University of Sunderland

Lonbay, Sarah and Deacon, Lesley (2023) Financial consequences of domestic abuse: A conversation with Emma Aggar, Paula McCormack and Darren McGee. The Portal Podcast: Linking Research and Practice for Social Work. Season two. Episode two. [Audio]

Usage guidelines

Series 2 Episode 1

Financial consequences of domestic abuse: A Conversation with Paula McCormack, Darren McGee from Wallsend Children's Community and Emma Aggar

[00:00:06] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

...

Introduction to Episode Series 2 Episode 1

[00:00:25] **Sarah:** Hello everyone, welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm Sarah, I'm here with Lesley.

[00:00:33] **Lesley:** Hello.

[00:00:34] **Sarah:** And we've got some great guests with us today. We've got Paula, we've got Darren and we've got Emma, and I'm going to ask each of them in turn to introduce themselves for us. So, Paula, if you could start please?

[00:00:46] **Paula:** It's Paula McCormack and I have the grand title of Executive Lead for the Wallsend Children's Community. Do you want me to tell you about the Children's Community now?

[00:00:56] **Lesley:** Yeah, tell us about that.

[00:00:58] **Paula:** The Children's Community is about six years old, it is one of only two in England, and the idea of a children's community is that it is a, I'll tell you the jargon first, 'systems change place-based initiative'. But essentially what that means is that we work in a place to ensure that there are much

better outcomes for children and young people in that place. And we work on the premise that it takes a village to raise a child. So our job is to galvanise that village as much as possible to ensure that everybody in that village knows that they are playing a part in raising children. And to raise the consciousness of what that means, that they are role modelling all of the time, and children are watching. To support collaboration, better collaboration. To understand how the system is working for families rather than for agencies. And to ensure that the voice of families, children, young people, is brought into how we design services.

[00:02:03] **Sarah:** Fantastic.

[00:02:04] **Paula:** So for my sins, I get to work with all the strategic leads in the area, and then I have a colleague, Gill, who works with all the practitioners in the area, another colleague called Kate, who works with parents, another colleague Phil, who works with children and young people, and also businesses in the area, and then this gentleman next to me, Dr Darren McGee, who has a much better title than I do.

[00:02:34] **Darren:** Which I don't remember, but [...] Evaluation Research. So my name's Darren McGee, I work for the Wallsend Children's Community, which is affiliated with Save The Children, so we're kind of employed by them, but we work in Wallsend for the Children's Community. And my role's quite diverse, which is why I find it quite interesting, we do a broad range of types of research, it could be working with organisations, youth workers, young people, primary school children, teachers, parents, it's quite a range. It can be on a range of topics as well, so it can be from things like attendance to LGBTQ+ to mental health, it's very varied in range. So it's really interesting and we get to do some, I think, some really cool research.

[00:03:24] **Sarah:** Yeah, that's great. So it sounds like the centre and the work that you do is really research-informed, so it'd be good to hear a bit more about that.

[00:03:33] **Paula:** Very much, yeah.

[00:03:34] **Sarah:** We can explore that in this conversation, I'm sure. Emma, would you like to introduce yourself as well?

[00:03:40] **Emma:** So mine's probably going to be quite short and sweet. My name, if I can say that properly today, is Emma Aggar. I'm an Academic Tutor at the University of Sunderland and I teach across the Social Sciences. And I'm also a researcher, so that's me!

[00:03:56] **Sarah:** Great.

[00:03:57] **Lesley:** Thank you.

Theme: Wallsend Children's Community and Facilitated Practice-based Research

[00:03:58] **Sarah:** Thank you Emma. I think we've got a few questions that we'd like to ask you about, but I would like to start just by asking you how this collaboration came about. So obviously I know Lesley hasn't introduced herself fully today because you already know Lesley, but Lesley was involved in the research project with the Wallsend, is it the Children's Centre sorry?

[00:04:19] **Paula:** Children's Community.

[00:04:20] **Sarah:** Children's Community. So how did this come about to begin with, the collaboration and the work that you've done together?

[00:04:27] **Lesley:** So I suppose the starting point is, we were just discussing that weren't we Paula, was in Reg Vardy, which is a building here at the University, where we met for a coffee quite a few years ago.

[00:04:39] **Paula:** Five.

[00:04:39] **Lesley:** Is it five? Wow. Okay. So that's where it started. And the former project manager, Gill's now project managing isn't she? But Emma was the former project manager, and Paula, you'd heard about some work I'd done, we then arranged to have a coffee. And then I remember, and it's been used in a quote recently, that you said, "shall we go on this journey together?"

[00:05:02] **Paula:** Yeah, I have a way...

[00:05:05] **Lesley:** I know, it was brilliant. It's being used in some advertising tools at the minute, that's from Paula, and it really was that, which was just some like-minded individuals getting together to think about how can we

utilise research to inform practice and work out what that might look like. So they've been hugely instrumental and collaborative in helping me design my research and the way I'm moving forward with practice research, to make research meaningful and to make sure it *informs* practice and is *about* practice and it's *in* practice. And so very much we did this journey of basically me coming and trying out my model of teaching with you, to support obviously the development of research skills and research-mindedness, and then you've gone on from there. And obviously Darren's then become involved in that and we've just continued working together. So this is a particular piece of research though, that we're going to talk about today, but we're going to put in the show notes some links to all the other fabulous pieces of research that are going on. But do you want to say a little bit about how research informs the work that you're doing?

