

Co-Creating Change:

Knowledge Exchange Event on Evidence-Based Domestic Abuse Practice

Event Report

August 2026

University of Sunderland



Knowledge Exchange Event

23 June 2026

Reg Vardy Centre, St Peter's Campus

University of Sunderland

Prepared by

Violence, Trauma, and Harm Research
Theme

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Foreword

Domestic abuse remains one of the most significant challenges facing individuals, families, communities, and public services. While legislative and policy developments have strengthened recognition of domestic abuse and expanded responsibilities across agencies, significant challenges remain in translating policy intentions into effective practice. The complexity of domestic abuse, the realities of resource-constrained systems, and the diverse experiences of victim-survivors mean that no single organisation or profession holds all the answers.

It was with this in mind that the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), through its Violence, Trauma and Harm research theme, convened the Co-Creating Change: Evidence-Based Domestic Abuse Practice knowledge exchange event. The event brought together academics, practitioners, policymakers, strategic leaders, and representatives from the voluntary and community sector to create a genuine space for dialogue, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving. Our aim was not simply to share knowledge, but to work with it collectively, drawing on different forms of expertise and experience to explore how responses to domestic abuse might be strengthened.

A key principle underpinning the event was that different forms of knowledge carry equal value. Research offers important insights into the challenges facing victim-survivors and the systems designed to support them, helping to inform policy, practice, and future innovation. Policy provides important frameworks and responsibilities. Practice offers vital insight into how systems operate in reality, where they succeed, and where they fall short. Equally important are the experiences of those affected by domestic abuse, which must remain central to any meaningful efforts to improve responses and outcomes.

The discussions throughout the day were characterised by openness, honesty, and a shared commitment to improvement. Participants identified important examples of effective practice, but also highlighted persistent challenges relating to system fragmentation, workforce development, information sharing, prevention, and the recognition of diverse victim - experiences. Importantly, the event moved beyond identifying problems to exploring opportunities for change and collaboration.

This report brings together the key themes, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations emerging from those discussions. It is intended to support continued conversation between policy, practice, and research communities, while also identifying priorities for future partnership working, service development, and research activity. I hope it serves not only as a record of the event, but also as a catalyst for ongoing action.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to everyone who contributed to the event and to the discussions captured within this report. The willingness of our speakers and participants to share their expertise, experiences, and reflections made the day both productive and thought-provoking. I hope this report marks not an endpoint, but part of an ongoing process of collaboration to improve responses to domestic abuse and strengthen outcomes for victim-survivors across the lifecourse.



Professor Sarah Lonbay

Director, Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS)

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Executive Summary

Brief Context

Domestic violence and abuse remains a critical policy and practice issue, with areas like Sunderland experiencing some of the country's highest incident rates.



[Click here to view Sunderland's Domestic Abuse and VAWG Executive Board's strategy](#)

Despite significant legislative progress, a persistent and damaging gap exists between policy intent and the lived reality of survivors. Research consistently highlights systemic failures, yet the structures designed to protect victim-survivors, particularly the most vulnerable, continue to let them down. This event was convened to address this gap directly, moving from identifying problems to co-creating solutions.

The event was hosted by the University of Sunderland, via the 'Violence, Trauma, and Harm' research theme within the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) (see Appendix A for more information about CASS and its research themes). This knowledge-exchange event brought together policymakers, practitioners, academics, and individuals with lived experience to collaboratively identify priority challenges and actionable next steps for domestic abuse service provision.

Headline Insights: Key Challenges Identified

Fragmented systems and barriers to coordination:

Participants highlighted ongoing challenges arising from siloed working, fragmented service pathways, conflicting organisational responsibilities, and barriers to information sharing. These issues limit agencies' ability to identify patterns of abuse, particularly coercive control, and create gaps in coordinated support.

A disconnect between evidence, policy, and practice:

While considerable knowledge exists about effective domestic abuse responses, participants identified ongoing difficulties in implementing, sustaining, evaluating, and scaling good practice. Short-term funding, fragmented systems, and limited opportunities for shared learning continue to hinder system-wide change.

Reactive rather than preventative responses:

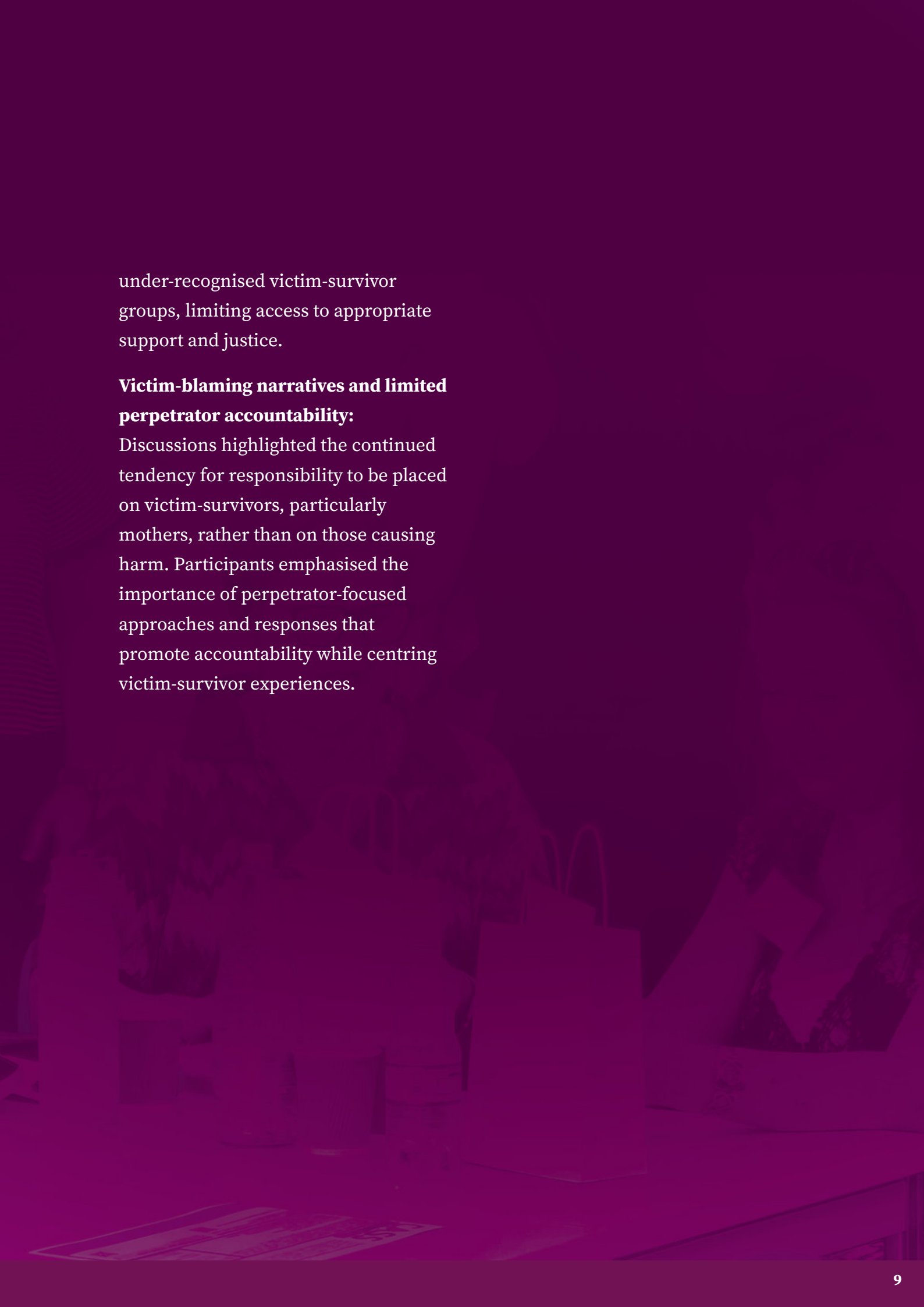
Current systems often respond to crisis and visible harm rather than intervening early. Participants highlighted the need for greater investment in prevention, early intervention, relationship education, and community-based approaches that address abuse before harm escalates.

Workforce capability and wellbeing challenges:

Domestic abuse training, professional confidence, and workforce support remain inconsistent across sectors. Participants highlighted the need for ongoing, trauma-informed learning opportunities, professional curiosity, reflective practice, and support for the emotional impact of frontline work.

The misrecognition of diverse victim-survivor experiences:

Participants raised concerns that existing systems often fail to recognise and respond effectively to the experiences of children, young people, older adults, students, and other

A row of brown paper shopping bags is lined up on a wooden surface. The bags are of various sizes and some have handles. The background is a blurred wooden wall.

under-recognised victim-survivor groups, limiting access to appropriate support and justice.

Victim-blaming narratives and limited perpetrator accountability:

Discussions highlighted the continued tendency for responsibility to be placed on victim-survivors, particularly mothers, rather than on those causing harm. Participants emphasised the importance of perpetrator-focused approaches and responses that promote accountability while centring victim-survivor experiences.

Top Priorities for Change



Strengthen coordination and integration across systems:

Improve information sharing, collaborative working, and joined-up responses to ensure agencies can better identify risk, reduce fragmentation, and provide more coordinated support to victim-survivors.



Embed, sustain, and scale effective practice:

Build on existing strengths, including trauma-informed approaches, perpetrator-focused practice, workforce development, integrated service models, and community-based initiatives. Greater focus is needed on implementing, evaluating, and sustaining approaches that are known to be effective.



Build inclusive, preventative, and survivor-informed systems:

Develop responses that recognise the diverse experiences of victim-survivors across the lifecourse, strengthen perpetrator accountability, invest in prevention and early intervention, and ensure services are co-produced with the people and communities they support.

What Happens Next



Share and disseminate key learning:

Use the findings from this report to support ongoing discussion, reflection, and learning across research, policy, practice, and community settings.



Continue collaboration and dialogue:

Build on the relationships, partnerships, and conversations established through the event to encourage ongoing cross-sector engagement and knowledge exchange.



Inform future research and development:

Draw on the themes, priorities, and recommendations identified in this report to shape future research, policy discussions, service development, evaluation, and innovation.



Promote collaborative and co-produced approaches:

Create opportunities for stakeholders, communities, and people with lived experience to contribute to future conversations about improving responses to domestic abuse.



Sustain momentum for system improvement:

Support continued partnership working, shared learning, and collective reflection to maintain focus on improving outcomes for victim-survivors across the lifecourse.

