



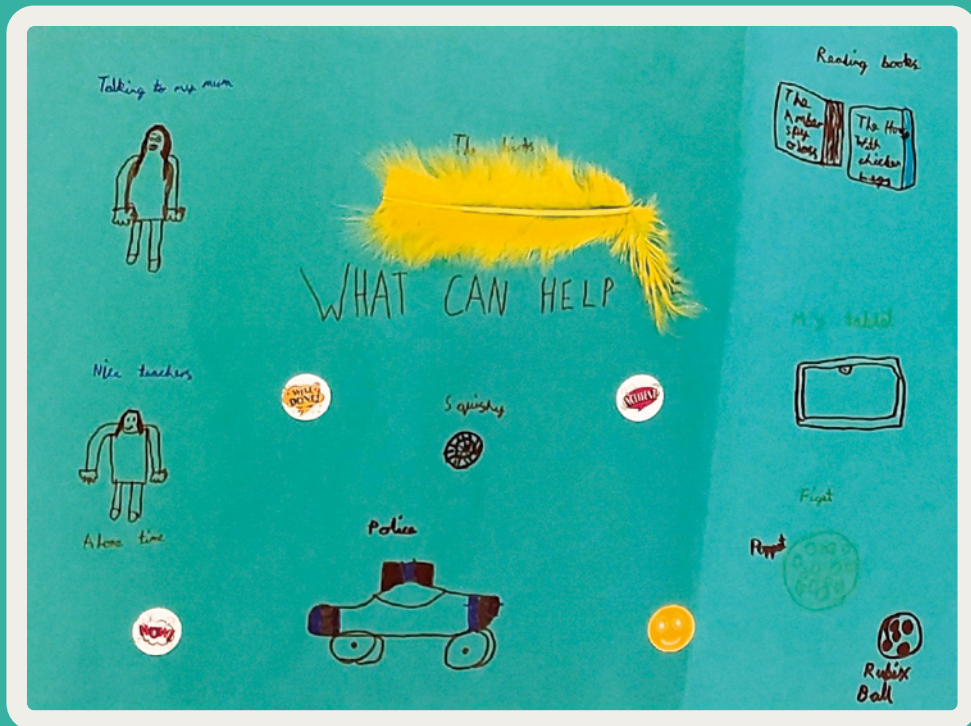
Tell Nicole

"Our feelings matter"

Children's views on the support they need after experiencing domestic abuse

Artwork in this report

Artwork within this report is either based on what young people have told Nicole or was created by Tell Nicole participants and reproduced with their permission. Front cover, *My Harbour*. Back cover, *The Den*.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the children and young people and their workers from the following organisations for giving up their time to help us. Their important insights have allowed us to pilot our Tell Nicole framework and learn more about children and young people's access to domestic abuse support services within England and Wales.

- Acorns
- Tender
- The Den
- The Dash Charity
- Limes College
- Hounslow Social Services
- My Harbour
- West Yorkshire Youth Commission

We would also like to thank:

The children and young people who gave constructive feedback on our draft materials and artwork to ensure that the Tell Nicole materials were attractive and suitable for children of different age groups, genders and abilities.

Claire Houghton, Lecturer in Social Policy and Qualitative Research from the University of Edinburgh, whose participation and ethics framework informed Tell Nicole.¹ Claire acted as a consultant and friendly advisor while we developed our process.

Current and former members of the Research and Evidence Team at the NSPCC, particularly Chloe Gill and Paul Whalley for their feedback on our initial ideas.



domestic
abuse
commissioner

Note on language and difference

For ease and speed of reading, we use the term 'children' throughout this report to represent 'children and young people.'

We also note this rationale from West Yorkshire's Child First Framework:

The term 'children' is used throughout this document to refer to anyone under the age of 18. Whilst we recognise this may not be the language children would use, this is to remind us, as professionals, of their legal status as children and our statutory responsibilities to them.²

We also recognise that all children, like adults, have different backgrounds and experiences, which means that some face more difficulties and challenges than others to get the support that they need.

Content notice

The *Tell Nicole* report does not include any direct descriptions of domestic abuse.

There are words and pictures that children have written and made, which describe their feelings about the help they did or did not receive.

They also describe what they wish would change.

Some people may find the children's words upsetting.

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“I would like my voice to be heard.”

4

Tell Nicole “Our feelings matter”: Children’s views on the support they need after experiencing domestic abuse

Foreword



As Domestic Abuse Commissioner, my role is to stand with victims and survivors of domestic abuse and magnify their voices, so that together we can transform the response to domestic abuse.

We have a long way to go to meet the ambitions set out by children through Tell Nicole, but I believe with the right drive and ambition from policymakers locally and nationally, we can do it. Every child, no matter who they are or where they live, must have access to the support and protection they need.

Three years ago, we mapped the provision of all domestic abuse services within England and Wales. Our report, *A Patchwork of Provision*, revealed huge gaps in service provision, particularly in services for babies, children, and young people, who are legally recognised as victims of domestic abuse within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.³ Only 29% of victims and survivors were able to access the specialist support they wanted for their children.

