

West Lothian pioneers project to tackle domestic abuse

West Lothian high schools have been working with local police in a pioneering project to tackle the scourge of domestic abuse.

The unique project devised by a local community officer engages with senior pupils to encourage healthy relationships... and offer advice on where they can get support or help if they are witnesses or victims.

As domestic abuse figures continue to rise across Scotland the project is one of several devised by police and professionals to change behaviour patterns.

Local councillors heard about the success of the scheme at the latest meeting of the Public and Community Safety Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel.

Chief Inspector Elaine McArthur-Kerr told the meeting that tackling domestic abuse “continues to be a priority for all West Lothian officers.”

She added: “By the end of the second quarter there were 1, 431 incidents reported, an increase of 9% [in West Lothian] on the same time last year.

“Over 60% of all domestic related calls did not result in a crime being recorded. This upward trend supports the assumption of increased confidence in seeking support from police and third-party services.”

Addressing the schools programme CI McArthur-Kerr said: “The initiative provides pupils with an overview of domestic abuse and the investigative processes employed.

“By raising awareness the programme seeks to empower pupils to identify potential signs of abuse in their own lives, or within their family and friends.”

A West Lothian based community officer, PC Scott McCulloch developed the programme after liaising with lead investigators in the Domestic Abuse Investigation Unit to ensure the delivery covered important aspects of investigations, what police do and why they do it.

The programme challenges behaviours within relationship settings to encourage all people, especially young men to develop healthy relationships and understand what is acceptable within the boundaries of a relationship.

Police are keen to stress that it is “by no means” an input that ‘targets’ males, however recognises the effects abusive males have within relationship settings, based on research and stats on previous offenders, however it covers all genders and relationship types.

It has so far been delivered to 600 students at three high schools in West Lothian, Inveralmond, Linlithgow and Broxburn. The plan is to have this input delivered to all S4 pupils in the West Lothian area by the end of the school year.

West Lothian Domestic Abuse Partners have also been involved and welcomed the input.

Community Policing Inspector John Fleming said: “The inputs by PC Scott McCulloch are invaluable as we continue to engage with young people to address the issue of domestic abuse and promote positive behaviours within relationships.

“By raising awareness, the program seeks to empower pupils to identify potential signs of abuse in their own lives or within their family and friend groups.

“By helping to educate young people, we hope it will reduce the likelihood of abusive behaviour developing in the longer term and reduce incidents of domestic abuse.”

A West Lothian Council spokesperson said: “West Lothian Secondary Schools take a proactive approach to educate young people on abusive behaviour and the damage it can cause.

“Our Mentoring in Violence Prevention (MVP) programme is well established across our secondary schools, improving pupil understanding of key issues related to gender-based violence such as healthy relationships, consent, gender equality and negative stereotypes.

“We are pleased to be working with Police Scotland to complement this work and further inform our young people on abusive behaviour.”

Earlier this month Police Scotland revealed the 11% rise in domestic abuse crimes across Scotland.

Scottish Government figures report that in 2023/24 Police Scotland recorded 63,867 incidents of domestic abuse. Of those incidents recorded, 81% involved a male perpetrator and female victim, 15% featured a female perpetrator and male victim and 3% featured same sex couples. And where age is known, approximately 35% of all incidents reported featured a male perpetrator under the age of 35.

Assistant Chief Constable Steve Johnson, the executive lead officer for major crime, public protection and local crime explained: “Domestic abuse is a crime that remains hidden behind closed doors, but we are committed to tackling it. The psychological harm that domestic abuse inflicts can be long lasting and wide ranging on not just victims, but also

children and other family members.

“Our focus remains on sensitively and thoroughly investigating incidents reported but we also want to see a reduction in offending.”

“Our aim is to encourage young men who are starting out in relationships to reflect on their behaviour and recognise that if they have started to use abusive, controlling or coercive behaviour to realise that it’s wrong and to change. There is advice available from our partner, Respect, to help them change their behaviour.

“We are fully aware that women can be abusers too, however our figures year on year consistently highlight that over 80% of incidents reported to us involve a male perpetrator and so our focus remains on reducing offending by men.

“With this campaign we are looking to influence those in the younger age brackets to realise what isn’t acceptable in a healthy relationship and encourage them to change their behaviour at an early stage and therefore prevent abusive behaviours developing.”

Jo Todd CBE, the CEO of Respect, said: “As the UK charity stopping perpetrators of domestic abuse, we’re delighted to be part of Police Scotland’s new campaign that raises awareness of abusive and controlling behaviour.

“To tackle domestic abuse, we need to address the root cause and ensure that perpetrators are stopped, held to account and given the chance to change where appropriate. Anyone who is concerned about their behaviour can call the Respect Phonenumber on 0808 8024040, or visit respectphonenumber.org.uk/choosetostop.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter