

Bridging the gap



*Developing a more ethnically diverse
approach to domestic abuse*



BRIDGING THE GAP EVALUATION REPORT OCTOBER 2023

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FOREWORD



Every person in Cleveland has the right to live without fear of violence or abuse – especially within their own homes and around the people closest to them.

For some communities, identifying abuse and understanding how to seek support can be wrapped up in a range of complex, cultural issues. It was clear that there was more we could do to reach people in Cleveland's BME communities and open the door to the brilliant domestic abuse support services we have in the area.

For this, we've turned to the grass-roots organisations across Cleveland, who already have an invaluable insight and trusted relationships with their communities.

This project has clearly indicated the importance of grass-root organisations in building community knowledge and preventing harm around domestic abuse. I'm confident this approach could be widened to support other groups across Cleveland.

Steve Turner
Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner



The Bridging the Gap project has shown the real value of the role of community groups to deliver services and support.

Each of the delivery partners on this project are embedded in their communities and trusted by the people they support, and they have therefore been able to deliver services to members of their communities who might have been less confident in accepting support from statutory service providers, or those with a less intimate knowledge of the cultures and customs of the diverse range of beneficiaries of Bridging the Gap.

This model of hyper local, community-specific service delivery has delivered learnings that have real potential to improve how we implement services to meet a much wider range of needs across communities traditionally perceived as being hard to reach.

Jon Carling
Chief Executive, Catalyst Stockton-on-Tees Ltd

INTRODUCTION

Domestic abuse is a pervasive social issue that affects individuals of all races, genders, and backgrounds. However, individuals from black and minoritised ethnic (BME) communities often face unique challenges when it comes to identifying, addressing and seeking support for domestic abuse.

Cleveland Police crime statistics highlight that less than 1% of domestic abuse is identified outside of White/British ethnicities, and demographic data provided by domestic abuse service providers across Cleveland – including one BME by and for service¹ - increases the total number of BME victims identified during 2022/23 to just 3%.

This emphasises that domestic abuse identified within BME communities represents a very small proportion of all domestic abuse known to police and/or domestic abuse services. The latest data available from the National Centre for Domestic Violence estimates that less than 24% of domestic abuse (across all ethnicities) is reported to the police. An Imkaan briefing (2020) further highlights that victim/survivors from BME communities are 10.1% more likely than any other ethnic group to experience domestic abuse, and are significantly less likely to disclose or report this abuse to the police or other authority figures.

To support the completion of a local Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) in relation to the specific needs of victims of domestic abuse from BME communities in Cleveland (2021), two distinct consultation exercises took place:

1. Consultation with key stakeholders sought to understand whether the needs of victims from BME communities were being met within mainstream services. This involved discussions with staff across local domestic abuse and victim referral services.
2. Consultation with services from or for BME communities to understand the needs of individuals from BME communities in relation to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) provision. Communication was held with community group leaders on the basis of their knowledge of BME communities and relationships with BME individuals.

The feedback from these consultations and the broader EIA² content supported thinking about how new approaches could be tested moving forward. As a result, 'Bridging the Gap' was developed to pilot a new and unique 'brokerage' approach aimed at better understanding the challenges - experienced or perceived – by BME

¹ Designed and delivered 'by and for' individuals for those that share the same protected characteristic(s)

² [Final-Signed-Off-Equality-Impact-Assessment-BAME-DA-210222.pdf \(pcc.police.uk\)](#)

communities. The approach involved supporting and funding local grass roots community groups already delivering services to BME communities and where there are established trusted relationships between leaders and service users.

BME COMMUNITIES, DOMESTIC ABUSE AND ‘BRIDGING THE GAP’

The purpose of Bridging the Gap was to:

- Raise awareness of and identify potential domestic abuse occurring within BME communities.
- Support communities, through grass roots projects able to better identify domestic abuse and understand current responses of BME communities, to better understand and engage with services responding to domestic abuse through increased awareness and understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- Build a bridge between local BME communities and organisations working in response to domestic abuse.
- Enable learning to improve the future commissioning of domestic abuse services ensuring the needs and preferences of BME communities are understood and met.