Introduction & Context

Domestic abuse is one of the most pressing social, public health, and criminal justice issues facing the UK. Nationally, legislation like the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has sought to improve protection and recognise the complex nature of abuse, including coercive control and the impact on children. However, at a local level, practitioners and survivors face a different reality. In regions like Sunderland, which has some of the highest rates of domestic abuse in the country, survivors navigate a landscape of complex lives and real challenges, including poverty and insecure housing.

Northumbria Police have recorded higher than the mean rates of domestic abuse in Sunderland, compared to other areas (LG Inform, 2026).



Aim of the Event

The event was designed to create a collaborative, cross-sector space that brings together academics, practitioners, and policymakers to move beyond siloed conversations. By convening a diverse group of stakeholders, including academics, police, health professionals, social care managers, and voluntary sector practitioners, it enabled a shared dialogue grounded in multiple forms of expertise.

At its core, the event aimed to strengthen the links between policy, research, and frontline practice through meaningful knowledge exchange where all perspectives carried equal weight. Participants worked collectively to synthesise knowledge, identify cross-cutting systemic challenges, and explore where current responses to domestic violence and abuse are both succeeding and failing.

This work is particularly critical given that domestic abuse remains a national policy priority and a central focus of local authority, NHS, and policing strategies. While legislative and policy frameworks have advanced significantly in recent years, their implementation in complex, resource-constrained, real-world contexts continues to present profound challenges.

The overall goal was therefore to co-develop practical, actionable solutions that can drive improvement in system responses and outcomes for all victim-survivors.

The Gap Addressed

This event was explicitly designed to bridge two critical and overlapping divides:

Policy vs. Practice:

While legislative frameworks such as the Domestic Abuse Act set out clear duties to protect survivors, there remains a significant gap in operational reality. Practitioners must navigate conflicting legislation, high caseloads, systemic fragmentation, resource limitations, and inconsistent training. These pressures, alongside organisational cultures that struggle to hold perpetrators accountable, hinder effective implementation, and limit the impact of policy intentions.

Research vs. Implementation:

A substantial disconnect persists between academic evidence on “what works” and the delivery of services in practice. Research has consistently identified key systemic failures such as in perinatal services and police responses, but these insights have not translated into the deep, structural changes required. Barriers including short-term funding cycles, lack of workforce training, inflexible commissioning, and limited system adaptability mean that services are not always evolving in line with emerging evidence or learning.



Event Overview



Reg Vardy Centre, University of Sunderland

23rd June 2026



Event Organisation and Research Context

This event was organised and delivered by the Violence, Trauma and Harm Research Theme within the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Sunderland. The theme brings together interdisciplinary expertise to examine violence, trauma, and harm across the lifecourse, with a strong focus on translating research into practice and policy impact.

The event reflected this commitment by creating a platform for collaboration between research, policy, and frontline practice to address complex challenges in domestic abuse.

Further information about the Violence, Trauma and Harm Research Theme and the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) can be found in [Appendix A](#).



Event Structure and Methodology

The Co-creating Change event was a full-day forum designed to maximise interaction, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. The programme combined expert input with participatory discussion and collective synthesis, structured as follows:

Policy into Practice Panel:

Three senior practice leaders explored the operational realities of implementing domestic abuse policy. Presentations focused on coordinated community responses (Laura Seebom, CE, WWIN Specialist Domestic Abuse Service), policing children's experiences of victimhood (Cath Easton, Academic Tutor in Policing, University of Sunderland), and addressing harm within teenage relationships (Emma Walker, Early Help Team Manager, Northumberland County Council, Front Door).

Research into Practice Panel:

Three academic researchers presented emerging evidence on key issues, including the evaluation of health-based IDVA models (Hayley Alderson, NIHR Advanced Fellow and Senior Research Associate, Newcastle University), the use of university Extenuating Circumstances (ECs) in relation to domestic abuse (Laura Caithness, Serious Incident Adviser, and Ashley Cave, Mental Wellbeing Adviser, University of Sunderland), and domestic abuse in later life (Sarah Lonbay, Professor of Social Sciences and Social Care, University of Sunderland)

Roundtable Discussions:

The afternoon centred on intensive, facilitated roundtable sessions led by the speakers. Delegates rotated between thematic tables to explore specific challenges in depth, share frontline experiences, and collaboratively co-develop solutions.

Plenary Synthesis Session:

The event concluded with a whole-group session to synthesise learning, consolidating key themes, priority challenges, and agreed next steps for collaborative action.

[The event agenda, speaker biographies and their slides can be found in the Appendices.](#)





Data capture method

Data was captured throughout the day via detailed note-taking across all sessions, including the recording of key speaker insights and the systematic documentation of issues, priorities, and solutions generated during roundtable discussions and the synthesis session. This forms the basis of this report.

The report represents a synthesis of issues, perspectives, and priorities identified by event participants through presentations, roundtable discussions, and plenary dialogue. It reflects discussions as captured through contemporaneous notes rather than verbatim transcripts. As such, the findings should be understood as reflecting the views, experiences, and observations shared by delegates during the event, as recorded through the organisational team's notes.

Quotations included within this publication are drawn from remarks made by speakers and conference delegates and have been reconstructed from contemporaneous notes and the authors' recollections. While every effort has been made to accurately reflect the substance and intended meaning of contributors' comments, quotations should not be regarded as verbatim records and may not reproduce the precise wording used.

The contents of this report do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Sunderland, the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), individual speakers, or participating people or organisations.



