

# First response

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First response officers have a dual role to play when attending domestic callouts. They should:

- recognise signs of abuse and the need for safety planning to protect victims (or potential victims) and prevent offences from occurring in the longer term
- identify criminal offences, so that offenders can be brought to justice and dealt with robustly within the judicial system

Response officers should:

- ensure immediate safety
- **build rapport**
- carry out an initial investigation
- identify risk
- initiate support and protection (initial safety planning)
- ensure a good handover takes place, where applicable

Where remaining at home is unsafe, officers should consider alternatives such as:

- referral to a refuge
- arranging emergency accommodation
- facilitating a temporary stay with a trusted friend or relative

Officers should be aware that staying with family members may not be safe in cases where **'honour'-based abuse (HBA)** is suspected.

For further information, go to:

- **Victim support and welfare**

Although some forces have specialist domestic abuse investigators, the first responder is often the only officer progressing the case, particularly where the report is initially assessed as standard risk.

The first responders should progress the investigation as far as possible at the first opportunity and seek advice from specialist resources where available.

First responders should note that other crimes often occur alongside domestic abuse, such as child abuse or sexual abuse. However, these types of offences are not always immediately apparent.

For further information, go to:

- [First response quick reference guide: domestic abuse](#)
- [First response national decision model \(NDM\) tool](#)
- [First response supervisor's checklist: domestic abuse](#)
- [Investigation](#)
- [Reporting domestic abuse](#)
- [Scene protection](#)
- [Associated investigations \(Appendix A\)](#)
- [First responders as a witness](#)

## En route considerations

Police officers should ensure they have all relevant information before attending or dealing with a report of domestic abuse. This includes details provided by the call handler and information obtained from appropriate checks of IT and paper-based systems. Gathering a full picture of the situation, the family and any previous history enables officers to:

- assess risk accurately
- manage the offender
- protect vulnerable people at the address

Officers should consider that there may be a history of abuse, even if police have not been called before. Officers should consider both the immediate report and any previous incident. They should recognise that domestic abuse is often hidden and the reported incident may be part of a wider pattern. Understanding these underlying issues is essential to assessing risk and protecting the victim.

Officers should gather evidence of past behaviour, as this may be critical in proving offences such as controlling or coercive behaviour under [section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015](#). Officers

should ensure that checks include:

- previous risk assessments
- Police National Computer (PNC) records for both the suspect and the victim, with attention to any markers or alerts
- bail and licence conditions
- civil injunctions, domestic violence protection notices (DVPNs), domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs) and other court orders, including those relating to child contact
- child protection intelligence systems
- the child protection register (in Wales) or local authority children's services records for children subject to a child protection plan (in England)
- [ViSOR](#)
- the [Police National Database \(PND\)](#)

For further information, go to:

- [Checklist: information gathering](#)
- [Checklist: Details to be provided to the attending officer](#)

## Actions on arrival

Police officers should prioritise the protection of all people present from injury or further harm. This includes the victim, children, witnesses, officers and the suspect. They should also take immediate steps to ensure safety and preserve evidence.

For further information, go to:

- [Checklist: Actions on arrival at the scene](#)

The first responder should look for corroborating evidence immediately on arrival at the scene, as this is the best opportunity to investigate. For further information, go to:

- [APP in initial investigation](#)
- [Evidence gathering](#)
- [Golden hour principles](#)

Where both parties present with injuries or make allegations, responders should avoid assumptions and follow the guidance on identifying the [primary perpetrator and managing counter-allegations](#).

Forces should consider routinely assigning officers equipped with body-worn video (BWV) to domestic abuse incidents.

For further information, go to:

- [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\) BWV Guidance](#)
- [BWV](#)

Where the suspect has left, officers should:

- circulate a description
- make every effort to locate the suspect
- ensure the safety of the victim and any children while the suspect remains at large

## Scene protection

Scene protection considerations are most likely to apply where there has been an immediate report. Although delayed reports may limit opportunities for forensic evidence, these should still be explored.

Officers should focus on the immediate scene, as indicated by the initial crime complaint. It may also include other scenes that provide supporting evidence for previous or ongoing domestic abuse.

Officers should seek advice from a supervisor, domestic abuse specialist or crime scene expert where [evidence gathering](#) is likely to be complex. For example, this may apply if there are multiple scenes or specialist forensic techniques needed.

Officers should secure the area in a way that does not compromise safety and preserves material of evidential value.