Following these findings, I made children and young people one of my main priorities for driving improvements in the response to domestic abuse.

I am delighted that so many children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse agreed to take part in Tell Nicole. They

told us what support they found helpful, what needs to improve and what changes they would like to see that will help children in the future.

I am so grateful for what they sent to my office. Together, they produced such beautiful and powerful artwork as well as incredibly detailed written feedback full of clear insights and ideas that are now guiding the work of my team. The children and young people's feedback has given us greater focus and has prompted my team to ask questions that we may never have thought about if we had not involved them within our work.

I would also like to thank the workers from the eight organisations who took part. As the children told us, it is so important for victims and survivors of abuse to be able to talk to someone who is kind, non-judgemental and respectful. Tell Nicole would not work unless the children feel able to talk to someone they trust, and we felt confident that the children would be safe and fully supported while they engaged with our work.

All child victims of domestic abuse deserve the support they need to rebuild their lives. I am determined to help the government make the changes that children want to see.

Dame Nicole Jacobs
Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales

Executive summary

This report describes engagement activity with children conducted on behalf of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's (DAC) Office during 2024. This was in preparation for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report on child victims of domestic abuse published in early 2025.

Children were asked 'what support do children and young people need when they experience domestic abuse at home?' What they told the Commissioner is summarised below.

Summary of findings

Children affected by domestic abuse want to be listened to, taken seriously, treated respectfully and to be believed when they share their experiences.

Children feel that many adults fail to recognise the impact of domestic abuse upon children. Consequently, some can have unfair expectations about the behaviour of children who have experienced trauma.

Children thought the government could help by:

- Educating adults about the impact of domestic abuse upon children.
- Ensuring that the legal system worked so that there were consequences for those who were abusive.
- Understanding what services help children affected by domestic abuse and ensuring that these are available.
- Placing a greater role on schools to support children affected by domestic abuse.

To help them recover from domestic abuse, children told us that they needed:

- Safety and space where they can talk to someone who listens to them.
- Professionals to recognise that children's accounts of what was happening may differ from those of their parents and carers.
- Greater choice over the length, location and type of support (for example, group or one-to-one).

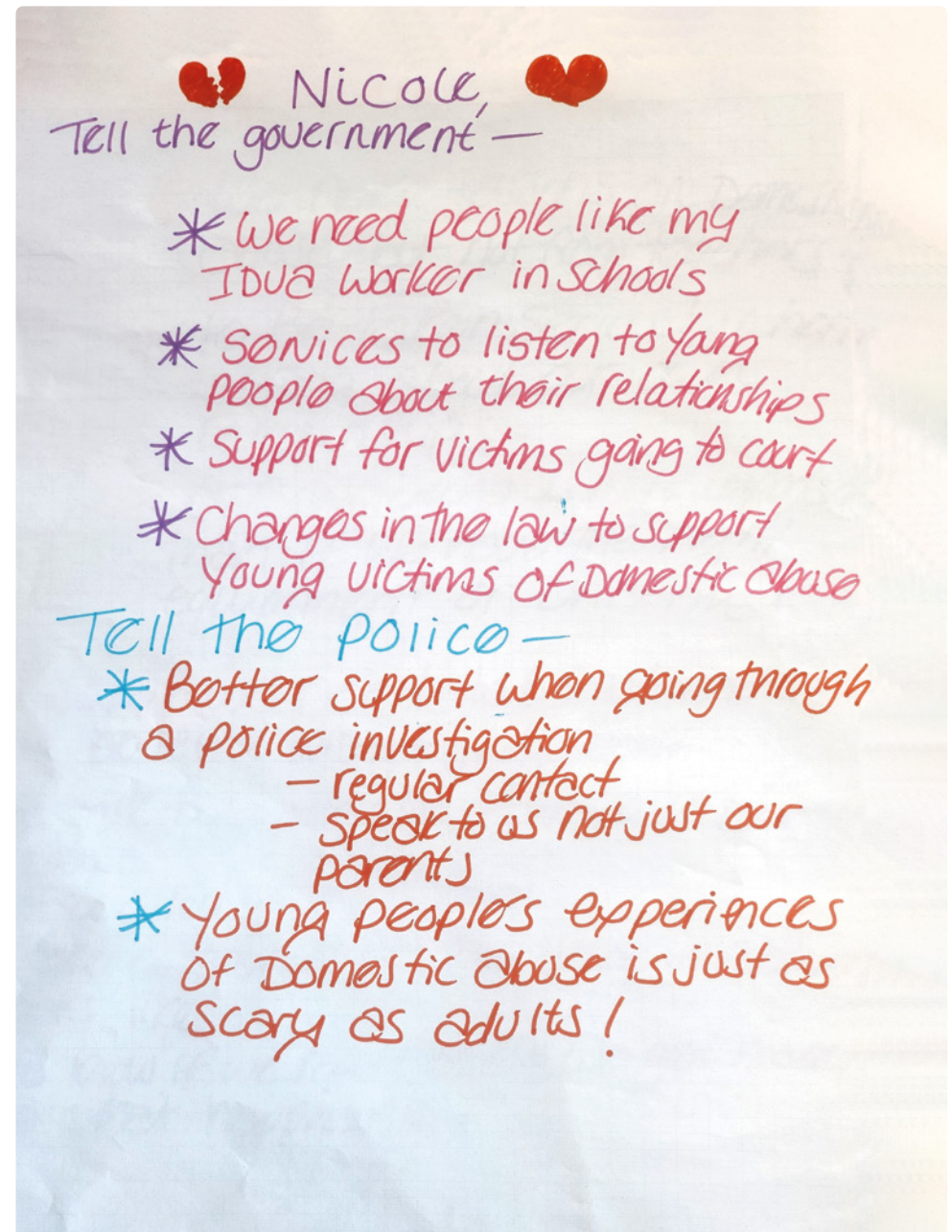
Children identified multiple barriers to accessing support, including:

