

Supporting high-risk victims of domestic violence: a review of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs)

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The strategic narrative on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) published in November 2010 announced that a review of MARACs would be undertaken in order to improve understanding of how MARACs are working and potential areas of development, including considering the case for putting MARACs on a statutory basis. This report presents the key findings of that review.¹

Background

Multi-agency risk assessment conferences are multi-agency meetings where statutory and voluntary agency representatives share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse in order to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase victim safety. The agencies that attend MARACs will vary but are likely to include, for example: the Police, Probation, Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs), Children's Services, health and housing. There are approximately 250 MARACs currently in operation across England and Wales.

This report brings together evidence from a range of sources in order to explore:

- existing evidence for effectiveness and cost effectiveness of MARACs;
- how the MARAC model currently operates within the wider response to domestic violence;
- variation in current practice amongst MARACs; and
- potential areas for future development.

¹ The strategic narrative can be accessed at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/call-end-violence-women-girls/>

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Keywords

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Methodology

The review draws together findings from a range of sources.

- An analysis of existing literature relating to the effectiveness of MARACs, and of the wider co-ordinated community responses to domestic violence or multi-agency responses to domestic violence.
- Analysis of data collected by the national charity Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA) including:
 - i) performance monitoring data from over 200 MARACs
 - ii) quality assurance assessment (QA) data from the 83 MARACs who had completed the quality assurance process at the time of drafting.
- A national survey of MARAC Chairs, MARAC/DV co-ordinators and IDVA/specialist domestic abuse support services (at least one response was received from over 90 per cent of known MARACs).
- Structured interviews with 13 members of the National MARAC Steering Group (NMSG).
- Structured interviews with 47 representatives from a range of agencies involved in four purposefully selected case study sites.

No single data source provides a full and accurate depiction of MARACs and there are limitations to each. For example, the survey achieved a very high response rate but selectively targeted specific MARAC roles and cannot therefore be considered as representative of all MARAC agencies. Qualitative interviews provide in-depth data on the perspectives of a wider range of agency representatives but the smaller sample means that findings cannot be considered representative of all MARAC practitioners. Given these limitations, and to draw more accurate conclusions in relation to each of the above topics, the report attempts to triangulate findings across the various data sources.

Findings

Effectiveness and cost effectiveness of MARACs

A review of existing literature on the effectiveness of MARACs, supplemented with analysis of NMSG interviews, found the following.

- Existing research indicates that MARACs (and IDVAs) have the potential to improve victim safety and reduce re-victimisation and therefore may be a highly cost-effective measure. However, as the available evidence on MARAC outcomes is relatively weak, a more robust evaluation would be required to strengthen these findings.
- The three areas which NMSG interviewees perceived as core to a MARACs' effectiveness are enhanced information sharing; appropriate agency representation; and the role of the IDVA in representing and engaging the victim in the process.
- Factors which were seen as supporting effective practice included having: strong partnership links (including a commitment from agencies to tackle domestic violence in general); strong leadership (through the MARAC chair); good co-ordination (through a MARAC co-ordinator); and the availability of training and induction.

Current practice

Findings from the responses to the national survey supplemented with analysis of data collected through the CAADA MARAC quality assurance process suggest the following.

- The vast majority of MARACs do follow the ten guidance principles for an effective MARAC, as defined by CAADA; however, there is evidence of variance in practice and performance within this overarching model.

- Of the ten principles, the four which appear to most frequently present challenges for MARACs are 'identification', 'representation', 'volume' and 'action planning'.
- Balancing the need to maintain a workable caseload against a wish to increase referrals to MARAC from a wider range of agencies will be important for MARACs going forward.
- Case study practitioners reported that having a degree of flexibility within the CAADA practice model was useful as it enabled them to adapt their approach to their local circumstances.

Potential areas for future development

Practitioners and stakeholders identified a number of potential areas for the future development of MARACs. Key findings included the following.

- Increasing the number of non-police referrals and improving agency representation were the most commonly identified priority areas for future development for MARACs. These link to the CAADA principles of 'identification' and 'representation' mentioned above.
- There is a desire for further clarity around how MARACs and other multi-agency procedures working with victims of domestic abuse (i.e. safeguarding children and vulnerable adult procedures) interlink, both to help avoid duplication and to support practitioners in prioritising actions across arrangements.
- The importance of developing the links between MARACs and services which are aimed at addressing the perpetrators behaviour (e.g. Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements and perpetrator programmes) were emphasised.
- Improved monitoring of MARACs was highlighted as an area for development to both build a better evidence base for MARAC effectiveness and to better understand outcomes measures such as repeat victimisation rates.
- Linked to the finding above, separate analysis of current performance monitoring data on repeat victimisation rates for MARACs (which is based on the number of repeat referrals they receive) shows that the quality of these data varies across MARACs and a question still remains around what a comparatively 'good' repeat rate should be. This suggests that further work is required to improve the quality and understanding of these data.
- Further work may be required to ensure that MARACs are reflective of the communities they serve. This could involve supporting and encouraging representation from organisations which represent minority communities such as Black and Minority Ethnic and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender organisations.
- The perceived benefits of training and induction for MARAC representatives were emphasised, alongside the potential value of training for wider practitioners around understanding the role of MARACs or being aware of signs pointing to domestic violence. This highlights the perceived value of an ongoing programme of training at either a local or national level.

The review also sought practitioner and stakeholder views on the potential advantages and disadvantages of placing MARACs on a statutory footing and found the following.

- The vast majority of respondents to the national survey of MARACs (targeted at MARAC Chairs; IDVAs; and DV/ MARAC co-ordinators) support the view that it would be beneficial to place MARACs on a statutory footing. However, views from members of the national MARAC steering group were more mixed, primarily due to concerns around the extent to which the potential advantages would be realised in practice.

- Key perceived advantages of placing MARACs on a statutory footing included: better agency representation; stronger accountability; and improved continuity and consistency. Where disadvantages were perceived these included: increased bureaucracy; greater burden on agencies; and concern that victim's views may be lost or victim engagement would decline.

This review was commissioned to inform the development of the supporting action plan for the implementation of the Government's 'Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls'. The action plan was launched on 8 March 2011 and includes a range of actions related to MARACs which were informed by the review. The findings of the review will also, where appropriate, be used to inform the delivery of those actions particularly in relation to the Home Office's commitment to work with colleagues on the NMSG to review the guidance and training for MARACs, including strengthening the links with other multi-agency arrangements and continuing to raise awareness of MARACs.²

² The complete action plan can be accessed at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/call-end-violence-women-girls/vawg-action-plan>