The Bridging the Gap Fund

The OPCC made available a £30,000 grant fund for voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs) with established reach into Cleveland’s BME communities.

Catalyst, a local voluntary sector infrastructure support organisation, were commissioned to manage the Bridging the Gap grants fund and to provide oversight and support for seven successful VCOs. Whilst the fund was open to any VCO delivering groups within BME communities operating in Cleveland, local demographic data and locality of relevant VCOs identified Middlesbrough and Stockton as the most densely populated BME communities. However, some projects did deliver in Hartlepool and Redcar areas, albeit with lower numbers of participants engaged.

The successful projects were required to apply to the fund and to meet minimum criteria for eligibility - specifically, being a constituted community group with appropriate health and safety, safeguarding and financial management arrangements in place.

All groups were provided with additional information regarding local domestic abuse services and the criminal justice system response to domestic abuse. Additionally, 'Ask Me' domestic abuse Ambassador training was delivered to all VCOs that hadn't previously undertaken domestic abuse training.

All VCOs were subject to project management and grant agreements, and project leads supported the co-production of a bespoke set of information and domestic abuse data collection to inform this evaluation. The purpose of this was to support learning, review of project impact and the pilot's effectiveness.

Cleveland OPCC met with project leads half-way through the delivery period to review support needs and progress. At this point, most projects had identified positive engagement and had identified individuals that they were encouraging to access domestic abuse services or, whom had been directly referred for support.

IMPACT OF BRIDGING THE GAP

Funding was agreed for **seven projects** that delivered across the Cleveland area including:

- [Nur Fitness](#) Afghan Women's Group
- [Purple Rose](#) and [Creative Minds](#) collaborated on Let's Talk
- [Victory Christian Ministries International](#) Healthy Relationships in Families
- Stockton African Caribbean Centre Bridging the Gap Domestic Abuse Project
- [Ubuntu Multi-cultural Centre](#) 'Raising Awareness of Domestic Abuse'
- [Women Today](#) Raising Awareness of Domestic Abuse and Supporting Associated Mental Health

Project impacts include:



NUR FITNESS:



Nur Fitness deliver a range of health promotion, fitness and wellbeing classes to Afghan women and girls arrived as migrants to the Middlesbrough and Stockton area within the last two years. Nur Fitness aimed to raise awareness within the community of Afghan Women about the diverse range of behaviours identified as domestic abuse within legislation in the UK and how domestic abuse is responded to by agencies and support services. Nur Fitness also sought to help women to seek support at the earliest opportunity.

This funding supported Nur Fitness to design and deliver 10 'Bridging the Gap' project sessions via a combination of face to face and online sessions. They utilised online software to enable translation to ensure that online sessions could be delivered in a single language but translated to meet the needs of attendees who predominantly used Pushto. An interpreter supported the development of information materials. Nur Fitness ensured all sessions delivered to those that could not speak English were able to access information and support regarding domestic abuse in their home language.

Project Content:

- **What is Domestic abuse in the UK**
- **Forms of Domestic abuse in the UK**
- **Where to get help when experiencing domestic abuse**

Project Outcomes:



- **Domestic abuse awareness, materials and support delivered in Pushto**
- **10 designated sessions over a 10-week period**
- **Engaged with 78 women of Afghan and Pakistani origin**
- **Identified 15 clear disclosures and many 'implicit' indicators of abuse**
- **Supported five formal referrals to a domestic abuse service**

- **Identified a high level of reluctance from participants to formally report or seek support from services regarding domestic abuse**

Nur Fitness engaged directly with 78 Afghan women in their sessions and had 15 disclosures from participants which were broken down into eight physical abuse, five emotional abuse and two financial abuse. It was identified that this abuse was predominantly being perpetrated by males against their wives.

Whilst there were five supported referrals to domestic abuse services, the project highlighted a high level of reluctance from those identifying their experience of a range of behaviours to engage with formal services. Many of the participants perceived that formal support would require or persuade women to leave their husbands and families and that they would need to go into a refuge to receive support. As a result of the work undertaken with these women, there is greater awareness of the role of services responding to domestic abuse and of the range of support available.