- Children's lack of awareness about abuse.
- Their readiness to talk.
- Negative experiences when they had previously tried to get support.
- The influence of other family members.
- Unwanted contact arrangements.
- Children's wariness of the police.

Children who criticised the police complained about a lack of empathy for their situation, failing to talk to them independently from parents and carers and not taking abuse occurring within young people's own relationships seriously.

Children thought that schools needed to take a much greater role in supporting children affected by domestic abuse. This could be done through:

- Training teachers to update their knowledge on trauma and the impact of domestic abuse on children, and signs of abuse, including within young people's relationships.
- Schools helping children understand domestic abuse by including more discussion of domestic abuse through assemblies and the RSE/PSHE curriculum.⁴
- Teachers and school staff taking an active role by being flexible in their response to children affected by domestic abuse and regularly talking about support that could be available.



- Schools helping children to recover from domestic abuse by intervening at an earlier stage, providing specialist support and counselling, and ensuring that the school is a safe place.

Children felt that information on domestic abuse or healthy relationships needed to come from workers with specialist knowledge in these topics, not their regular teachers.

Children believed that if teachers had a better understanding of trauma, they would respond to and manage pupils' behaviour with more understanding.

Children thought that all children needed to have basic information about domestic abuse, how to recognise that something is abusive and who to tell if it is happening to you. Information on consent and healthy relationships should be provided at a younger age. Children affected by domestic abuse also need help with safety planning.

Qualities that children valued in professionals were those who are:

- Experienced and have a good understanding of domestic abuse.
- Able to relate, having been through things themselves.
- Kind and respectful to children.
- Good listeners and able to keep calm and positive.
- Patient and non-judgemental.

Children said they wanted professionals to:

- Take more time to listen to them and work at their pace.
- Recognise that adults have more power, which can be unfair for children.

Children said they wanted to keep their personal information confidential and retain control over what information about them or their family is shared with others. Professionals will need to think carefully about how they can enable children to feel updated and in control, while still following safeguarding procedures.

Next steps

As a result of Tell Nicole, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and her office has made a series of commitments to child victims of domestic abuse. You can find further information about these in Section 3.

“Changes in the law to support young victims of domestic abuse.”

“Young people’s experiences of domestic violence is just as scary as adults!”

Introducing the Tell Nicole Framework

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Tell Nicole framework is part of her office's ongoing work to ensure that we capture the voices of children and young people to inform her key priority in relation to babies, children and young people.⁵

The framework enables children and young people to have the opportunity to 'tell' Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, what they think about domestic abuse issues in a way that is meaningful to them.

This section of the report provides the rationale and legal context for Tell Nicole, the framework design, its advantages and limitations, and how it was implemented.

1.1 The need to amplify the voice of children affected by domestic abuse

While efforts to engage and include the voices of adult survivors of domestic abuse have developed considerably,^{6,7} the voices of child survivors have tended to be marginalised. Symbolic of how children and child victims of domestic abuse are sidelined is the situation that, although children were legally recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, this legal change is yet to produce a comprehensive and integrated response across government in relation to this group of children.^{8,9}

The Commissioner's mapping of domestic abuse support services in 2022 found that only 29% of parents were able to access the specialist support they wanted for their children.¹⁰ Although there has been an increase in the commissioning of services that mention providing support to children since 2022, less than half of those are services are specifically for children only, and in the last year the number of commissioning opportunities that mention children have reduced.¹¹

1.2 The legal context for Tell Nicole

The right of children to influence the provision of services designed for them are longstanding and underpinned by law. Article 12 within the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.¹²

More recently, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's legal responsibilities set out within the Domestic Abuse Act include a general function to encourage good practice in:

*'the identification of children affected by domestic abuse'¹³ and
'the provision of protection and support to people affected by domestic abuse'¹⁴*

To fulfil her functions in relation to children, it was essential that the Commissioner's office created opportunities to hear the voices of children affected by domestic abuse.