[00:06:15] **Paula:** Yeah, I mean, when we met, it was about 'Story of Place', as we were calling it. So what we didn't want to do was turn up in Wallsend and think that we knew everything about Wallsend. But we did want, we immediately wanted to do some research that would inform what it was that we would concentrate on. There was a theory of change, it had already been developed, but with agencies, not with the community. So we really wanted to understand what it was like to live in Wallsend, raise your children in Wallsend and be educated in Wallsend and work in Wallsend. So we commissioned this 'Story of Place' project, but we didn't know how to translate that into direction. So we had two people out there doing that research, but we didn't know how to get that research back out of them to inform what it was that we were doing, which is where Lesley came in. But from there, really, in terms of what we do, everything that we do is triangulated as much as possible because a system involves such a wide range of partners. So we've divided that down into the community, which involves families, children, young people and some of the businesses that operate within the area. And then we've got agencies that specifically have a focus around children, young people and families, so that has to be in their work. And then we've got practitioners that work for those organisations, that *say* that they're doing certain things, that have a vision, have objectives, have outcomes and have ways of working, but practitioners who go, "yeah, no, that's not quite what we're doing", and "I didn't know that we had that vision", or "I didn't know that we had that outcome", or "yeah, we're working towards that outcome, but actually above that outcome is *this* outcome", or "yes, that's how it's supposed to work in practice, but in practice, this is what I do, or in practice this is what I would *like* to do". Which is why I get to work with leaders, to learn what the horizon is,

what the policy is, what the practice is, etc., and what the objectives are, and where the funding sits, and what's coming down from government and how that's going to change things. And then Gill, who I mentioned earlier on, she works with the practitioners to find out, well, what's the reality of that? And then Kate and Phil work with children, young people and families to go, "yeah, okay, they're not receiving it like that", "they don't want it like that, they want it like this", or "they don't even know that that's happening", or yeah, all of that kind of stuff. So all of our work is triangulated to what do leaders tell us, what practitioners tell us, and what do families tell us. And then we've got Darren that sits in the middle of that triangle and makes sense of all the dribbles that we bring in. So if we're going to do any piece of research, it has to have emerged from the three places for us to say that's where we're going to go.

[00:09:34] **Darren:** It's very responsive to the community's needs, isn't it?

[00:09:37] **Paula:** Incredibly responsive, which is a big challenge, because in terms of having a team of what we are termed to be 'systems stewards', so we steward the area, we are the overseers of everything that's going on in the area, we're the glue, if you like, that connects different pieces of the system together. So when a piece of research comes up, we have no master, we can't have a master. Does that make sense? So

[00:10:09] **Lesley:** Like no one leader on it, do you mean?

[00:10:11] **Paula:** No, what I mean is if we were funded by, for example, the local authority, there are very particular things that the local authority might want to know.

[00:10:20] **Lesley:** Right? Okay. So you mean not led by them?

[00:10:24] **Darren:** Yeah, like an agenda.

[00:10:25] **Paula:** We can't, we have to be autonomous and independent of any of the agencies that operate in that system, otherwise we *will* have a bias somewhere along the line. Does that make sense? So that makes our funding quite complicated.

[00:10:42] **Lesley:** Yes.

[00:10:43] **Emma:** Very challenging. Very challenging.

[00:10:46] **Paula:** But a couple of recent examples of that triangulation is attendance. We had a message come down from Save the Children that there was an Attendance Action Alliance commencing and VCSE had been invited onto it, but at a really, really leadership strategic level who knew *nothing* about what was going on on the ground. So Save the Children reached out to us and said, "tell us what's going on, on the ground". So we went out to schools and said "tell us", and they went "aargh!" We went out to parents and said "tell us", they went "aargh!" Went out to kids, and they said "ugh". So we thought, right, okay, well we've got the makings of a piece of research here. There's clearly something going on in our community that isn't sitting right for any party, so let's understand what that's about. So that's kind of how our research emerges. And then when we do a piece of research, we give it back out to all of those stakeholders, but those that need to *action* it, so in attendance case it would be schools or local authority, so we give that back out to them and we help them to think about "what is it that you want to do with any of this?"

[00:12:06] **Sarah:** That's really interesting. And especially I was interested in what you said about all your research ideas and projects emerging from those three areas, those three points of the triangle. So is that quite formal the way that you do that? Or do you just pick these things up through the ongoing work that you do and you start to hear things come up and you think, "oh, this needs to be looked at"? Or how does that emerge from those sources?