The approach taken ensured women and girls had access to information, guidance and support about domestic abuse, whilst being free and empowered to choose how they wanted to respond to their own circumstances within the boundaries of organisational safeguarding arrangements. This approach enabled cultural sensitivity to a highly stigmatised subject matter and supported participants to engage in exploring issues within their families in a safe and non-threatening way. Significantly, these women were reassured that they could access support whilst remaining in control of next steps. This resulted in women feeling more empowered to disclose without fear of loss of control of their own lives and family connections.

A by-product of the project was the building of confidence and knowledge within the women, some who agreed to act under the radar as champions within the Afghan community, raising awareness and sharing learning from the project amongst their peers and with their children, to create longer term change and sustainability.

CREATIVE MINDS AND PURPLE ROSE



Creative Minds work predominantly in the heart of Middlesbrough with refugees and asylum seekers – particularly women and children newly arrived to the UK and who had often experienced trauma and unfavourable conditions in their home country. They delivered a range of activities, offering a warm welcome, community spirit and opportunities for friendship and support. The group meets regularly around informal activities such as crafts, coffee mornings, orientation to the local area and sharing food. Similarly, Purple Rose offered the same approach to refugees and asylum seekers through similar activities in Stockton. Of note is that both groups are attended by women and children who are related to each other within extended family networks.



Both organisations were funded to deliver 'Let's Talk' in a joined-up way, each delivering duplicate approaches in separate groups in Middlesbrough and Stockton and bringing the groups together around specific activities. Both groups were led by those with lived-experience of domestic abuse including culturally specific harms associated with so-called honour-based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. The project was jointly planned and delivered via informal sessions within an existing activities programme, on the premise of building safe spaces for discussing stigmatised issues, awareness raising of domestic abuse and how to seek support.

Project content:

- **Eight sessions delivered across the project by Creative Minds in Middlesbrough and a further eight sessions by Purple Rose in Stockton**
- **Two joint sessions to bring women from the two groups together**
- **Six sessions delivered as part of the regular drop-in sessions by both organisations**

Project Outcomes:



This approach resulted in positive participation and discussions about domestic abuse which was never promoted as the primary focus of activities, rather the sessions were planned and led in such a way that they allowed women already attending sessions with an activities-based focus - such as crafting - to engage in discussions without the worry of being singled-out or facing stigma associated with intentionally attending a group with an explicit focus on domestic abuse.

Leaders of these groups were acutely aware of the stigma and challenges of discussions around taboo and/or culturally sensitive issues and the potential impacts upon those family members and friends from the same community being engaged in such discussions. As such, the approach used focused on facilitated discussions in a sensitive and safe way allowing discussion, awareness raising and support options to be identified in a conversational and informal way. As a result of these informal discussions, leaders were able to identify individuals for one-to-one follow-up discussions, provision of literature and sign-posting where safe and appropriate.

Sessions raised awareness of domestic abuse and the support available should disclosure or reporting be considered. Both groups were intentional about creating display boards and making literature available to support follow up and general awareness. Feedback from both projects suggests that discussing difficult issues is improving slowly. However, sustainability of this project can be realised through continued informal sessions. Positively, some participants have gained confidence as volunteers of these groups and will be supported with the longer-term ambition to identify community champions for training such as the 'Ask Me' domestic abuse community ambassador programme.

VICTORY CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL (VCMI)



VCMI is a Christian Church attended predominantly by the Black-African community. They delivered their project in the context of established church-based ministries - men's groups, women's groups, youth groups. VCMI focused on support and mentoring, developing life skills, supporting mental wellbeing and supporting family life by educating black African families on British law and behavioural expectations in domestic relationships. They covered what healthy relationships in families look like and coordinated a whole family approach across the church, delivered through separate sessions in men-only, women-only and youth sessions (over the age of 14).

VCMI worked with both men and women, including young people over the age of 14 years to open discussion about relationship dynamics and healthy strategies for dealing with disagreement and conflict within families. This helped to raise awareness and educate participants around domestic abuse and recent changes in legislation, as well as supported participants to recognise abusive behaviours, understand the law and access relevant support. VCMI worked closely with Women Today to provide specific support to women identified as victims through the project and this collaborative approach brought additional benefits in terms of more targeted long-term support for women.