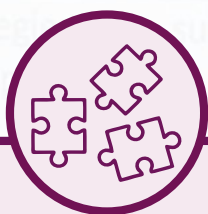


Key Themes from Speaker Presentations



The six speaker presentations provided expert insights into the systemic challenges of translating domestic abuse evidence and policy into effective practice.

These insights coalesced around four interconnected themes, outlined below:



Theme 1: System Fragmentation, Inflexible Pathways, and the Failure to See Patterns



Theme 2: Expanding and Recognising Victimhood Across the Lifecourse



Theme 3: Workforce Capacity, Trauma, and the Need for Specialist Training



Theme 4: Reframing Responsibility and Addressing the Overlap with Mental Health

Theme 1: System Fragmentation, Inflexible Pathways, & the Failure to See Patterns

A central message was that current systems are fundamentally ill-equipped to respond to the lived reality of domestic abuse. They are designed to respond to single, acute incidents rather than the cumulative, patterned nature of coercive control, the “slow, deliberate erosion of a person’s freedom”.

“systems can only manage incidents, they cannot manage patterns”

Speakers consistently highlighted the fragmented nature of service provision. Agencies operate in silos, each governed by its own remit, thresholds, and legislative frameworks (e.g., the “Three Planets” of Child Protection, Family Court, and domestic abuse services, alongside tensions between Caldicott Principles and the Children’s Act). This fragmentation prevents a holistic understanding of risk, as critical pieces of information, such as patterns of concerning behaviour that fall

below criminal thresholds, are captured across multiple services but are never brought together.

As Laura Seeböhm emphasised, “systems can only manage incidents, they cannot manage patterns,” which severely limits the ability to respond effectively to coercive control. This lack of coordination leaves survivors navigating a complex and disconnected system, often required to repeatedly retell their experiences, contributing to re-traumatisation. Inflexible service pathways further compound these issues. Hayley Alderson’s research on health-based IDVAs in maternity services demonstrated that systems are rarely joined up, and staff are often unprepared for the complexity and trauma of what they encounter within health settings.



Theme 2: Expanding & Recognising Victimhood Across the Lifecourse

A powerful and recurring theme was the systemic misrecognition of who constitutes a victim of domestic abuse, particularly across different stages of the life course.

“These are people with complex lives and real challenges”

Children

Despite legal recognition as victims, children are frequently treated in practice as “witnesses” or extensions of the adult victim. Police officers often do not speak directly to children during call-outs, reflecting a lack of professional curiosity. This approach overlooks children’s direct emotional harm, particularly in systems that prioritise visible physical injury.

“Are children treated as victims in their own right?”

Teenagers

The complexity of “Teenage Relationship Harm” was highlighted, and that young people often do not identify their own or others’ behaviours as abusive. Traditional victim/perpetrator frameworks and language are frequently ill-suited to their experiences, limiting engagement and appropriate intervention.

Students & young adults

University can represent both a period of increased vulnerability and an important source of safety and support. Students often experience multiple transitions simultaneously, including independent living, intimate relationships, financial pressures, and professional placements. Delegates noted that many students remain unaware of available support services or are reluctant to seek help due to fears about academic consequences, disciplinary action, or impacts on future career prospects. Particular concerns were raised regarding students on professional placements, where responsibilities for safeguarding, reporting, and support can become unclear, creating uncertainty for both students and placement providers.

Older Adults

Older people were described as a “hidden group” whose experiences of abuse are routinely misrecognised. Disclosures are often indirect and may not align with standard domestic abuse terminology. Abuse in later life is frequently miscategorised as a general safeguarding issue or obscured by conditions such as dementia, driven in part by ageist assumptions. As a result, older survivors are often diverted away from specialist domestic abuse services and justice pathways. Additionally, older people do not readily identify themselves within the support literature available from domestic abuse services, which tend to use imagery depicting younger victim-survivors. This also creates a narrative of ‘this service is not for me’.

“Across our research, a consistent picture emerges: older people are there in the data, in practice, in services, but we are not consistently recognising their experiences as domestic abuse”

The overarching conclusion was the need to move away from adapting systems designed for younger adults and instead design responses that reflect people’s needs across the lifecourse.

Theme 3: Workforce Capacity, Trauma, & the Need for Specialist Training

The lack of adequate workforce training emerged as a critical issue across all presentations and discussions, described as a “key aspect of the day”. Across sectors, frontline professionals, including police officers, healthcare staff, and university personnel, often lack a sufficient understanding of domestic abuse dynamics and the confidence to respond effectively to disclosures. This leads to missed opportunities for intervention and inconsistent or inappropriate responses.

Speakers stressed that training must move beyond one-off or “tick-box” approaches. Instead, it should be mandatory, ongoing, in-person, and skills-based, with a strong emphasis on trauma-informed practice and professional curiosity.

In addition, the emotional toll on practitioners was a significant concern. Vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue are widespread but insufficiently addressed, highlighting the need for structured supervision, reflective practice, and organisational support systems.

Theme 4: Reframing Responsibility & Addressing the Overlap with Mental Health

A fundamental critique of the system was its persistent focus on victim behaviour, alongside a failure to recognise the broader complexity of survivors' experiences. Speakers highlighted how institutional responses often place responsibility on victim-survivors, particularly mothers, through concepts such as "failure to protect," while insufficient attention is paid to perpetrator behaviour. This dynamic is reinforced through language and practice, prompting calls to "flip the script" and shift accountability appropriately onto the perpetrator. This reframing also raises critical questions about why survivors are so often expected to leave their homes, communities, and support networks to access safety, rather than systems focusing on disrupting perpetrator behaviour.