[00:12:30] **Paula:** It's a real mix. We have some very formal forums, if you like. So there are 17 schools in Wallsend, and those 17 schools very much work together and they have what's called a schools partnership, and they meet every half term. We go along to that and we are an agenda item on that. So we listen to everything that's going on in there, what's challenging schools, what's concerning them, what's working for them, what's not working for them and which part of the system is not working. And then we take that away and triangulate it. Has that come from anywhere else? If it's come from somewhere else, then what is it that we could potentially do with that? Is that a research piece or is that just a collaboration piece? So, for example, Early Health Assessments, so this is where schools, there's difficulties with a particular child and they know that there needs to be some other support around the child, but maybe they're not, the support is not the domain of the school, if you like. But the school are holding that because the child is with them every day. That's become a major issue for our schools because they're

dealing with an awful lot more than they were pre-pandemic, and the complexity and intensity of those is significantly more. So they're sitting there struggling thinking "we're supposed to put a team around the family, but we end up being a single agency and we're really frustrated". So we know we can't fix that problem, but what we know is that if we bring some collaboration around it, and if we make sure that all of the tools that are available to them are actually in their awareness, then maybe together they could do things slightly differently. Or maybe if we understand what's bringing all of the EHAs in, we can do a piece of research on that or we can do something else on that. So with that one in particular, Darren designed a survey to understand the volume, the intensity, what agencies were sitting around them, who was more responsive to others, etc. And then we pulled a workshop together and invited schools along to those workshops along with the local authority and a few other agencies that we knew would be engaged in that process. And as a result of that, there was a very clear action plan, but we don't own it. We will host it, we'll wrap ourselves around it, insofar as we have resources to do so, and we'll just keep holding people account to the actions. But I think we've already come to the end of that because a lot has happened as a result of two workshops. So it works in lots of different ways.

[00:15:43] **Sarah:** Yeah, thank you for going through that.

[00:15:46] **Lesley:** The reason obviously for this series of the podcast is we're looking at the issue of domestic abuse, and while some people's research has been specifically *about* that, other people that we're speaking to have been doing *other* research and it has emerged within that, and you guys fall into that category. So it's the research that actually relates to the emergency response grant. So obviously people won't necessarily know what that is.

[00:16:13] **Lesley:** So I don't know who wants to field this one, whether it would be you Paula or Darren, not Emma, Emma's shaking her head at me! But do you want to tell us a bit about what that is and how that research emerged?

[00:16:27] **Darren:** You're probably better at actually explaining the grants and I'll explain what emerged.

Emergency Response Grants

[00:16:33] **Paula:** Okay, so as Darren said earlier on, we work for Save the Children, which is the autonomous independent piece, and that brings with a

huge amount of resource that we can deploy then within the locality. And one of those things was pre-pandemic we had what was called Early Years Grants. And basically they were about supporting the development of better home learning environments. So you can imagine that for a better home learning environment, that might be sleep, sleeping arrangements, so cots, etc., it could be about food, so a space to dine together to be a family together, could be about carpets, could be about baby equipment. So it's for early years, age 0–5. When we hit the pandemic, we very quickly adjusted that whole thing to be Emergency Response Grants. So recipients no longer needed to be benefit recipients. Basically in a professional's judgment they were in some kind of hardship or there was a mental health issue that was preventing the home learning environment from working effectively. And if you think about the pandemic, the home learning environment became *everything*. So those grants were were redirected into these Emergency Response Grants. Effectively, they are a maximum of £340, the only criteria is that the child is either educated or living in NE28 area, which is Wallsend, and that was about it. So what we set out to do was find referral partners that would have that direct contact with those families and would know and be able to identify when a family was in that kind of hardship. And our referral partners are very diverse, we had a number of schools in there that have early years settings in them, we had a refugee agency, we had the domestic abuse agency, we've also got a range of voluntary sector partners in there. So we've got 12 referral partners across the area. The research part of it though, I'll let Darren then talk about.

[00:19:05] **Darren:** Yeah, so I think to to-date we've given out quite a bit of money to quite a few families, I don't know the exact number.

[00:19:14] **Paula:** 421, and £180,000.

[00:19:19] **Darren:** So one of the first things we did, this was maybe about four months in something like that, we decided to have a conversation with the partners that were helping us deliver these grants just to get a sense of understanding what these grants were doing for the families, but also what it was doing for their relationship with the families. Because we wanted to see were these grants actually enabling the partners to work, because a lot of these families, what we were hearing, were hard-to-reach families that wouldn't necessarily be...

[00:19:49] **Paula:** That God-awful term.

[00:19:51] **Darren:** That horrible term, yeah. But they wouldn't necessarily be captured in other ways, you know, they wouldn't necessarily be accessing support or accessing all the support. They may not even know what support's available to them, so the idea was that these partnerships would help maybe get at families that really needed it, that might not get support from other places. And it was really interesting, a lot of the feedback was really positive around how it had broke-down that mistrust that they may have, that sense of authority between certain organisations and that mistrust, and it made them feel a bit more that they could seek that support, and that actually these organisations were there to support them, so it was really positive. And it was also at the same time during Covid where schools and things like that were starting to be seen as a little bit more like a source of support because of how they were helping families with free school meals and things like that. So that was lining up quite nicely. When we looked at the number of families, and then we looked at the reasons for why the families were being put forward for the grant, probably less than half of the partners were actually giving reasons for it. So we weren't actually certain what the reasons were why they were there. There were some obvious things that were coming out, like the majority were single parents, unemployed and/or on benefits, that was another big one. And also more than one child as well, so many of these people had a number of children. And when we looked across the actual country at the other Emergency Response Grants being delivered, actually that demographic of parent was actually quite consistent, it was quite similar. And there was some stuff around domestic violence, DV, coming out as well. But because there wasn't a lot of reasons given we just weren't certain. So the purpose of this was to maybe to take a deeper dive look, have actually a conversation with those recipients of the grants to try and understand what the circumstances were around those families, why they were seeking the grant, or why they were being put forward for the grant, why they were in that situation in the first place. And also why this grant might support them in the way that they wanted. So yeah, it was really unique because, like I say, we just didn't have all of that information. And even that information that we did have, it was sometimes just a sentence or two, it wasn't really in-depth. and we didn't really have a good understanding of what the contextual factors were around the family, around those parents that were leading them to the situation where they were seeking a grant. So it was just to try and clarify and understand a bit better.