1.3 How does Tell Nicole work?

Key to the Tell Nicole approach is collaborating with professionals already involved in children's lives through voice, participation and engagement work. These workers can use the Tell Nicole materials provided by the DAC Office with their young people and then share the children's feedback with the Commissioner's team.

During Spring 2024, members of the DAC Office identified and met with workers within organisations that were already known to conduct engagement activity with young people affected by domestic abuse.

Workers at each organisation were given guidance documents that provided ideas, questions to ask, exercises and session plans to run a Tell Nicole session. The guidance was flexible and encouraged workers to tailor sessions according to the age, needs and interests of their young people. The Commissioner recorded

and shared a short video that welcomed the young people to the session, thanked them for taking part, and emphasised how important it was to her to hear from them. Postcards with Tell Nicole branding and tailored to different age groups were sent to groups who wanted to complete them.

The objectives of each session were as follows:

- To help children and young people understand how the Domestic Abuse Commissioner tries to help victims of domestic abuse.
- To discuss the Tell Nicole theme for 2024 (children and young people's access to domestic abuse support services) or another related topic of their choice.
- To answer the question, "If you could ask the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to tell the government something about children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse, what would you want to tell them?" This question enabled the young people to inform the work of the DAC Office in the future.

How the children and young people addressed these session objectives was up to them and their workers. Workers were advised to discuss the session with the children beforehand so they could influence what the group would be doing. Groups were encouraged to send their feedback in any form that could be submitted via email, such as photos of art, flipcharts or sticky notes, video or audio recordings, Menti notes and meeting transcripts. Each of these would be loaded into software used for qualitative data analysis by the DAC research team ready for thematic analysis.

1.4 Advantages of the framework

Using the Tell Nicole '**SAaFERR**' framework had the following strengths and advantages that benefitted the work of the DAC office:¹⁵

- **Safety:** Engagement activities are facilitated by practitioners who already have an ongoing working relationship with the children and young people and can continue to support them and make appropriate referrals where necessary.
- **Accessibility:** Practitioners/facilitators can use the Tell Nicole framework to contribute to DAC policy making and strategy but can tailor the activities to suit the age, developmental stage and communication needs, disabilities, culture, location and interests of the young people that they work with.
- **Analytical:** The DAC Office carries out thematic analysis of all the feedback using a framework approach¹⁶ within NVivo, software used for qualitative data analysis. This will allow the identification of themes both within and across the data that can all be treated equally, whatever the format.
- **Flexibility:** Feedback can be sent to the DAC Office in any format that can be emailed or posted. For example, facilitators can send anonymised pictures, photographs, short videos, audio recordings or written feedback.
- **Engage:** Each year, the DAC Office will provide a theme for Tell Nicole that will help us to include children's voices within our current work. We will also include a question that enables children to tell us about something that we may not have considered.

- **Relevance:** Children and their participation facilitators might want to use the framework to address a specific topic or a local issue but also share their information with the DAC Office to have national impact too.
- **Reach:** While adult survivors can engage with a range of participation opportunities via the VOICES at the DAC platform, we need different approaches for engaging children.¹⁷ The Tell Nicole framework enables us to work with a wide range of organisations who support children affected by domestic abuse across England and Wales.

1.5 Limitations of the framework

Our prioritisation of safe recruitment and engaging activities, best delivered by workers who had already built good relationships with the children, meant that only children who have been able to access support were able to take part. We know that these children are in the minority, as most children affected by domestic abuse within England and Wales are unable to access the support they need.¹⁸ Close relationships between the workers and the children, and communicating via the workers, also introduced an element of bias in how children might discuss the support they had received or preferred. However, it is important to emphasise that Tell Nicole is designed to enable children to speak to the Domestic Commissioner, not to evaluate the services they receive.

We do not know how diverse the groups were in terms of ethnicity or disability as, apart from their age, the young people were invited to share only the demographic information they felt was important for us to know. It is likely that children from minoritised backgrounds, as with their adult parents and carers, find it more difficult to access specialist support due to additional barriers.¹⁹ We are also very conscious that the most vulnerable groups of children affected by domestic abuse, babies and young children are excluded from this process.²⁰

1.6 Who took part?

Eight organisations that support children affected by domestic abuse took part in Tell Nicole during Spring 2024.

Workers ran 21 sessions involving 105 children and young people who live in the North East, North West and South East regions of England, the Yorkshire and the Humber region and London. One national group, involving young people across the country, met online.

The children and young people's ages ranged from 4 years to 24 years, with the majority being under 18 years. Demographic details of the groups who participated in Tell Nicole can be found in the Appendix.

1.7 What did they discuss?

After introductory and warm-up discussions, older children were asked to discuss the following themes:

- What support do children and young people need when they experience domestic abuse at home?
- What would you like to 'Tell Nicole' to tell the government?

Younger children were asked:

- When children are hurt or upset by what might be happening at home, what support would they want from people they can trust to help?
- What makes someone better at helping children?
- What would you like to 'Tell Nicole' to tell the people in charge of the country?