Project Content:

12 sessions on:

- **Encouraging vulnerability within safe spaces to discuss the hard things in family life**
- **Strategies for healthy communication and resolving conflict well**
- **Building resilience in families**
- **Domestic abuse awareness including behaviours between different family members and cultural differences**
- **Domestic abuse law in the UK**
- **How people using abusive behaviours can access support for change**
- **How victims of domestic abuse can access help**

Project Outcomes:



VCMI found that many of their participants lacked awareness of the range of behaviours defined as domestic abuse within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and were able to address misconceptions around the use of discipline within family life, especially in the context of scriptural misinterpretation. This project dug deep into differences between British and African culture, especially in the context of those participants who were new arrivals to Britain through asylum and who 'struggled' with the difference in cultural attitudes towards women, children, family life and British equalities legislation.

Two formal victim referrals were made to a local domestic abuse service whilst a number of additional women, ambivalent about accessing domestic abuse services were signposted to Women Today (who work closely with the Church Women's group), a local African Women's service able to provide well-being and pastoral support with other onward referrals for specialist support.

There were also two disclosures by men who approached their Pastor after engaging in sessions, they had questioned their own behaviours and sought advice and a safe space to reflect. Pastoral support was provided with safeguarding arrangements reviewed in context of the family. This demonstrates the significant value of trusted relationships within organisations able to balance support and challenge.

A key success of this project resulted from the coordination of activities across separate groups delivering within a family context; where disclosures were identified the church was able to respond pastorally and review safeguarding in relation to the family unit. The VCMI leadership have taken learning from their engagement in 'Bridging the Gap' which has resulted in a review of the church's response to domestic abuse, pastoral arrangements and awareness of local domestic abuse services.

STOCKTON AFRICAN CARIBBEAN ASSOCIATION (SACA)

SACA support African Caribbean communities across Cleveland and provide a range of educational and 'Orientation to Britain' inputs to those migrants newly arrived to the UK. SACA used Bridging the Gap funding to deliver domestic abuse awareness sessions to men across Cleveland.

Project Content:

- **Raise awareness on the forms of domestic abuse (and unacceptable ways of addressing issues) in the UK.**
- **SACAs target was to deliver 16 sessions to 40 African men from 8 community groups living in Teesside. This was as a result of many members of the community who are relatively new migrants to the UK falling foul of the UK law on domestic abuse, believed to be as a result of originating from cultures and practices that tolerate some forms of domestic abuse.**

Project Outcomes:



SACA found that many of the men in their groups legitimised domestic abuse and lacked awareness of British legislation regarding domestic abuse and safeguarding. Further, many held strong opinions about gender roles, especially within marriage and family relationships.

Attitudes included views on women remaining submissive to men within households, concerns about culture in the UK 'leading women to rebel against behaviours expected by countries of origin' and victim-blaming where abuse occurs - all of which was challenging for SACA to address and unpick.

Group-leaders representative of participants led group conversations about British legal and cultural expectations regarding gender equality. SACA were able to start challenging inappropriate attitudes and entrenched beliefs about gender roles,

especially within family life. SACA have started to establish change, with some men committing to becoming peer-educators within their communities.

SACA suggest that the biggest impact on changing attitudes has resulted from the 'trusted-relationship' established between group leaders and participants and the fact that challenge is brought by those who share the experience of moving to the UK and adapting to new ways of living family-life, legislation and societal expectations.

SACA recognise that this is a significant challenge and will not be a 'quick fix', and that change will require ongoing and persistent education, challenge and support to influence change. SACA will bring some sustainability to their project by using the foundational training and learning they acquired through 'Bridging the Gap' to continue to bring a domestic abuse focus into other work they have planned with men within these groups.



UBUNTU:

Ubuntu Multi-cultural Centre supports ethnic migrants with a range of activities and delivers specific projects which provide a link between a range of statutory and non-statutory agencies perceived as 'authoritarian' by migrant communities - many of whom have experienced persecution and trauma from authorities in their country of origin. As such Ubuntu acts to bridge the gap and provide reciprocal communication between organisations and migrant communities.