Responses often implicitly ask "why doesn't she leave?" rather than "why doesn't he stop?"

Services can feel like "another voice telling the survivor what to do", rather than meaningful support.

In parallel, research emphasised that domestic abuse rarely occurs in isolation but is deeply interconnected with other issues, particularly mental health. Within higher education settings, requiring student survivors to evidence abuse through external legal or medical systems was identified as a significant barrier, creating rigid and immediate obstacles to accessing support and failing to reflect the complex, overlapping nature of lived experiences.



Roundtable Insights

Frontline Challenges & System Gaps

The afternoon roundtable sessions, chaired by the event speakers, enabled practitioners to ground the morning's presentations in frontline experience and local operational realities. These discussions highlighted a consistent set of challenges across sectors.

“We haven’t adapted as we have learned”

Siloed Systems, Inflexible Commissioning, & Information Barriers

Practitioners reinforced concerns about siloed working, highlighting practical barriers to information sharing and coordination between agencies. Statutory agencies often fail to share vital information with voluntary sector partners, limiting the ability to build a complete picture of risk and need.

“Professionals are bringing draught pieces to a game of chess”

This fragmentation is compounded by rigid commissioning structures and short-term funding models. Pilot programmes are frequently time-limited, preventing the development of sustainable, long-term capacity and undermining continuity of support. They also lack the evaluation needed to evidence the work being undertaken and its impact.

Housing, Refuge Provision, & Structural Barriers to Safety

Housing systems were identified as a key area of concern. Policies often require victim-survivors to access refuge accommodation, sometimes located significant distances from their communities, effectively isolating them from their support networks while leaving perpetrators in the family home.

Participants also highlighted a severe shortage of appropriate refuge spaces tailored to diverse needs, particularly for older people and mothers with teenage sons, leaving many unable to access safe and suitable accommodation.

Limited Professional Curiosity, Confidence, & Engagement

A lack of professional curiosity and confidence emerged as a critical issue across multiple sectors. Frontline workers are often “frightened of doing it wrong,” leading to inaction or avoidance.

“How do we bring about that deeper awareness of what domestic abuse looks like in our communities?”

Examples included teachers closing down disclosures to avoid administrative burden, and police officers failing to engage directly with children during incidents. It was noted that some police officers reported that they only speak to children at domestic abuse call-outs where there are visible physical injuries, often assuming Children's Social Care will take responsibility.

This issue extends into healthcare settings. Participants noted that time pressures mean GPs rarely attend MARAC or other multi-agency meetings, limiting their contribution to coordinated responses. Additionally, a participant raised that the automatic involvement of social services following disclosure in health settings can deter victim-survivors from speaking openly, creating further barriers to early intervention.

These challenges reflect a broader lack of confidence in managing difficult conversations and responding appropriately to domestic abuse across professional roles.

Barriers to Disclosure & the Impact of Poor Responses

Significant barriers prevent survivors from disclosing abuse, including shame, stigma, and fear of consequences such as institutionalisation for older people, child removal, or being judged as a “bad parent”. When disclosures do occur, inconsistent or inadequate professional responses can have long-lasting consequences. A poor initial response may deter survivors from seeking help again, reinforcing cycles of isolation and harm.

Fear of the consequences can prevent people from disclosing abuse

Similar barriers were identified within Higher Education settings. Participants reported that students may avoid seeking support due to fears of “getting into trouble”, concerns about confidentiality, or worries that disclosure may affect their studies or professional progression. Delegates emphasised the importance of communicating clearly that accessing support will not jeopardise academic outcomes and that students can access help safely and confidentially.



Victim-Blaming Systems, Criminal Justice Challenges, & the Role of the Family Court

Participants raised concerns about systemic practices that reinforce victim-blaming, particularly within the family court system. The presumption of contact was described as re-traumatising for survivors, with children sometimes being weaponised within proceedings. This dynamic extends into wider systems, where mothers are disproportionately held accountable for the impacts of abuse. For example, if a child misses school due to domestic abuse, it is often the mother who is blamed or sanctioned, while the perpetrator's responsibility remains unaddressed.

*“always mum
convicted, not dads,
why?”*

Concerns were also raised about decision-making within the criminal justice system, particularly whether police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are consistently willing to pursue cases involving older perpetrators. Participants questioned what factors are influencing prosecution decisions in these cases, highlighting a lack of transparency and potential inconsistencies in how cases involving older adults are progressed.



Emerging Strengths & Opportunities for Change

“There have been major strides to help people with domestic abuse over the years”

Alongside the challenges identified, participants highlighted several examples of effective practice and opportunities for further development. Discussions demonstrated that, while significant systemic reform is required, there are already credible models, innovations, and partnerships that can be expanded and embedded to drive meaningful change. The collaborative spirit demonstrated throughout the event reflects a significant appetite among practitioners, academics, and policymakers to work together to improve responses.