[00:22:31] **Paula:** And I think as a Children's Community, services act very much these days, and funding is, is behind quite a lot of that, they act in a

responsive manner, in a reactive manner. We have very little investment in prevention any longer. And for us, as systems change agents, it's really important that we get this system right around it. So unless we understood the deeper roots of poverty and what leads somebody to, because some of the comments that we were getting back is 340 quid is like life-changing, and we really wanted to understand how is £340 *so* life-changing? Because it doesn't sound like an awful lot of money in some circles. And in other circles we were hearing from our partners that people were scared to take that amount of money because it was just so much they didn't know what to do with it, or they were afraid to be in possession of that kind of money. So we really wanted to understand what goes behind the, behind the behind.

[00:23:39] **Darren:** And also from a systems change perspective, it's not just about what organisations are there, but it's also what's missing. So what kind of support is actually missing there? Like if there was support there, what could support a family better so that they wouldn't need to seek out these grants? Obviously there's going to be consistencies across all areas, there's going to be similarities, the universal things, but there's also unique things about Wallsend that we wanted to try and understand, what services we're missing that could support families better.

Linking research into practice

[00:24:08] **Lesley:** I think just linking to the podcasts at this point that we've recorded, we don't know the order yet, that's going to be repeated in every single podcast I've just realised because we haven't decided on the order. But one of the things that's coming out from other people is that there's research going on that's identifying issues that services are *not* aware of. And I think what's quite important and unique about what you guys are doing is you're sharing that, you're identifying those issues and sharing it within the community with the other stakeholders so that that is getting fed back in. And because that's some of the frustration, I think, in other research that's going. Do you think, Sarah? I don't know if that's an agreed face or a "what are you talking about Lesley?" face...

[00:24:50] **Sarah:** No, I'm just thinking particularly the conversations that we've had with Angie and the conversation we had with Carrie and Louise, I think that's definitely true, isn't it? That loop back, I suppose you're well connected to do that, aren't you, in the way that you're set up?

[00:25:07] **Paula:** Yeah, and I go back to that autonomy and independence. That's what enables us to do that. Because the only skin that we have in the game is better outcomes for children and young people. So every time that we get a challenge around, you know, whether we're in competition with anybody, whether the research that we're doing is highlighting things that some people don't want to know, whatever that is we bring it back to, do we all want the best outcomes for children and young people? And if the answer is yes, we'll then you've kind of got to listen.

[00:25:46] **Sarah:** So tell us a bit about how you went about this research then, Darren, because you said, I don't know who started it off, but I think I'm right in that you started off with a survey? So what did the survey look at? What did you find?

[00:26:02] **Darren:** I don't think we did do a survey with the families, we looked at the...

[00:26:07] **Paula:** It was the data.

[00:26:08] **Darren:** Yeah, we looked at the data. So I mentioned that before, and we actually haven't had a chance to look at the full data set yet, that is on our list to do, but initially when we did look at it, that was one of the things that initiated the idea that we need to maybe explore these issues a bit more, around reasons for why they were seeking the grant, because it was actually missing from the data that we had. But the initial idea was we'd try and hopefully get the partners to introduce us to families who would want to speak to us, well you actually, because you did the research. And then from there we'd understand it a little bit better. So that was only really our part in it.

[00:26:51] **Lesley:** I suppose it's actually me, I think. I think it's me.

[00:26:55] **Paula:** I brought it to Lesley and said, this is what we want to know, help us to understand what we need to do.

[00:27:02] **Lesley:** It was one of our little, I was on a journey. I was on a journey with Paula and

[00:27:08] **Sarah:** I'm just picturing a boat...

[00:27:09] **Lesley:** It was Teams, luckily.

[00:27:11] **Sarah:** Ah that's not quite as exciting.

[00:27:12] **Lesley:** It's not, but luckily we started before Covid.

[00:27:16] **Paula:** So I already knew what you looked like.

[00:27:17] **Lesley:** You did know me in person, yeah, you knew I was short, yes there's been surprise about people's tallness today, because people won't know what we look like though, in podcast terms.

[00:27:26] **Sarah:** Oh, that's true.

[00:27:26] **Lesley:** We're just voices.

[00:27:27] **Sarah:** I always get that, "oh, you're really tall" when people meet me in person.

[00:27:30] **Lesley:** Yeah, we've got the two tall people together.

[00:27:32] **Paula:** Sorry Emma.

[00:27:33] **Emma:** That's fine.

[00:27:34] **Sarah:** We're used to, we'll just sit over here.

[00:27:36] **Lesley:** Yes, because Emma hadn't been met in person apart from on Teams. So Emma, you got on board. I'll bring you in, so if I say what happened, because obviously what's happened with this journey, I feel like I'm on Strictly, on a journey...

[00:27:50] **Sarah:** You're going to tell us your backstory developing?

[00:27:52] **Lesley:** Yes, I do feel like that because we have, it's very much been, I hope, because I'm about to say I think we've *both* got a lot out of it, I hope you have.