Prompts and other exercises that facilitators could use are illustrated within this document.

1.8 What did the children produce?

The groups created and sent over 90 items to the DAC Office to analyse, including photographs, surveys, posters, flipcharts, artwork, postcards and written documents. Data was imported and analysed using NVivo and Microsoft Excel. It was notable that the materials the children produced included powerful messages through art and written word. The differences in age ranges meant that the materials varied from clear messages

in simple language to insights from young people who are extremely knowledgeable about domestic abuse and the impacts of trauma.

As discussed in the Limitations section earlier, Tell Nicole can only reach children who are receiving support for domestic abuse; however, the insights they gave us demonstrated that they clearly remember their experiences before they received support, and that reaching support did not necessarily bring an end to their difficulties or frustration with their situations.

1.9 How did the DAC Office feedback to the children?

Child-friendly feedback documents summarising the analysis of the data and how the DAC Office was using the young people's insights to inform their policy work were shared with the participating organisations in July and November 2024. The DAC Office also kept a log of all the meetings and consultation responses that had been informed by Tell Nicole data so that this could be reported back to the children.



Findings from Tell Nicole

This section of the report sets out findings from the qualitative analysis of information workers submitted to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office on behalf of children who participated in Tell Nicole. It is divided into six sections:

1. The importance of listening to children affected by domestic abuse.
2. What children thought the Domestic Abuse Commissioner should tell the government to do on behalf of children affected by domestic abuse.
3. The support that children affected by domestic abuse need.
4. The variety of barriers that prevent children accessing support.
5. How schools can take a greater role in supporting children affected by domestic abuse.
6. What children want from the professionals supporting them.

2.1 “Our feelings matter”: the importance of listening

When the children’s groups were asked to prioritise what they wanted to tell Nicole, the following issues were consistently considered most important:

- Listening to children.
- Taking them seriously.
- Treating them respectfully.
- Believing their story.

One powerful piece of artwork created by secondary school-aged children included painted words that expressed the feelings of a young person affected by domestic abuse and then pasted onto those words were speech bubbles with suggestions to adults about what could help address the feelings (detailed further down). The feelings were:

“Lost, alone, sad, different, worried, lose control, terrified, anger, unhappy, nervous, scared, not heard.”

(Secondary school-aged artwork)

Children expressed frustration with dismissive attitudes they received from some adults, which they believed was just because they are children, as this quote illustrates:

“There is still a kind of a saying around ‘children should be seen and not heard’. This shouldn’t be a thing.”

(Secondary school-aged group artwork)

2.1.1 Failure to listen to children has real consequences

Negative consequences for children when adults failed to listen to them could mean not getting the type of support that they would have preferred, or worse, being forced into situations they did not want, such as contact arrangements with a family member that they did not want to see:

“We need to be listened to and taken seriously and be believed – especially around contact arrangements.”

(Postcard completed by a child aged between 7 to 19 years)

2.2 What should the Commissioner tell the government?

The children wanted the Commissioner to take their messages to those at the very top of government: “We want the BIG BOSS!” as they felt that those in charge did not fully appreciate the impact that domestic abuse can have on children’s lives and were not listening to children.

2.2.1 Change understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on children

Children felt that adults often had unfair expectations of children who had experienced trauma:

“Even though children are now classified as victims, their voices still feel hidden.”

(Comment from online group meeting)

Most important

more sessions in mental health & children's

more time in group

Support in homes

Groups in school

more help

to meet workers in school before group

D.A sessions in school

make school food better

Least important

“Domestic abuse, regardless of the type, regardless of whether it features in our own relationship or that of others, and regardless of whether we have witnessed it directly, can affect many areas of our lives. Despite this, there are often high expectations placed on young people and a lack of understanding around individual trauma responses. We ask those that work with young people to show compassion and understanding and to prioritise our recovery above society’s expectations.”

(Acorns Youth Panel)

Children believed that changing adults’ understanding would help them recognise that children experiencing domestic abuse:

- Will have different perspectives to the adults around them.
- Will experience just as much trauma as adult victims.
- May endure greater long-term psychological effects as their brains are still developing.

2.2.2 Other system changes the government could make

The children suggested various ways the government could have influence in making things better for them, by ensuring:

- **The legal system** supports children affected by domestic abuse so that:
 - There are consequences for harming someone.
 - Courts listen to what children have to say.

- **Greater awareness of what support is helpful** to children, including:
 - Recognition that children will need different types of support.
 - Supporting the non-abusive parent so that they can provide safety and stability to their child.
 - Online resources, including safety planning.
 - Long-term support to enable stability, such as life skills, financial literacy, healthy relationships and self-care.
- **Availability of support** services is:
 - Consistent across the country.
 - Quick for children who need them.
 - Suitable for children with differing needs.
- **Schools play a greater role** in addressing domestic abuse
 - Through teachers being able to identify signs of domestic abuse.
 - Helping children to recognise what is an abusive relationship.
 - Providing support to children experiencing it.
- **More information and resources** are made available to children affected by domestic abuse.