For further information, go to:

- [Checklist: Protecting the scene](#)
- [APP on scene strategy](#)

## Powers of entry

Police officers should consider all powers of entry where they may need to enter premises when responding to domestic abuse incidents. Potential powers of entry include the following:

- Under [section 17\(1\)\(b\) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\)](#), a constable may enter and search any premises for the purpose of arresting a person for an indictable offence.
- Under [section 17\(1\)\(e\) of PACE](#), a constable may enter and search premises for the purpose of saving life or limb or preventing serious damage to property.
- Under common law, a constable has the power to enter premises to prevent or deal with a breach of the peace.
- Under [section 48 of the Children Act 1989](#), a warrant may be obtained to search for children who may be in need of protection.
- Where a power of arrest has been attached to a civil order, such as an occupation order, and there has been a breach.

Officers should keep a record of all searches, in line with the [PACE Codes of Practice](#).

## When access to a property is denied

Victims may refuse entry even after calling 999. This may be due to threats, coercion or the presence of the perpetrator inside. Officers should assess whether fear is the cause of refusal and record this as a risk factor.

Perpetrators may also deny entry, claiming nothing has happened. Officers should request to see all persons inside the property. If this is refused and there is reason to believe others are present, officers may invoke powers of entry under [section 17\(e\) of PACE](#). Where persons are seen but deny any issue, officers should still assess whether fear is influencing their response.

Officers should record the power of entry relied on and the grounds for believing it applies. Denial of entry does not remove the possibility of lawful entry. Any decision to enter despite objection must be legally justifiable.

Concern for welfare alone is insufficient to justify entry under section 17(e) of PACE. The power to save life or limb applies only where there is fear that something has happened, or may happen, that

could involve serious injury – [Syed v DPP \[2010\] EWHC 81 \(Admin\)](#).

Where there is doubt, officers should seek advice from a domestic abuse expert or supervisor before proceeding.

## Building rapport

On arrival, officers should establish rapport and communicate effectively by avoiding victim-blaming language and listening to the victim. This is essential to ensuring safety, preserving evidence and enabling further investigation.

For further information on how to ensure the safety of victims and children and preserve evidence, go to:

- [Checklist: Actions on arrival at the scene](#)

When an incident is handled with professionalism and empathy, victims are more likely to call the police again if abuse recurs. A good rapport also increases the engagement with risk assessment and safety planning, reducing the risk of future harm.

Officers should recognise that many factors may prevent a victim from giving a full account. These can include:

- fear of the perpetrator
- distrust of police
- substance misuse
- mental ill health
- long-term trauma
- belief that abuse is normal

Officers should approach each case with sensitivity, patience and an understanding that reluctance to engage may reflect the impact of abuse rather than unwillingness to engage. Officer should also avoid common assumptions when writing up reports, with fuller explanations for lack of engagement. These include:

## Why a victim might appear unwilling to engage

You might be thinking	The victim might be thinking any of the following
The victim will not leave.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not safe.</li> <li>• He will come looking for us and kill us if we do – he said so.</li> <li>• She will take it out on the kids if I leave and she will not let me see them.</li> <li>• I am transitioning gender. At least he accepts me how I am. He tells me no-one else will and I am sure he is right.</li> <li>• Where will I go? How will I live without the income?</li> </ul>
The victim refuses to make a statement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am frightened of the consequences.</li> <li>• He will see it and know what I said about him.</li> <li>• I will have to go to court and give evidence against him. It will be humiliating.</li> </ul>
The victim answers the perpetrator's calls and texts or even initiates them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I ignore him, he will come round and shout outside the window and wake up all the neighbours.</li> <li>• He will just carry on phoning until I answer.</li> </ul>
The victim lets the perpetrator into their home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He will break in and assault me if I do not let him in.</li> <li>• He has threatened to go and burn down mum's house if I do not let him in.</li> </ul>

You might be thinking	The victim might be thinking any of the following
<p>The victim will not support a prosecution.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Last time I supported a prosecution, the case got dropped and he hit me as punishment for calling the police.</li> <li>• If he goes to prison, he has got to come out at some point and then I will be sorry.</li> <li>• He is a pillar of the community. The judge will believe him, not me. I never finished school and I am stupid – he says so all the time.</li> </ul>
<p>The victim will not speak to the police.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the police become involved, social services will too and the children will be taken away.</li> <li>• I am in and out of court for shoplifting. Who is going to believe me?</li> <li>• I have got mental health issues. The police will not believe me, and I will just get sectioned.</li> <li>• Last time I spoke to the police, they arrested me and treated me like a suspect before figuring out I was the victim.</li> <li>• No-one will believe I was assaulted by a woman or by my own child.</li> <li>• They just think it is my own fault for being gay.</li> <li>• I will be deported if they find out I am an illegal immigrant.</li> </ul>

For further information, go to:

- [Why do victims continue abusive relationships?](#)
- [CPS domestic abuse guidance](#)

Officers should avoid being dismissive or judgemental towards victims, even when attending repeat calls. Many victims remain in, or return to, abusive situations due to fear, coercion, dependency or hope that the abuse will stop.