Perpetrator-Focused Practice and Language



Building Workforce Capacity and Organisational Expertise



Community-Based Prevention and Early Intervention



Integrated and Survivor-Centred Service Delivery



Co-creation and Inclusive Intervention Design



Growing Awareness, Innovation, and Strategic Momentum

Perpetrator-Focused Practice and Language

The Safe and Together model (<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/the-safe-together-model>) was frequently identified as an example of effective practice. When properly resourced and implemented, it facilitates a shift in focus towards perpetrator behaviour, helping to keep children safe while holding those responsible for harm accountable.

This approach is reinforced through the reframing of professional language. As one participant noted, professional discussions can sometimes focus on what a mother should do to prevent contact with an abusive partner. Adopting language such as “the perpetrator will not attend the address” instead shifts responsibility and accountability to the perpetrator, helping to challenge embedded victim-blaming narratives and promote a more perpetrator-focused approach.

Building Workforce Capacity and Organisational Expertise

The development of Domestic Abuse Champions within organisations was identified as a positive step toward embedding specialist knowledge. These roles help to increase workforce confidence and provide accessible, informal support for colleagues responding to domestic abuse, strengthening organisational capacity overall.

Participants also highlighted wider workforce innovations, including trauma-informed supervision and community-based approaches, as practical mechanisms for improving professional confidence and response quality.

Community-Based Prevention and Early Intervention

There was strong support for moving beyond purely statutory, multi-agency responses toward approaches that build “social capital” within communities. Participants emphasised the importance of strong neighbourhood networks, recognising that friends and family are often the first point of disclosure but are currently under-supported and under-equipped to respond effectively.

This aligns with a broader emphasis on community-led solutions, detached youth work, and preventative approaches that strengthen communities' capacity to recognise and respond to abuse before harm escalates.

“sending young people to a succession of workers is not always helpful, though it might make us feel better”

Integrated and Survivor-Centred Service Delivery

The concept of “One-Stop Shops”, multi-agency hubs where services come to the survivor, was strongly endorsed. These holistic approaches reduce the burden on individuals to navigate complex systems and minimise the need to repeatedly retell their experiences, thereby reducing re-traumatisation. On a pragmatic level, it also minimises the need to travel to and attend multiple appointments which can be costly in terms of both finances and time. Participants emphasised that IDVAS should be embedded within such services.



Participants also highlighted the potential of integrated service models more broadly, including co-locating domestic abuse support within health and community settings, such as maternity services.

Co-creation and Inclusive Intervention Design

A clear recommendation was the need to co-create tools, interventions, and services with those who use them. Working collaboratively was highlighted as essential to ensure that responses are relevant, accessible, and effective in addressing the specific experiences and needs of domestic abuse victim-survivors. Examples discussed included co-designing services with older victim-survivors, co-creating educational resources and interventions with young people, and developing integrated local responses through partnership between statutory, voluntary and community organisations.

“There have been major strides to help people with domestic abuse over the years”



Growing Awareness, Innovation, and Strategic Momentum

Participants expressed cautious optimism that domestic abuse is now higher on both the public and political agenda than in previous years. This increased visibility is contributing to improved awareness and creating a stronger foundation for sustained system change and innovation.

The current policy environment was seen as providing important opportunities for reform, investment, and advocacy. Participants identified practical awareness-raising initiatives, including induction activities, Freshers' events, digital communications, and information displayed in private spaces, as effective approaches for improving visibility of support services and encouraging earlier help-seeking.

Local innovation was also highlighted as an important driver of change. For example, Northumberland's Teenage Relationship Harm notification system demonstrates how local authorities can bridge gaps in provision through earlier intervention and coordinated responses before criminal thresholds are met.



Strategic Priorities for Action

The event highlighted not only significant challenges, but also a strong foundation of effective practice, innovation, and partnership working. Building on these strengths, participants identified three priorities for action that have the potential to drive meaningful and sustained system change.



1. Strengthen coordination and integration across systems

Participants consistently identified the need for more connected responses across agencies, sectors, and professional groups. The success of integrated approaches, such as One-Stop Shop models and co-located services, demonstrates the value of reducing fragmentation and creating more joined-up pathways for victim-survivors. Future efforts should focus on improving information sharing, clarifying responsibilities, and developing coordinated responses that enable a more holistic understanding of risk.

2. Embed, sustain, and scale effective practice

The event highlighted a range of promising approaches, including perpetrator-focused models, Domestic Abuse Champions, integrated support services, community-led initiatives, and innovative early intervention models. The challenge is often not identifying what works, but ensuring that learning is implemented, evaluated, sustained, and scaled. Stronger links between research, policy, commissioning, and practice are needed to support long-term investment and the wider adoption of evidence-informed approaches.

3. Build inclusive, preventative, and survivor-informed systems

Participants emphasised the importance of designing responses that recognise the diverse experiences of victim-survivors across the lifecourse. This includes strengthening perpetrator accountability, challenging victim-blaming narratives, investing in prevention and early intervention, and ensuring that services are co-produced with the people and communities they support. Achieving this will require a confident and well-supported workforce, alongside systems that value lived experience and respond to complexity rather than narrow categories of risk.

Together, these priorities provide a framework for the recommendations that follow. They highlight the importance of collaborative leadership, evidence-informed innovation, and a sustained commitment to prevention, inclusion, and survivor-centred practice.



Recommendations

The recommendations below represent priorities identified through the event discussions. They are intended to provide a framework for future dialogue, partnership working, and co-production. Decisions regarding leadership, implementation, resourcing, and timescales should be developed collaboratively with relevant stakeholders.