[00:28:03] **Paula:** I concur.

[00:28:04] **Lesley:** Because I certainly... But yes, as part of this, it's very much about having these sort of informal networks to have these conversations and

know that you can phone somebody up and say, "ah, right, this is happening. What can I do?" So that's part of the relationship that we have. And then I've got more and more involved the more time, which I don't have, but which I *can* give. And so what happened was, I think it's me that thought they were surveys rather than just it's actually the *referral* information that you analysed.

[00:28:34] **Darren:** Yeah.

Biographical narratives – indirect domestic abuse

[00:28:34] **Lesley:** So that was my fault for thinking it was a survey, sorry about that Sarah. But I got involved at that point, which was, as Darren was saying, we've got information here, but we don't know why. We don't know why. And obviously my area in particular is in *qualitative* research, and very much focused on trying to understand the voice of people, and very much fits with this triangulation that Paula mentioned. So what I looked at, I was looking to design a piece of research around it, and what I've become particularly interested in is these things called 'biographical narratives', which is basically about letting people tell you their story. Because I think that what came through in that was you just don't know why. There's obviously some reasons there behind why people were having to access this support, and so with that the idea was to try and get some form of representation. Obviously not a representative sample that we could test and everything, but more just there's 12 referral agencies, can we access families in there who would be willing to come and share their stories. And so that's where Emma became involved.

[00:29:50] **Emma:** I did.

[00:29:51] **Lesley:** You did.

[00:29:52] **Sarah:** So you did the interviews Emma did you?

[00:29:53] **Emma:** I did. So I wasn't particularly privy to all of the information from the data analysis that you'd had beforehand. I was just approached by Lesley who kindly offered me the position to do this research and do this biographical narrative method where I would go out and speak to the people that were happy to do so. And it was a case of literally asking them one question, to tell me their stories, anything that was significant throughout their stories as well. So whole life story, start where you want to, finish where you want to. And that was pretty much how this all came about really. So it was

very much in detail, very much getting a lot of the information that correlated with the data that I'm hearing more about now. And obviously the major themes that came out of it were the domestic violence, amongst the others.

[00:30:57] **Lesley:** Do you want to tell us, because obviously I think that's what's significant and obviously why we've brought you guys here to share this with us, but do you want to tell us a bit more about what exactly it was emerged about domestic abuse? Because I think there was a term you used.

Theme: Indirect domestic abuse

[00:31:14] **Emma:** Indirect.

[00:31:14] **Lesley:** Thank you.

[00:31:16] **Emma:** Indirect, yeah, indirect domestic violence. So this cropped up a lot and on the face of it, you would think, well, there's been eight years since something's happened that was considered domestic violence. But actually, whilst it's not linear, there was plenty of things that happened in between, but that if you follow the line of what did occur, it's safe to say that a lot of it did occur from that because it was either fleeing from another country or fleeing from another place in this country, which would lead to repetitive patterns of meeting other people that were likely to be perpetrators of domestic violence. Or even in the case of seeking asylum not actually being granted leave to stay. And that lasted for many, many years. So actually when they finally got granted, being able to actually gather their own possessions off the back of nothing, not being able to work so you haven't even got your own wages to back you up there. Nothing furniture-wise, nothing educational-wise, so realistically the only thing, which I believe is in a quote, is all they had was the clothes that were on their back. And that I think, again I say off the face of it wouldn't necessarily look like it was a direct consequence of the domestic violence that happened eight years beforehand, but it was the reason that she needed to flee, was because of that. The reason that other people needed to relocate in another area up to the North East was because of that. So it might have been a couple of years down the line for other people, but it was still a consequence of it.

[00:33:09] **Lesley:** And that's the idea of doing that approach with the stories, which is they were identifying it as that's the factor that was leading them to

where they were and the difficulties that they were encountering. So it was them, you weren't asking them any questions?

[00:33:23] **Emma:** No, deliberately no, no there was nothing from me, and yet it occurred, the word domestic violence kind of occurred so often because people, in retrospect, in fact, were looking at it going actually, that that *was*, I've done some research on it now, looking back on it now, and I can see that it *was*, so...

[00:33:42] **Paula:** I think what's wonderful about all of this, and it's a penny drop right now, is that part of the reason why there wasn't, *potentially* part of the reason why there wasn't a reason for the application, was because actually it's not conscious.

[00:33:59] **Lesley:** To come through, until they were actually trying to share their story. And then it comes out as part of that.

[00:34:05] **Paula:** And so the only thing that we're going to get on the application is the immediate circumstance. You know, what's going on in the here and now.

[00:34:14] **Sarah:** I think that's a really important part of domestic abuse, isn't it, that often gets ignored? Actually that history. So using that biographical approach, where you actually do understand people's stories and journeys and where they've come from, can reveal a whole lot more about their current circumstances that often doesn't get picked up, I think in practice as well as research sometimes. Because I think often the focus is on what is happening right now, and what do we need to do. But actually that time to explore someone's history is really important, but often gets missed in different ways for different reasons.

[00:34:48] **Lesley:** Did they share with you any sort... I think because obviously this was a Covid-19 specific point in time, because obviously that was the shift to the Emergency Response Grants. Was there something in that that kind of impacted on their ability to get out of the situations that they were in?