Project Content:

- **Informal discussions about domestic abuse within regular centre activities every week**
- **Establish a women-only safe space within the centre with relevant literature**

Project Outcomes:

**REACHED OVER 100
BLACK AND ASIAN
WOMEN FROM
MIDDLESBROUGH**

**ENABLED
STRONGER
COLLABORATION**

**CREATED A WOMEN
ONLY SAFE SPACE
WHICH FACILITATED 5
ONE-TO-ONE
DISCUSSIONS
EXPLORING DISCLOSURE**

**3 REFERRALS TO
EARLY HELP FOR
CHILD
SAFEGUARDING**

Ubuntu created a safe women-only space which was accessed regularly and conducive to private one-to-one discussions about sensitive issues. In order to encourage attendance, sessions were based around activities such as jewellery making, baking and tea testing so that conversations could be held informally. They also noted the impact of abuse on children within the family unit and were able to offer advice and support to participants about this and signpost to support services such as Childrens Services, reassuring victims that disclosing to social services does not mean that children will be taken into care but that they can access a wider range of advice and support.

As a separately funded project, Ubuntu also deliver on the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) project which meant that they were engaging with some of the children impacted by domestic abuse. As a result of the training that was completed as part of this project, HAF project leads were better equipped to spot the signs and take the relevant safeguarding steps.

WOMEN TODAY



Women Today are a well-established Women's Service providing information, advice, guidance and support to empower Black African women.

Women Today utilised their established reach and contact with women to deliver 'Addressing domestic abuse and unmet mental health needs of Black African Women' a project which included:

Project Content:

- Domestic abuse awareness including criminal justice system and support services response
- Understanding impact of domestic abuse on mental health
- Wellness and building emotional resilience
- Mental health stigma

Project outcomes:



These sessions included discussions, interactive zoom sessions and both one-to-one and group sessions to raise awareness of and educate women about domestic abuse, its impact and routes of support.

Additionally, they included the significant intersection between domestic abuse and women with mental health issues to increase feelings of wellbeing. This was done through four six-week programmes of group counselling, delivered by a qualified health professional. Where identified through discussions, Women Today also offered those women with the highest need, where appropriate, a programme of high intensity cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and tailored domestic abuse support.

This approach was delivered in partnership with specialist professionals, counsellors, and organisations who have existing collaborative arrangements with Women Today.

Another element of the project which provided a wider reach included the creation and publication of three short 'Table Talk' style digital recordings produced in collaboration with the Police and Crime Commissioner and two local 'By and For' BME services.

These have been published on Women Today's YouTube channel, as below.





Contact with women through these groups enabled Black African women - the majority of whom do not tend to disclose to formal services or authorities. Women Today provide practical support to enable women to access specialist provision. The digital element of the project provided Black African women beyond the contact of Women Today's groups, with access to information about domestic abuse and local support services whilst brokering confidence in agencies perceived as 'authoritarian'.

A by-product of the project resulted from the proactive encouragement of women to volunteer for Women Today, empowering and building resilience whilst supporting women to gain more skills, and to support other women through similar lived experience. This ensures peer-led practice that is integral to the approach of Women Today.

WHAT WE LEARNED - KEY THEMES

Bridging the Gap facilitated valuable learning, whilst at the same time, reinforcing known assumptions and further increasing the OPCC's understanding of the complex range of barriers experienced by BME communities.

This learning will inform future approaches to tackling domestic abuse and the support provided and available to victims moving forward.

Below are the key themes identified.



Language and communication barriers

Language barriers can prevent victims from effectively communicating their experiences or seeking help. Many BME communities do not have access to information about domestic abuse or information available in their first language. This makes it difficult for communities to understand options available to them, including reporting to the police or accessing support services that meet their needs.



Overcoming stigma and shame

Breaking stigma and shame associated with domestic abuse is prevalent in all communities. However, BME communities are disproportionately more likely to experience additional challenges rooted in a range of cultural and religious belief systems - both from individuals within BME communities and from others *about* BME communities.

Speaking out about abuse from a partner or family member, considering leaving a relationship or divorce can be highly stigmatised within some BME communities. Victims of domestic abuse often fear bringing shame to their families or fear the response or consequence from their families and their communities. This prevents victims from speaking out or seeking help, as there is legitimate fear about facing cultural backlash, being ostracised from family and community, and in some cases, the real risk of inciting significant consequences and physical harm.