“Hope is really important and really possible”

Policy & System Development

Adopt a whole-system, trauma-informed approach across public services to support more consistent and effective responses to domestic abuse.

Strengthen information-sharing frameworks through clear, proportionate, and non-oppressive approaches that support collaborative working while maintaining appropriate safeguards.

Reform housing and legal responses to prioritise perpetrator accountability and reduce the need for victim-survivors to leave their homes, communities, and support networks.

Develop longer-term funding and commissioning approaches that support sustainability, workforce development, innovation, and evaluation.

Increase investment in prevention and early intervention, including education, awareness-raising, and community-based initiatives.

Practice Development

Implement comprehensive trauma-informed training that develops confidence, professional curiosity, and effective responses to disclosures across all sectors.

Embed perpetrator-accountability approaches within policy, practice, and professional language.

Adopt integrated survivor-centred ‘One Stop Shop’ models where coordinated

multi-agency services are co-located to reduce re-traumatisation and system navigation burdens.

Design specialist pathways for under-recognised victim groups, including children, young people, older adults, and other groups whose experiences may be overlooked by existing services.

Strengthen workforce wellbeing and support, including access to supervision, reflective practice, and responses to vicarious trauma.

Research and Evidence Development

Address key evidence gaps relating to teenage relationship harm, abuse in later life, children's experiences, men's experiences, and other under-researched areas.

Strengthen understanding of implementation and systems change, including how evidence and policy can be translated more effectively into practice.

Evaluate interventions, pathways, and models of practice to build a stronger evidence base for future service development and reform.

Promote co-produced research and evaluation that incorporates lived experience and practitioner expertise alongside academic evidence.

Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange

Develop sustainable mechanisms for knowledge exchange between research, policy, practice, and lived experience communities.

Build and maintain collaborative networks that support ongoing dialogue, learning, and system improvement.

Strengthen multi-agency approaches to understanding and responding to risk, including improved use of data and shared learning.

Promote co-production and partnership working as core principles in the design, delivery, and evaluation of domestic abuse responses.

Summary

These recommendations emphasise that meaningful change requires a coordinated, system-wide approach. Action must move beyond isolated initiatives to sustained, collaborative reform, combining policy change, workforce development, evidence generation, and integrated service delivery.



Next Steps

This report represents the first step in a longer-term commitment to driving meaningful system change. The momentum generated by the Co-creating Change event will be sustained through a series of coordinated actions.

Outputs and Dissemination

This synthesis report will be shared with event participants, senior leaders, commissioners, and local and regional partners. The aim is to support ongoing discussion, knowledge exchange, and reflection on the challenges, opportunities, and priorities identified during the event, and to inform future policy, practice, research, and service development activities.

Continuing the Conversation

The event highlighted a strong appetite for ongoing collaboration between research, policy, practice, and community partners. Future opportunities for engagement, knowledge exchange, and networking will be explored to maintain dialogue, share learning, and support the development of collaborative responses to the issues raised throughout the day.

Informing Future Research, Development and Innovation

The findings presented in this report identify a range of opportunities for future research, service development, policy discussion, and collaborative working. Rather than prescribing specific actions, the report is intended to support ongoing reflection and dialogue regarding the strategic priorities identified by participants and to inform future developments across research, policy, practice, and service delivery.

Sustaining Learning and Collaboration

This event represents one step within an ongoing process of learning, reflection, and partnership working. Participants consistently highlighted the value of bringing together diverse perspectives from research, policy, practice, and lived experience, and there was strong support for maintaining opportunities for continued dialogue and knowledge exchange.

The report is intended to contribute to these ongoing conversations and to support future collaborative efforts aimed at improving responses to domestic abuse and outcomes for victim-survivors across the lifecourse.

Appendices

Appendix A: The Centre for Applied Social Sciences

The Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Sunderland brings together researchers, practitioners, and partners to address pressing social challenges through high-quality applied research. CASS is committed to tackling inequalities and social exclusion, advancing social and criminal justice, and informing policy, practice, and service development through collaborative and impactful research. It provides a hub for interdisciplinary working across areas including social care, health, policing, criminology, community practice, and education.

CASS is organised around three core research themes:

- Violence, Trauma, and Harm Across the Life Course
- Identities, Inclusion, and Inequalities
- Research, Practice, and Knowledge for Social Change

This event was delivered through the **Violence, Trauma, and Harm Across the Life Course** research theme, which focuses on advancing understanding of violence, abuse, trauma, and harm from childhood through later life. The theme seeks to generate evidence that informs policy and practice, strengthens services, and improves outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

CASS actively works with external partners to develop research, undertake evaluations, support knowledge exchange, and translate evidence into meaningful social impact. We welcome opportunities for collaboration with practitioners, policymakers, community organisations, and fellow researchers.

To find out more about CASS, discuss potential collaborations, or learn about future events and activities, please contact **Professor Sarah Lonbay** (Sarah.Lonbay@Sunderland.ac.uk) or **Dr Helen Williams** (Helen.Williams@Sunderland.ac.uk). You can also follow the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) on LinkedIn to receive updates on research, events, funding opportunities, and collaboration activities. Scan the QR code to join our LinkedIn Page.