Lockdown and domestic abuse

[00:35:09] **Emma:** So in a lot of the cases it was more to do with the social isolation and being isolated from family as well, so not being able to actually

reach out necessarily for the help that they may have got beforehand. The closures of a lot of services as well, that made people sink into themselves, I guess. I don't know if that's a good phrase or term or what, but not reach out, I think, because of all these closures. And for a lot of people as well, the main concern was making sure that their children were fed and that their children were clothed and they had a roof above their heads. So whilst not really concerned about their own safety as such, they were more concerned with their children's safety and, and having some form of food and clothing.

[00:36:05] **Lesley:** Yeah... was just wondering with that, Emma, about some of that context of that period of time, because one of the other people that we've spoken to is taking place at a similar time, so we've got the impact that the pandemic had on actually people remaining in domestic abusive situations. Did they share anything around the sort of challenge they had in getting out or anything like that?

[00:36:32] **Paula:** I would hazard a guess that these were already out there and already out of their situations.

[00:36:39] **Emma:** Yes, they were, because the few that mentioned it were in the position of either just transitioned into a new house, so it had been a case of, in a lot of cases again, fighting over the whole year, the first year of Covid, to actually get into housing and find their own place and support themselves, get the equipment, and starting again from scratch.

[00:37:03] **Lesley:** So they were sort of struggling to get out of those situations at the point where you did the interviews with them? They had got out.

[00:37:10] **Emma:** Yeah, it literally just sort of more or less happened over the year of the first year of Covid.

[00:37:14] **Lesley:** Right. Okay.

[00:37:16] **Paula:** What were you going to say?

[00:37:17] **Darren:** No, I think this extends beyond Covid. So this idea that we heard about quite a lot, and this is not new information, but referral rates for DV did go down during Covid. That was consistent across the country. What's really interesting is this piece of research last year showed that referral rates, so they looked at previous years versus Covid and they looked at different

times of the year, and what you actually find is during the school summer holidays, referral rates drop at a similar rate. So the phenomenon that happened during Covid actually happens at a similar rate each year during the summer holidays. So even though this is specific to Covid, this piece of research, it's still applicable I think to things like the school summer holidays where the same type of circumstances happen, where the mum or dad in some circumstances are at home for extended periods of time, they have to look after the children, the same types of factors that happen then are still applicable during that period.

[00:38:17] **Emma:** Yeah, when I was looking at the literature about it, it was becoming quite evident that being at home with children and not necessarily being able to go out to the referral companies. But if it's by the phone as well, if you're trying to get onto your mobile phone or even using your house phone, it was a case of trying to prevent intrusion. So not being caught on the phone, for example, so if you're stuck at home and everyone's at home, including the person that might be committing the abuse, the chances of people actually reaching out via telecommunication is going to be limited as well.

[00:38:57] **Paula:** It was, without doubt, limited through that period of time. And to be honest, our schools are telling us that they're seeing the consequence of that now, with children and young people disclosing now stuff that happened over that period of time.

[00:39:16] **Lesley:** Are they disclosing around domestic abuse?

[00:39:19] **Paula:** Yeah.

[00:39:20] **Lesley:** That's interesting...

[00:39:22] **Emma:** From what I'd seen, there'd been pros and cons to Covid, sadly. Some cases where that, in fact, it was actually easier for some people to reach out because it wasn't face-to-face. So that kind of pressure of going somewhere and asking for help face-to-face being quite intimidating, and people backing off for that reason, versus just picking up the phone and not necessarily having to stare at somebody and feel that pressure. But at the same time, the consequence is do you have somebody at home with you that is likely to be listening to your telephone call if you are trying to reach out for help?

[00:39:58] **Paula:** And I think what you've just raised there is also the experience of the referral partners, was that to get through the application is actually quite an intimate conversation. And it does mean that the referral partner needs to get closer to the family and understand the family circumstances for them to collectively decide where does the fund get spent? And what referral partners did tell us was that that seemed to be easier remotely. Whereas the criteria for the Early Years Grants prior to that was a home visit. So the only ones that continued any home kind of visit in the latter parts of Covid would've been health visiting teams. In the earlier parts, everybody was remote, so yeah. And our schools initially found that very difficult because they're like, "how do I even begin that conversation with a family, and will they be insulted because I'm singling them out?" But they very quickly got past that to be able to find a way of just engaging a conversation that, albeit incredibly intimate, was remote.

[00:41:17] **Darren:** I think one of the things which we haven't mentioned yet is that from the start we got the partners together, maybe once every... was it once every two weeks or was it weekly?

[00:41:28] **Paula:** Well, it continues to be monthly, but initially it was fortnightly.

[00:41:33] **Darren:** So they could share best practice around, you know, if you had any concerns about how you would approach a family or what you would say. So I feel like that kind of supported that whole process with the referral partners where they had a space to discuss what they were doing and the kind of barriers or problems they were facing.

[00:41:52] **Lesley:** I'm just curious about whether you've, because obviously at the end of this you've had the practice report and everything, and whether that's been shared with any partners or if you've just had any feedback from them around the issue that domestic abuse was, was within that? So that might not come up, but I just was curious if it had.