2.3 What support do children affected by domestic abuse need?

This section begins with a case study that illustrates the variety of challenges that children participating in Tell Nicole face. The following sub-sections summarise the types of support that children said that they need and potential barriers to accessing support.

2.3.1 Case study: One child's story

One worker submitted an account written by a child who was under 13 years old at the time. Their story, reprinted in full here with their permission, illustrates the sadness, isolation, frustration and loneliness of their situation. It describes a dehumanising existence in unsanitary temporary housing and how the police do not appear to be responding to their story or showing empathy:

"Police seems biased, don't show much compassion.

Did interview but did not hear anything back.

I'm not being questioned on the domestic abuse case.

I don't feel like I want to share any more.

I feel ignored.

Feels repetitive.

I don't feel comfortable in my 'temporary accommodation.'

- **Dirty.**
- **Can't invite friends.**
- **Bugs.**
- **Reception won't listen to complaints.**
- **I feel like a bother/'animal' in this flat.**

Made homeless, sitting in a policeman's car, he said 'can you stay at your friends because I need to go soon'.

Went to council same day – felt numb – sat there for 2 hours and they said 'can you leave, we are closing soon'.

Went to a restaurant.

Laughable, this is such a joke."



While their story would be shocking to read if it had been written by anyone escaping abuse, the unsympathetic response and abandonment of someone so young by the authorities who are meant to help is particularly sad and consistent with what other children told Nicole.

2.3.2 A safe space and someone to talk to who will listen

When asked what support children affected by domestic abuse needed, the children often referred to having somewhere 'safe' or a 'safe space.' Children used those terms both in a physical sense, referring to a place where there was no fighting, and also metaphorically, referring to people with whom they felt safe to talk to:

"To be able to play, relax and talk to adults. To have a place away from the hurting and fighting."

(Children aged 6 to 9 years)

"A safe space is needed. It may be really difficult for someone to come forward. Support is needed without the fear..."

(Older children meeting online)

While older children usually interpreted the term 'support' as a type of recovery service or information, younger children thought about support in a very literal way, and talked about needing support that could intervene to stop the abuse they were experiencing:

"I would like for them to help us to stop the adults from being mean and would like for them to stop them from fighting."

(Children aged 6 to 9 years)

"The people fighting to stop and say sorry."

(Children aged 8 to 10 years)

Having someone to speak to and listen to them seemed to be a feature of good support for most children:

"Need someone to speak to. Support helping them to get through the tough times going on. Support can even be someone listening. Feeling understood, wanted to be heard is good support. Supporting them just being there for them."

(Artwork, secondary school-aged children)

"Young people need someone they can relate to and talk to when they need it."

(Postcard, secondary school-aged child)

For many children, the person they most wanted to talk to first was a trusted family member, with several children referring to their "mum", "nana" or their siblings as being the person they felt closest too.

2.3.3 While some children prefer groups, others want one-to-one support

What a 'safe space' looked like varied from child to child. Most tended to talk more favourably about the type of support that they had received compared with alternatives; for example, children who had accessed group work emphasised the importance of peer support, while those who had received one-to-one support said that they would not have wanted to discuss their problems with other children.

Children who received one-to-one support from an adult said they preferred a calm environment and were concerned that other children would not keep their information confidential:

"Talk to adults and not children because they will tell others about what is happening at home."

"A place not with other groups of children but by myself, calming and not too much noise."

(Children aged six to nine years)

These children were also sceptical that other children would believe them:

"I wouldn't want to talk about it in a group with other children as they might not believe you."

(Postcard, child aged 10 years)

However, children who had experienced group support were positive about this type of support and talked about the friendships they had made, as these comments from this group show:

"I like group better than on my own."

"Groups are more fun."

"Talking to other children is better"

"Don't feel on your own."

"Make new friends."

(Children aged 4 to 11 years)

Tell Schools —

* We need lessons on Domestic Abuse but not from teachers

* to be taken seriously when talking about our own relationships

* our wellbeing is more important than if we have the right equipment or uniform!

Nicole - we need to be listened to and believed without judgement

- to talk to someone who understands domestic abuse
- to be asked what we want
- more awareness of what abuse in relationships looks like
- To know if we report abuse we get a say in what happens next

2.3.4 Recognition that the child's account might be different

Children's comments also indicated that often their views had been sidelined or considered secondary to those of adults. There was a sense of having to keep their views hidden or having to hold on until they could be given a chance to speak:

"When incidents happen after police and social care involvement for someone to check in with the young person their thoughts and feelings."

(Poster secondary school-aged children)

"I would like to be able to talk openly about what has happened."

(Child aged 4 to 11 years)

"Police should be more attentive to young people when there is an incident and seek their views – ask them what happened."

(Children aged 11 to 16 years)

As will be discussed later, having to wait to be heard caused great worry and anxiety for children whose views were not being considered:

"I want court to listen to me because I don't want to see my dad."