Critically, where BME communities intersect with migrant communities and/or other issues there are a range of additional barriers including no recourse to public funds, complexities in accessing support, and real fears of deportation and/or abandonment.

Where English is not the primary language, promoting open and non-judgmental discussions about domestic abuse and British laws within safe spaces, with support

of trusted relationships, encourages victims significantly and supports their confidence and ability to seek help from those able to provide it.



Fear

BME communities often have lived experience of racist discrimination within the UK or have experienced abuse of power and/or violence from authorities in their countries of origin. This often creates fear and mistrust of authorities, especially towards police and children's services in the UK. Some victims are hesitant to seek help from support services, law enforcement or other services due to a lack of understanding about their roles, fear of repercussions or lack of confidence in personnel within the justice system.

This is often caused by previous experiences of poor treatment or understanding from individuals in relation to culturally specific issues, either directly or in relation to awareness of the experiences of others, from within their BME communities.



Limited access to services

BME communities often face barriers in accessing mainstream support services, including lack of transportation, financial constraints, or limited availability of culturally sensitive services. This can further prevent victims from seeking help and accessing necessary support.



Lack of representation in services

BME communities are underrepresented in mainstream domestic abuse and other services which can lead to a real or perceived lack of culturally sensitive support. Victims are often reluctant to access services due to the perception that they do not understand their culturally specific circumstances or cannot provide services in a way that meets their specific needs, challenges and/or preferences.

However, learning from our EIA suggested that some victims prefer accessing mainstream services or a have preference for an out of area 'By and For' services.

There are a number of reasons for this however, a significant factor is the small size of BME communities in the local area and the level of confidence in perceptions of anonymity when accessing local services.

THE BRIDGING THE GAP APPROACH: HOW ORGANISATIONS CAN BETTER SERVE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES



Increasing engagement through culturally sensitive support

Addressing domestic abuse in BME communities through BME 'By and For' VCOs enables culturally sensitive support that takes account of the unique needs and challenges experienced by BME communities.

Established 'By and For' grass-roots VCOs already provide trusted relationships and offer services that are appropriate, culturally relevant and which are delivered in such a way that meet the needs and preferences of specific BME communities.

This includes providing information and services in multiple languages, incorporating cultural beliefs and practices, and promoting diversity and inclusion. When advice and support is provided by trusted individuals in a way that empowers individuals, a critical connection is made between organisations that can provide more tailored support and those that are currently failing to access the support that is needed.



Awareness raising for empowerment

Raising awareness of domestic abuse and support services in BME communities empowers victims, perpetrators and witnesses of domestic abuse to identify and call out behaviours that can so often be minimised, tolerated and/or accepted as normative within intimate relationships, families and communities.

Equipping individuals with information and support empowers them to take ownership of their situation and enables access to a range of options for change, empowering victims to make informed decisions about their situation, safety and well-being. Further, it challenges stereotypes and unconscious racism that support narratives suggesting that cultural or religious belief systems support acceptance of behaviours which are abusive. This reinforces understanding that domestic abuse, in any form is never acceptable or excusable.



Informing needs assessment and commissioning intentions

The very nature of working with BME people through grass-roots 'By and For' community organisations that already engage with their communities on the basis of

trusted relationships and culturally-specific understanding, enhances opportunities for 'deep-listening' and 'co-production'.

This supports understanding of the needs and choices of those communities within commissioning activity. The under-identification and under-reporting of domestic abuse within BME communities is a concern identified by a range of organisations across many themes.

Bridging the Gap as an approach provides agreed access to those communities and the rich information available through collaboration between commissioners, mainstream services and 'By and For' groups which can facilitate an enhanced understanding for needs assessment and commissioning activity - resulting in more meaningful inclusion for BME communities.

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND FINAL THOUGHTS:



Trusted Relationships

Bridging the Gap has highlighted the significant impact and opportunities available through working with community groups providing well-established, trusted relationships at a grass-roots level in local communities. This is especially important regarding reach into communities currently less likely to engage with a range of services responding to domestic abuse.