Recognising domestic abuse

[00:42:11] **Paula:** Oddly enough, our domestic abuse agency has not referred for quite a while. And part of that is because the houses within the NE28 area are full. But what we have had is young parents leaving care, and refugees, and the movement around the housing for those two populations has been

particularly high. So we've had lots of referrals that way, but less so from domestic abuse. So we've reached out in different ways and we're offering resources in different ways around that. But domestic abuse is one of a number, and I think what we learned from this was the complexity of it all, and that domestic abuse was one part of a much, much bigger picture. And I think you alluded to it earlier on as what happens once you've fled, and what's the next relationship, and how does that pan out, and how does one pick themselves up financially and restart life? How does one support their children who've been through that situation? And what services are out there for that? Because again, in this country, we have a huge amount of resources for the *immediate* aftermath, but *very* little for the longer term, which is why seven years down the line, somebody is still being impacted upon it. But also not even that immediate kind of, or long-term, it's like what's preventing it in the first place? What are we doing to help children and young people understand coercion properly.? I know it's within PSHE now to talk about relationships, but how deeply do we do that and at what stage have we already learned that that's a behaviour that we should perpetuate?

[00:44:15] **Sarah:** I think that links back to a podcast episode that we did in the last series with Nicola and Demi, where they'd done some research about young people's understanding of coercion and control as a form of domestic abuse, and they found very little understanding basically was kind of the bottom line. I don't know if they're doing some follow-up research on that.

[00:44:35] **Lesley:** We need to find out.

[00:44:36] **Sarah:** We should get them on if they are. But yeah, it's very poorly understood, I think in that age group from the sounds of it, but also across the board, I think. It's difficult for people to understand or identify when that's happening, or for people who are experiencing it to actually have that understanding that what they're experiencing is domestic abuse.

[00:44:58] **Paula:** And in previous research that I've done around this, there was a good cohort of 60 plus women suddenly recognising that they had been in domestic abuse situations for a lifetime, but hadn't recognised it. So one really needs to look at the culture of an area, culture of a place, to really understand domestic abuse. It's funny, when we first started I had lengthy conversations with the police and we talked about domestic abuse and they said we can give you some money straight away to do something about domestic abuse. And it was 50 grand. And it was a real conflict for me because

I thought I could do something, but I don't understand it. So what I'd do would be just a responsive, reactive, whatever we could design up would be responsive and reactive. Because if this is deeply ingrained within a culture, then there's significantly more systemic work to be done around it that 50k is not going to touch in lots of ways. And so when you're talking about refugees, that abuse is not just in the domestic situation, it's probably broader than that. And it's how do, how do you... it's no wonder there are what they call 'serial victims'. I don't like the term at all, but the reason why there are is because it's deeply ingrained within the psyche, within the culture, within the expectations. And if you've gotten that far, then your self-belief, your self-worth, your love of self, is not... the internal gauge isn't there, so it's sought *externally*. And systemically, therefore there's significantly more work that we need to do around this. And unless that work is ever done, than we're always going to be dealing with refugees, and refuges and aftermaths.

[00:47:08] **Sarah:** I think what's coming out from all of these conversations that we're having with different researchers is it's a very complex issue. And I think there's a lot of complexity that overlaps no matter who the victims or survivors are. But then what we've found in each conversation is that there are sometimes really unique things depending on the group. So what you're saying about people who are, well we had conversations about people who are migrants, you're talking about people who are claiming asylum and the particular issues that they might experience. Who were the participants in this study predominantly? And was there any kind of defining features or unique things that were relevant for this group?

[00:47:53] **Emma:** The majority were single mothers, tended to be roughly from around the North East, but had located multiple times to come back to the North East. I'm trying to think of other demographics really. I think a lot of them had young children, multiple children, and had children quite young as well. I don't know whether that sounds offensive, even me saying that? I don't want this to sound like derogatory, but it tended to be that it was young mothers as well. But I think that's always like a penalising thing to actually say "oh, you had children young".

[00:48:44] **Darren:** There is a correlation between age and DVA though, it does decrease as you get older. That's consistent across the, so that is consistent. And most violent crimes tend to be with younger people. It's just the nature of it, and DVA is the same.

[00:48:57] **Emma:** I just don't want anyone to listen to it and think, "oh, well now that feels like my fault because I had a child young". You know?

[00:49:03] **Lesley:** I think that there's an issue that it's not about saying that these are factors that led to it. It just so happens this was a very small group of people, so we don't know in what way they represent anything except that these are really interesting stories. And that's the most important thing I think about the work that you did with these people, was to actually give them an opportunity to share and make those, they made those links themselves in terms of the stories, not about their demographics or anything else. It was about the fact that they're in this position and domestic abuse was part of that story. So I think that's the bit that we take from what you've done, Emma.

[00:49:44] **Emma:** Great.

[00:49:45] **Sarah:** Could you tell us if you had any data or if you just generally know about this, because obviously these were young women who had young children. So what about the impact on the children and, and how did that kind of... Oh Emma's pulling a face about this question? Yeah, I'm assuming you've got something to say about that.

Impact on children

[00:50:07] **Emma:** Yeah, so the impact was huge. Literally the consistency of people talking about school dinners or lunches and the hot food, or particularly in one case being warm enough to sleep, and having to wrap up in coats and sleep on the floor. The absolute *huge* impact to the children was just, I can't even explain to you. I think the biggest part tended to come down to just being able to afford food. And I think that's where it comes in, where the grant felt like such a huge amount, because to suddenly have children having to stay at home and be homeschooled, and I think one of the quotes was "eating me out of house and home". There is a case of having to look a bit more savvy around the supermarkets and find things in the reduced aisles that are costing, you know, 40p for a pasta bolognese or something like that, that can try and feed the four of them or something like that. So actually that grant supplied absolutely loads of food, which enabled them to carry on for a bit longer whilst they were struggling so much from either being homeless or just finding a home or being made redundant for whatever reason. So...

