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Domestic violence courts extended

More magistrates' courts in England and Wales are to specialise in dealing with domestic violence cases following the success of a pilot programme.



Data indicates the scheme has resulted in more convictions

An existing government scheme is being extended to a total of 25 court areas.

According to the latest statistics, domestic violence accounts for 17% of recorded crime.

The Specialist Domestic Violence Court Programme, which involves prosecutors, police and victim support groups, aims to bring more offenders to justice.

The new courts provide independent advisers for victims and dedicated prosecutors, as well as magistrates, legal advisers and police officers who specialise in domestic violence cases.

Fast-tracking

The pilot has been run in seven courts including Croydon and Caerphilly since 2004.

Now the authorities intend to extend the scheme to 21 court areas, including those where the pilot has been run, with a longer-term plan to set up the specialist courts across four larger Criminal Justice Board areas - Gwent, Lancashire, Merseyside and the West Midlands.

The pilot programme has seen domestic violence cases fast-tracked and clustered together so that the courts run more effectively.

“ The evidence shows that these specialised courts give victims more confidence in the law and are more likely to bring offenders to justice ”

Baroness Scotland, Home Office Minister

Some courts also have separate entrances and waiting areas so that victims do not run into their attackers.

Data from the Crown Prosecution Service indicates the scheme helped increase the number of domestic violence incidents reported to police that resulted in a trial; reduced the number of cases dropped before a case came to court, and increased the number of convictions.

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It has also helped improve the gathering of evidence, so that prosecutions can still be pursued even after the actual victim opts to withdraw from a case.

Priorities

"Last year we strengthened the law against those who perpetrate domestic violence, and we increased protection for victims too," said Home Office Minister Baroness Scotland.

"But I don't want it to stop there. The evidence shows that these specialised courts give victims more confidence in the law and are more likely to bring offenders to justice."

Nicola Harwin, chief executive of the charity Women's Aid, welcomed the scheme's extension.

Domestic violence court areas

- ♦ Southern Derbyshire; Cambs; Croydon; Hammersmith & Fulham and Kensington & Chelsea; Durham; Halton; Wirral; Salford; Wigan and Leigh; North East Hants; Devon; Plymouth; Sedgemoor; Wolverhampton; North Staffs; South East Staffs; Leeds; Caerphilly; Cardiff; Neath and Port Talbot; Miskin

"The existence of independent high-quality support and advocacy services for victims is critical to the success of specialist courts," she said.

"We support the Government's actions to ensure a more joined-up approach across the criminal, civil and family justice system so that victim safety is prioritised and the risk posed by perpetrators is reduced."

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