's journey through the criminal justice system and on their journey to safety. IDVAs are client centred. They are the victim's voice, advocating for their safety and needs and supporting them regardless of their engagement with statutory services. IDVAs help to reduce the risks a victim or survivor faces, increasing their safety and the safety of their children.

IDVAs are **independent**, generally sitting separately from statutory services, offering non-judgemental support to victims and survivors, and ensuring their wishes and priorities are considered. IDVAs are generally funded by the local authority or the government, and usually work for charities or within the local authority.

Every week, SDACs are attended by Specialist Criminal Justice IDVAs, who have specialist knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse within the criminal justice system and the SDAC process. The CJS can be daunting, and these IDVAs keep victims engaged by demystifying the process and breaking down what different outcomes mean and the available options. Specialist Criminal Justice IDVAs are best placed to address victims' needs, give specialist CJS support, and help with wider support needs.

IDVAs in the SDAC ensure timely and accurate updates are provided to the victim or survivor. For example, if a defendant has been released from custody on bail or for sentence, an IDVA can speak to the victim or survivor immediately to create or update existing safety plans before the defendant has left the courtroom. IDVAs often hold information that other services, such as the police, may not be aware of, including details around civil remedies, social services involvement, and housing options. This information can be vital for the court when dealing with processes such as bail applications.

Having a Specialist Criminal Justice IDVA in court as part of the wider SDAC process supports the CCR approach to domestic abuse.



*This is compared with 28% of cases that are not supported by Specialist Criminal Justice IDVAs. This indicates that their support has a positive effect on the conviction rate.

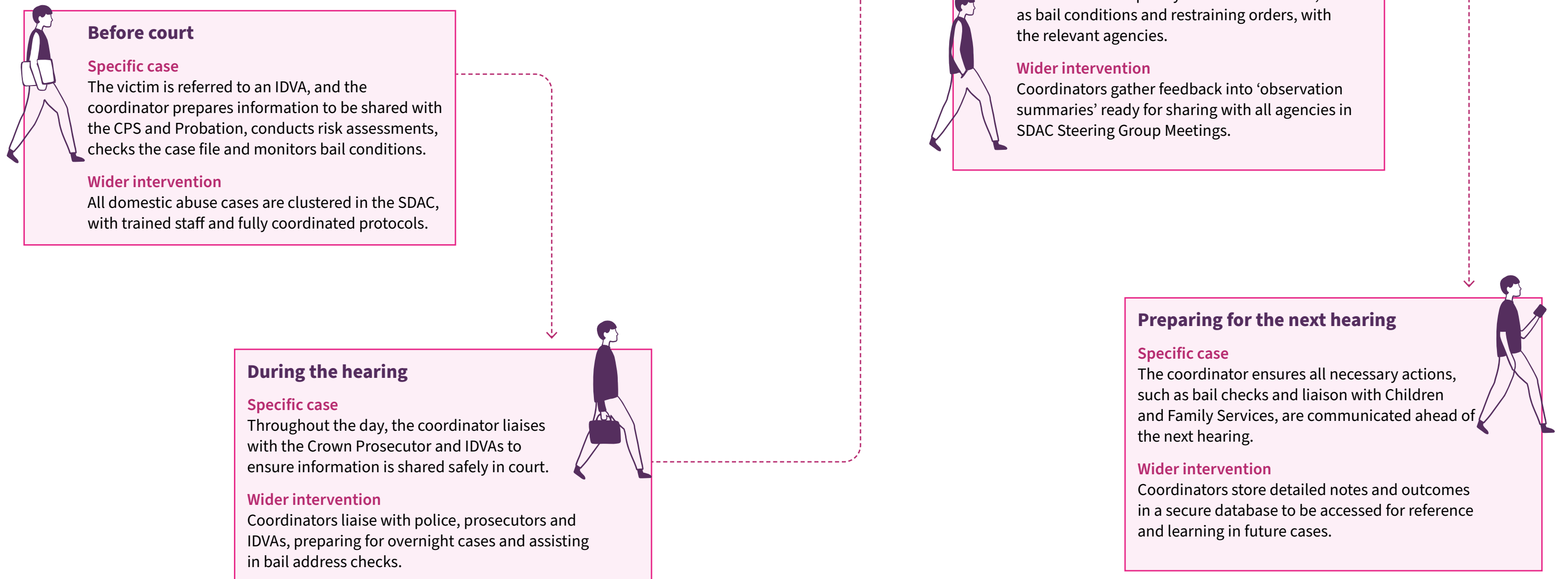


SECTION 6

Behind the scenes

While observing the SDAC, you will be able to see the benefit that the court brings. But this results from a lot of hard work behind the scenes. The journey below shows you what happens in the background, stage by stage, to put victims and survivors first and hold more abusers to account.

The victim's journey



Achieving better outcomes?

Research shows that sentences imposed in SDACs are more likely to include a rehabilitative element, leading to more support for victims, better risk management, and improved opportunities for abusers to change.

SECTION 7

Helping bring an SDAC to you

We want to bring efficient, effective justice to all victims of domestic abuse. With their focus on victims' interests, SDACs enable this to happen. However, we also understand the challenges of setting one up, and we're here to help.

We can support you with the following:

- Securing buy-in from all partners with the same levels of commitment
- Issues within agencies, including internal capacity
- Agencies restructuring
- Lack of recognition of how vital the coordination role is
- Centralisation and uniformity across areas
- Individuals carrying the buy-in and moving on
- Trained and consistently deployed staff

Having agencies work well together creates less work for everyone:

- Clustering cases makes it easier for agencies to deploy their trained staff consistently
- It also helps IDVAs use their time more effectively, only attending court on domestic abuse days
- A coordinated response before the first hearing ensures better-informed decisions about bail and special measures and effective case management, reducing the number of ineffective trials.

Get in touch

Learn more about SDACs, arrange a visit, and find out how to implement one in your area.

Get in touch today. Email criminal.justice@standingtogether.org.uk

Further information

To learn more about the work that Standing Together do within the wider criminal justice system and to read more about our capacity building and consultancy packages, please visit our website:

www.standingtogether.org.uk/criminal-justice



Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse is a national charity bringing communities together to end domestic abuse.