Regardless of whether a victim chooses to end the relationship, officers should investigate abuse and provide appropriate safeguarding.

Officers should consider referrals to specialist domestic abuse services, even if the victim feels unable to engage directly with police.

Officers should build trust by being transparent in their actions. Victims will feel respected, informed and more likely to cooperate if officers explain why they are:

- speaking to children
- requesting medical consent
- asking for access to digital devices
- gathering evidence

## Medical treatment

Police officers should assess whether the victim or any other person requires first aid, paramedic support or hospital care. They should also consider the need to request and/or complete an early evidence kit (EEK), according to local procedures. Complaints of non-fatal strangulation should be considered a medical emergency and medical advice sought as soon as possible.

If a victim declines medical treatment, officers should still record injuries in detail. This may include:

- written descriptions
- photographs
- use of a body map
- BWV

Victims sometimes decline treatment because of concerns about leaving their children. In these cases, officers should consider safe and appropriate childcare arrangements and reassure the

victim that their children will be kept safe.

Where hospital or specialist treatment is required – for example, at a health centre or sexual assault referral centre (SARC) – officers should accompany the victim to ensure their safety and provide reassurance while care is given.

For further information, go to:

- [Forensic evidence](#)

## Relocation and emergency accommodation

In some cases, it may not be possible to ensure a victim's safety by addressing the perpetrator's behaviour. For example, this may apply where the suspect is believed to be highly violent and has left the scene. Moving a victim from their home is a serious step that can further traumatise or disrupt their life, but in some situations it may be unavoidable.

Where relocation is necessary, officers should consider whether a [refuge](#) place is available and suitable, noting that refuges have limited capacity and may have restrictions on who they can accommodate. For example, it may not be possible to accommodate victims with substance misuse issues or those with older male children. Finding a place can also take time, so early consideration is essential.

Officers should work with the victim to identify their individual needs and match them with appropriate services, which may include:

- a safe place in another area
- a specialist domestic abuse service for people from ethnic minority groups
- a service that can provide legal or financial advice
- a service that can offer support in another language

For further information, go to:

- [Support services and charities](#)

Officers should ensure that a victim's location is not disclosed to the perpetrator. This includes avoiding any confirmation that the victim has gone to a refuge or other place of safety. Perpetrators

may attempt to discover the address through word of mouth, social networks or by making a missing person's report. Officers should remain alert to these risks and take all necessary steps to protect the victim's confidentiality.

For further information, go to:

- [CPS domestic abuse guidelines for prosecutors, annex E – National support organisations](#)

Local authorities have a duty to provide emergency temporary accommodation for anyone experiencing or threatened with domestic abuse. Officers should know how to access local emergency housing protocols and either make arrangements directly or ensure that support services assist the victim in doing so.

Officers should accompany victims who need to return home to collect children or belongings, and there is a risk of further abuse. Where a police presence could increase tension, it may be more appropriate for a relative, friend or social worker to provide support.

For further information, go to:

- [Victim property recovery](#)

Officers should also advise victims on privacy measures, such as registering to vote anonymously and applying to be excluded from the public electoral register. For victims who have no recourse to public funds and are therefore not entitled to refuge or safe accommodation, officers should initiate an application under the migrant victims of domestic abuse concession (MVDA) to secure support.

For further information on this process, go to:

- [MVDA guidance](#)

## Handover

The first responder should ensure that any handover includes all information relevant to the safety of the victim and any children.

It should include:

- the perpetrator's history of violence and history of any domestic abuse

- any risk assessment and grading of risk, including any signs of controlling or coercive behaviour
- any information relevant to ongoing risk assessment
- any information relevant to the custody sergeant's decision to bail or remand in custody, including information relevant to bail conditions – for example, details of their workplace or children's schools
- any information relevant to an application before a court to remand in custody – for example, colour **photos of injuries**
- details of any safety planning measures taken
- any additional safety planning required

Officers should, wherever possible, photograph victim injuries at the scene. If using a personal-issue camera or mobile device, images should be securely downloaded and attached to the case file as part of the handover process, in line with local and national procedures. For further information, go to **injury photos**.

The officer should also give the victim a point of contact and should remind them to call the emergency services if there are any further incidents or bail breaches.

For further information, go to:

- **First response quick reference guide: domestic abuse**

## Tags

APP Domestic abuse