[00:51:42] **Paula:** And it remains a theme still today. You know, Maslow's hierarchy can be demonised, or you can love it, whatever, but ultimately for those safety was first. And getting the roof over their head. And then there was the security of "we are okay now and we have what we basically need". And this is why it was Emergency Response Grant rather than an Early Years Grant because it was in response to emergencies. The real shame of it is that those are emergencies that continue Yeah to exist, irrespective of Covid. And food is a first and foremost. And then the second part of that is the structure that was missing for those children. So "eating them out of house and home" was because what else are the children going to do? There's no structure in their day, they're not going anywhere, there's no routine. Their metabolism is all over the place because they're not moving in the same way that they were. So all of these consequences are now presenting in our schools. And nobody's really thinking about the trauma that children have been through. And then if you double down on it, what you are seeing, or what you were hearing was the *immediate* of clothing and food and heating and safe roof, but what we're seeing *now* is the psychological, mental, emotional impact. Because you think about any kind of loss or grief, you deal with the practical stuff of it first, but then the psychological part of it kind of kicks in when the practical is done...

[00:53:31] **Lesley:** That's later, isn't it? Yeah.

[00:53:33] **Paula:** And that's what we're seeing now, more so, and I think services are more acutely aware of those that have been through those situations in Covid. I don't know *why* they're more aware of them, but they certainly are more aware of them now, and so they're being able to connect those things a little bit better, that actually children have been seriously traumatised through Covid.

[00:54:02] **Lesley:** Because I suppose when I'm listening to those, that reminded me of I think you mentioned one of the participants saying it was a choice between this toxic environment or living in that poverty. And obviously they chose...

[00:54:16] **Emma:** Yeah, to move and live in poverty.

[00:54:18] **Lesley:** They chose to live in that, because that was preferable to the environment they're in because of domestic abuse.

[00:54:23] **Sarah:** But those choices are going to get harder for people, aren't they? Because, you know, we're now in a cost-of-living crisis, and we know that access to financial means is a huge barrier to seeking help or leaving a domestic abuse situation. So I think it's going to be compounded by the situation that we're in now.

[00:54:43] **Emma:** Well, in one of those cases, somebody stayed with their abuser for nine years and that was because of security and being able to support their children. So I can't even imagine what it's got to be like now with the cost-of-living crisis on top.

[00:54:59] **Sarah:** I'm just conscious of our time because we've been talking for an hour. I have got one last question just to sort of tie it back together and then if there's anything that you've kind of wanted to say but haven't yet then we'll have a chance for that as well. But just in terms of key learning from this research specifically around the aspect of domestic abuse that came out ,have you got any messages, particularly for social work, but for other agencies as well off the back of this?

Messages for practice

[00:55:28] **Paula:** For me it's that longer-term thing. It's the before and after. It's the before, what can we do beforehand to ensure that our children are educated effectively about what a healthy relationship really looks like, sounds like, feels like. Secondly then it's about the longer-term consequences. So you might rehouse somebody, but what kind of support is wrapped around the family at that point? Because that is more than just a house. What we saw also through that period of time was no carpet, and actually our grants didn't support carpet. So if you think about 'tummy time' for our baby, how is that tummy time going to occur? So poverty, it's just thinking bigger about poverty and about the systemic ongoing issues that poverty is perpetuating. And if that happens to have been as a result of domestic abuse, what guilt, shame, everything else that mother or that father is going to take forward, and the ongoing impact that that's going to have for the children, etc. So in terms of social work, it's a very *now* thing to ensure that the safety of the child and the family is there, but that safety has to go on much longer than that immediate issue. So what are we putting around a family *after* the aftermath, if you like? So for me, I think what this research has done is made us really think about those systemic issues way beyond the incident or the immediate kind of "now I've been rehoused" issue.

[00:57:21] **Sarah:** Yeah, that's so important. That's a really important piece of learning actually, isn't it? Mm-hmm.

[00:57:27] **Lesley:** I thought that was summed up beautifully actually, Paula.

[00:57:32] **Sarah:** In that case, we'll wrap it up. Thank you very much Paula, Darren and Emma for joining us today. And we'll see you all next time.

[00:57:41] **Lesley:** Are you not thanking me? I was here!

[00:57:43] **Sarah:** You're always here. Thank you Lesley. Are you going to thank me?

[00:57:46] **Lesley:** Thank you. No, I'm not thanking you at all. Thank you Sarah!

[00:57:50] **Paula:** Thank you for expert hosting.

[00:57:52] **Darren:** Yeah, thanks having us.

[00:57:53] **Sarah:** It's been a pleasure.

[00:57:53] **Lesley:** Thanks to everybody.

[00:57:54] **Sarah:** Yes, great, alright bye everyone!

[00:57:56] **Lesley:** Thank you, bye!

…

[00:57:58] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:58:06] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:58:16] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

[00:58:29] **Sarah:** See you all next time.

[00:58:31] **Lesley:** Bye.