(Child aged between 4 to 11 years)

2.3.5 Greater choice over the length, type and location of support

Children talked about needing support over longer periods of time in order to get to know their worker better or having the opportunity to stop and then start seeing them again if they needed:

"Find ways to let us take control of our support, for example a phone number we can use if more support is needed."

(Acorns Youth Panel)

While young children referred to specific activities they would like to do or use, such as fidget tools, crafts and games, older children talked about having access to support information online, such as coping strategies and safety planning. While some older children talked about the need for a school counsellor, others said they would prefer to attend a small group outside of school. Other suggestions included making sure that the service was welcoming and inclusive for boys and ensuring that children who wanted "alone time" were able to have that too – a need for some children that might be overlooked.

2.4 Barriers to accessing help vary from person to person

One of the prompts that workers could use with the older groups of children was the question: "What might stop children and young people from getting support?" Feedback to this prompt included recognition that each child's situation will be different and, therefore, the support they wanted, or the potential barriers to

getting that support, would vary from person to person. Children tended to talk more favourably about the type of support that they had received compared with alternatives.

The children also recognised that their views of what they needed may be different to the views of professionals trying to help. The barriers to getting help that the children identified included:

- Lack of awareness.
- Readiness to talk.
- Previous negative experiences when they had tried to seek help.
- Influence of family members.
- Concerns about the police.
- Gender and intersectional factors.

2.4.1 Lack of awareness

Children suggested that some children may not be aware that what they were experiencing at home was domestic abuse. Even if the child is aware that the abuse should not be happening, they may not be aware that help for their situation might be available.

Children felt that schools needed to provide a more comprehensive and serious approach to addressing domestic abuse by providing:

- Children with more knowledge and detail about what is an abusive relationship.
- Teachers with more training to recognise potential signs that the children in their care might be affected by domestic abuse.
- Counselling for children experiencing domestic abuse.

Older children who participated were very aware of the debates about parental rights to know about what was being taught within RSE and how this climate could inhibit school leaders from providing children with the information about abusive relationships they needed to be able to recognise domestic abuse.²¹

2.4.2 Readiness to talk

While some children criticised what they thought was too slow of a response from services to help children experiencing domestic abuse, the groups also acknowledged that many children might not be ready to talk. Reasons given for not being ready included:

- Fear of what might happen next, for example 'being taken from parents'.
- Embarrassment.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Previous negative experiences with professionals.
- Concerns about how their sensitive personal information might be shared with others.

The tension between the adult requirement to follow safeguarding procedures and children's strong preference for keeping their information confidential is discussed further in the next section.

2.4.3 Previous negative experiences of disclosing information to professionals

Examples of missed opportunities to support children who had tried to get help were poignant. Some of the children described how, when they had previously talked about the abuse, their situation was not taken seriously and no further action was taken

by the police.²² This made them feel less likely to want to disclose information in future:

“Feeling that we won’t be taken seriously, or the abuse won’t be fully acknowledged. Sometimes, traumatic events can feel minimised, especially when we are told there is not enough evidence to do anything. If we have reported previously and there have not been any outcomes, we are less likely to report in the future.”

(Taken from leaflet submitted by Acorns Youth Panel)

2.4.4 Concerns about the police response

Children had very mixed attitudes towards the police. While younger children thought it was important for the police “to let us tell our story”, older teenagers or those who had previously had negative experiences with the police were reluctant to have any involvement. Some indicated a lack of trust in the police and were fearful of the potential consequences for other family members if the police were involved.

Negative experiences included officers showing a lack of compassion or empathy:

“Made homeless sitting in policeman’s car, he said ‘Can you stay at your friends because I need to go soon’.”

(Young person attending a domestic abuse service)

Others experienced officers not attempting to listen to the young person’s account of what was happening:

“I would like for the police to come and speak to me alone without my parents there.”

(Child receiving one-to-one support)



“Listen to both sides equally and let us tell our story.”

(Secondary school group).

When the children did have the opportunity to speak to the police, some complained that they did not receive sufficient updates on what was happening with their case:

“Did interview but didn’t hear anything back. I’m not being questioned on the domestic violence case.”

(Young person attending a domestic abuse service)

Others felt that domestic abuse was either not taken seriously or was interpreted very narrowly, particularly if the context involved:

- Young male victims.
- Young people’s own relationships.

A common theme was that an improvement in knowledge and attitudes towards children affected by domestic abuse was needed within the police force:

“Police – comprehensive training on psychological impact of domestic abuse on children and young people; making them aware that domestic abuse in a young relationship is still domestic abuse instead of downplaying it as a toxic relationship/bad breakup.”

(Online group)

“When police attend a domestic abuse call...children are often pushed to one side and not viewed as victims in their own right. They are not spoken to with the same level of

concern as adults despite new domestic abuse legislation considering children as victims too.”