Further, trusted relationships provide increased opportunities for raising awareness of domestic abuse in safe and culturally-sensitive environments and for providing brokerage of stronger partnership working between mainstream services and VCOs – particularly in the context of supporting more disclosures and referrals to specialist services.

However, it is important to note that 'trusted relationships' established between communities and grass-roots organisations, generally peer-led and volunteer-run, can present challenges where boundaries are concerned. This is something which needs to be understood better by partners and stakeholders.

In the context of Bridging the Gap, VCOs operating in such contexts benefited from the support and training provided by Catalyst who identified further opportunities for training and capacity building within the VCOs organisations to enhance the opportunities emerging from this approach.



Brokerage between specialist services and grass roots 'By and For' community organisations

The seven projects selected for Bridging the Gap were well-established voluntary sector organisations, known to local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, such as Catalyst, operating across Cleveland. These projects were well known for their reach and established work with BME communities and it was assumed that increased identification and disclosure of domestic abuse would be an opportunity presented by the context of trusted relationships.

Bridging the Gap was clear from its inception that none of these groups were recognised as being, or requiring, the specialist knowledge held by domestic abuse service providers. Rather, there was clear guidance provided to these VCOs regarding the parameters of their role in the context of delivering domestic abuse related sessions, including:

- Domestic abuse community champion level training
- Information about specialist domestic abuse support services
- Roles of key organisations including police and children's services
- Strengthening partnership between Bridging the Gap, specialist domestic abuse services and statutory agencies during project delivery.

A challenge associated with Bridging the Gap was how these VCOs could provide support and encouragement to elicit disclosure, without pushing too quickly or against the wishes of individuals. Consideration was given to how services would handle conflicts between the wishes of individuals and what to do with information surrounding various levels of, and seriousness contained within, possible disclosures.



Disclosure and Safeguarding

Another key challenge of Bridging the Gap was, and remains, the issue of how VCOs with trusted relationships with BME communities, manage the risks and responsibilities associated with safeguarding concerns for those that do not want what has been disclosed to be shared with others. This is especially difficult in the context of awareness of children being present within the household and ensuring they are appropriately safeguarded from harm.

Whilst all projects delivering Bridging the Gap had a safeguarding policy and were aware of their responsibilities for safeguarding, this issue was the single greatest challenge experienced by project leads when handling disclosure.

Given the context of under-reporting of domestic abuse in all communities, and the significant additional barriers experienced by BME communities, it is important that individuals have safe spaces in which to voice their experience whilst recognising the impacts of domestic abuse on children and the responsibility to safeguard children.

One of the key barriers to disclosure and reporting is the fear of children's services investigation and the perceived risks of child removal from families. This is a real challenge which requires further understanding and dialogue between safeguarding and domestic abuse strategic partnerships, when considering approaches to tackling under-reporting of domestic abuse and the specific under-representation of BME communities.

Bridging the Gap has identified an appetite and opportunity for further training and capacity building within VCOs around safeguarding practice which will complement any community champion based approaches to tackling domestic abuse within BME communities.

NEXT STEPS

As outlined throughout this report significant information has been gleaned through the projects delivered across Bridging the Gap. Moreover, there are further opportunities to understand the specific experiences and views of groups which were not the focus of this pilot, such as young people and migrants. This will be considered in the context of any further Bridging the Gap projects.

Learning from Bridging the Gap will be shared with a range of relevant stakeholders including Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnerships across Cleveland and local commissioners of domestic abuse services to inform policy and practice in relation to understanding the needs, gaps and impacts for BME communities. It is clear that Bridging the Gap, as an approach, has been instrumental in reaching those communities least likely - for whatever reason - to engage with mainstream services and/or authority figures including criminal justice agencies and children's services.

Further, the number of disclosures made, and individuals offered support and referrals into support services highlights the opportunities available through VCOs. These organisations can provide sustainable and cost-effective awareness-raising in local communities and provide support at earlier opportunities for individuals less likely to acknowledge domestic abuse is an issue or to speak out and seek/accept support available.

On this basis there are a range of other groups, specifically those with protected characteristics, that could benefit from a similar approach to Bridging the Gap. This will be considered by Cleveland OPCC when developing future needs assessment and commissioning intentions.