

## **PE1838/I**

ASSIST submission of 5 February 2021

### The ASSIST Service

ASSIST services are accredited by the SafeLives Leading Lights programme, an accreditation programme which recognises and rewards good and safe practice in community based domestic abuse services across the UK. The programme offers services and partners a set of standards for supporting victims of domestic abuse through a risk led response, and is designed to ensure that survivors of domestic violence receive the same level of service, regardless of where they are in the country. ASSIST as a Specialist Independent Domestic Abuse Advocacy and Support Service focussing on reducing the risk to and improving the safety of victims of domestic abuse, supports both women, children and men who have been victims of domestic abuse.

ASSIST's aims are to ensure that all victims of domestic abuse are safe, informed and supported throughout their involvement with the criminal justice system. The CYPAWs service (Children and Young People Advocacy Workers) offers support and advocacy to children who have witnessed domestic abuse, are considered to be at further risk from the impact of domestic abuse or if they are cited to court as a witness in a domestic abuse case, the Children and Young People's Advocacy Worker provides a series of face-to-face support sessions, depending on their age and stage of development. Court support for child cited witnesses is offered throughout the court process. This could include meeting with the child for pre court sessions. We identify what support is required before, during and after.

We have a separate CYPAW Intake form that considers Indicators of risk of harm to children. This allows us to prioritise high risk cases (who is most at risk) and these are cases where the child is a cited witness or has witnessed but not cited. It also enables the worker to identify where Child Protection is a concern (in relation to the perpetrator not the non-abusing parent) and risk of abduction or harm to children and conflict over contact with the Accused. We discuss what parenting support may be required and look at the impact domestic abuse has had on the relationship between parent and child. Where appropriate we arrange direct support with the child/young person and non-abusing parent/carer.

A crucial part of our work is interagency work, removing the secrecy. We are all responsible for keeping the woman and her children safe. We aim to plan a coordinated approach so that the families we are working with are safe from further harm or injury. It often is an extremely stressful and emotional time for the non-abusing parent, and it lessens their stress having an CYPAW worker telling their story and focusing on their safety.

The development of child advocacy has proven to be beneficial to child victims in their reduction of trauma during the Criminal Justice process. Empirical literature has revealed that advocacy is needed throughout all stages of intervention (MillerPerrin & Perrin, 2015). The emotional experience a child victim endures, both before and after, is something that may never be fully known. However, through this advocacy, the experience of a child can be validating, instead of harmful.

There is a strong case for independent advocacy services for children and young people generally, but especially so for vulnerable groups such as those 'in need'. We support the development of guidance and mechanisms to ensure that non-statutory child advocacy services are competent, transparent and accountable. However, would note that the Scottish Government Children and Family Directorate currently provides such guidance. The provision and support for children and young people's advocacy sit squarely with Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) and should continue to be at the heart of it.