Appendix B: Event Programme

09.30-09.45	Arrival and registration
09.30-09.45	Welcome & Opening Remarks
09.45-10.00	Policy into Practice
	Laura Seebohm (Chief Executive, WWIN Specialist Domestic Abuse Service): ‘Misunderstanding and Myths: Revisiting the co-ordinated community response to domestic abuse’
	Cath Easton (Academic tutor, policing, University of Sunderland): ‘Understanding Children’s Victimhood in Domestic Abuse: Law and Practice’
	Emma Walker (Early Help Team Manager, Northumberland County Council, Front Door): ‘Learning from the ‘Teenage Relationship Harm’ Pilot’
11.15-11.30	Break
11.15-12.30	Research into practice and policy
	Hayley Alderson (NIHR Advanced Fellow and Senior Research Associate, Newcastle University): ‘The RIVA study – Evaluating models of health-based Independent Domestic Violence Advisor Provision within maternity services.’
	Laura Caithness (Serious Incident Adviser) and Ashley Cave (Mental Wellbeing Adviser) (University of Sunderland): ‘Extenuating circumstance: Learning lessons to support student survivors of abuse and harm.’
	Sarah Lonbay (Professor of Social Sciences and Social Care, University of Sunderland): ‘Domestic abuse in later life: Recognition, complexity, and missed responses.’
12.30–13.15	Lunch Break
13.15–14.45	Roundtable Discussions
14.45–15.00	Break
15.00–16.15	Plenary Synthesis Session
16.15-16.30	Session summary and close

Appendix C: Speaker Biographies



Laura Seebohm

Chief Executive at WWIN specialist domestic abuse services

Laura joined WWIN Specialist Domestic Abuse Service as Chief Executive in 2024, bringing 30 years' experience across statutory and voluntary sectors. Previously leading the Maternal Mental Health Alliance and women's services at Changing Lives, her work spans domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, addiction and criminal justice. Laura works closely with women to amplify their voices and influence decision-makers, alongside contributing to national policy, Government Select Committees, advisory boards and inquiries, and serving on several boards and networks.

Cath Easton MSc

Academic Tutor, University of Sunderland

Cath is a former Detective Constable with extensive operational experience in Public Protection and Safeguarding, specialising in sexual and domestic abuse cases. She has trained police colleagues, partner agencies and voluntary sector organisations, with her work recognised locally and nationally. Now an Academic Tutor at the University of Sunderland, Cath teaches Professional Policing, combining frontline expertise with academic insight and evidence-based approaches to help develop future professionals committed to protecting vulnerable people.





Emma Walker

Early Help Team Manager at Northumberland County Council

Emma Walker is the Early Help Team Manager at Northumberland County Councils Front Door, leading the Early Help Team who focus on supporting families at the earliest opportunity. With a background in early help and multi-agency collaboration, Emma plays a key role in coordinating responses to teenage relationship harm across the county. Her work champions child/young person focussed practice and early intervention, ensuring young people and families receive the right support at the right time.

Hayley Alderson

NIHR Advanced Fellow and Senior Research Fellow, Newcastle University Population Health Sciences Institute

Dr Hayley Alderson research focuses on multiple disadvantage and complex needs, particularly domestic abuse, mental health, substance use and safeguarding. Before entering research, Hayley gained 12 years' practitioner experience across voluntary and community organisations, local authorities and HMP Prison Service. Her work is driven by a commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable individuals, children and families.





Laura Caithness

Serious Incident Adviser, University of Sunderland

Laura brings over ten years' experience supporting individuals through unwanted experiences, combining a trauma-informed and supportive approach with analytical expertise. At the University of Sunderland, she oversees the Report + Support platform, providing specialist support directly to students. Her work also focuses on proactive, campus-wide change, including leading the design and implementation of the University's mandatory consent and harassment training packages.

Sarah Lonbay

Professor of Social Sciences & Social Care, University of Sunderland

Sarah's research focuses on adult social care, particularly participation, empowerment, vulnerability, adult abuse and safeguarding. Her work uses qualitative, participatory and creative approaches to foreground lived experience and promote meaningful change. She contributes to national research infrastructure through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, supporting social care research across the North East and North Cumbria and contributing methodological expertise and funding decisions within national research programmes.



Appendix D: Presentation Slides



Misunderstandings and Myths

Laura Seebohm



[Go to presentation](#)



Understanding Children's Victimhood in Domestic Abuse: Law and Practice

Cath Easton



[Go to presentation](#)



Teenage relationship harm

Emma Walker



[Go to presentation](#)



The RIVA Study: Evaluating models of IDVA provision within maternity services

Hayley Alderson



[Go to presentation](#)



Lessons from EC Applications on Supporting Student Survivors of Abuse & Harm

Laura Caithness & Ashley Cave



[Go to presentation](#)



Domestic abuse in later life: Why we're still missing it and what needs to change

Sarah Lonbay



[Go to presentation](#)

Appendix E: Method Note

Data for this report was captured through contemporaneous notes recorded during the roundtable discussions, alongside notes and presentation materials from the six plenary sessions. The report represents a synthesis of the themes, priorities, challenges, and opportunities identified by delegates throughout the event. As the report is based on note-taking rather than audio recordings or verbatim transcripts, quotations are included as recorded in the organisational team's notes and should be regarded as illustrative rather than exact reproductions of participants' words. The findings presented therefore reflect the views, experiences, perspectives, and discussions shared by event participants and should not be interpreted as formal positions of the University of Sunderland, the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), individual speakers, or participating organisations.