(Secondary school group)

2.4.5 Influence of family or unwanted contact

In addition to fears about being separated from their family, particularly non-abusive family members who they felt might need them, children recognised that their families can be a barrier to them getting the support they needed. Children thought that their parents and carers might be resistant to outside interference or may be unable or unwilling to support their children to get external help. Children said this could be due to lack of access to transport, or because the family were being constantly monitored and controlled by the perpetrator of the abuse.

It was clear from their comments that several children who participated in Tell Nicole had at some point in their lives been subjected to unwanted contact arrangements:

“Kids should be able to make own choices. Court shouldn’t force kids to have parents contact if don’t want to.”

(Postcard, secondary school-aged child)

“Children to have more say around who they do/don’t want contact.”

(Poster created by secondary school-aged children)

One of the prompts that workers could use with groups was to ask the children if there was anything that children needed that was different to their whole family. While young children talked

about children needing someone to listen and play with them and “keep things fun,” older children referred to the difficulties children experience when an abusive parent still has parental rights:

“Abusers shouldn’t have access to children’s educational, medical and personal information even if they have parental responsibility.”

(Children receiving support, aged 11 to 16 years)

2.4.6 Gender and other intersectional factors

Gender and other intersectional issues were more likely to be discussed by children within the older age groups. Members of a Youth Board recommended that the support offered to children affected by domestic abuse needed to be diverse.

One young man described how he felt that:

“As a male victim of sexual violence and emotional abuse within my relationship, I felt that the police were not very sympathetic to my case.”

(Young person accessing IDVA service)²³

He went on to explain that the discouraging response from the police dissuaded him from supporting a criminal investigation because he did not think he would be believed.

The materials submitted by each group contained little discussion of how children’s gender, ethnicity or age affected the support that they might need. Any future examination of domestic abuse within young people’s relationships needs to ask participants to share

more demographic information (if they are willing to), so that it can inform the analysis of how services respond to different groups.

2.5 How schools can take a greater role in supporting children

Children thought that schools needed to take a much greater role in supporting children affected by domestic abuse. This could be done through:

- Training teachers to update their knowledge on:
 - Trauma and the impact of domestic abuse upon children.
 - Domestic abuse within young people’s relationships.
 - Signs that might indicate domestic abuse.
- Teachers and school staff taking an active role by:
 - Regularly promoting support options available via the school.
 - Being flexible in their response to children affected by domestic abuse.
 - Recognising that children will only speak to someone they trust.
 - Being aware that children who behave well might be masking their problems at home.
- Schools helping children understand domestic abuse by:
 - Including discussion of domestic abuse during assemblies.
 - Adding more content on domestic abuse within RSE/PSHE lessons.
- Schools helping children to recover from domestic abuse by:
 - Intervening at an earlier stage.
 - Providing specialist support for domestic abuse.

WHAT INFORMATION DO CHILDREN NEED

PROGRESS PERFECTION

good things are coming
good things are coming
good things are coming
good things are coming

- If children grow up involved with domestic abuse and don't speak to people or hear about the help or if they can't see the wrong in it they could become the abuser.
- Schools should go more into detail about what is happening abusive relationships.
- There is still kind of a saying around 'children should be seen and not heard' - This shouldn't be a thing.
- Children can overthink if parents lie to them.
- Children can react angrily and lose respect for the people lying to them if they find out later the truth.

I AM GRATEFUL TODAY

SEE rejection AS A redirection

I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED ME GET THROUGH ALL THIS

WHAT SUPPORT DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DA?

no are they most likely to trust to listen to them?

BE Kind

- They will listen to their parents as they will trust them. Feel safe around them.
- Trust their best friends and tell them how they feel to get it off their chest.
- They might trust their siblings as they could be going through what you are.

THANK YOU FOR BEING THERE

WHAT MIGHT STOP SUPPORT

- * Not knowing what support is out there?
- * Scared and embarrassed
- * Not being aloud to seek help
- * People finding out scared being in a group.
- * Transport not being able to get there.
- * Can be overwhelming
- * Not ready for support.

What Type of Support Do Children Need?

- Need someone to speak to
- Support helping them to get through the tough times going on.
- Support can even being someone listening
- Feeling understood, wanted to be heard is good support.
- Supporting them just being there for them.

Children to have more say around what they don't want contact

More education around abuse in schools to allow children standing and in stop future abuse

Tell Nicole

Stop saying 'Children should be seen not heard'

When incidents happen after police social care involvement for someone to then check in with the young people's feelings

For schools to incorporate domestic abuse in assemblies and share agencies with them what will help support

“Stop saying children should be seen and not heard.”

- Provide counselling for children who need support.
- Recognising some children will not feel comfortable speaking to their teachers.
- Ensuring that the school is a safe place.²⁴

2.5.1 Teachers versus specialist workers

A recurring theme, particularly from children who had received support from outside of school, was that information on domestic abuse or healthy relationships needed to come from workers with specialist knowledge in these topics, not their regular teachers:

“I think there should be a counsellor per school for anybody struggling with domestic abuse or their thoughts and feelings to share with while parents are at work and teachers aren’t really taught how to deal with it.”

(Poster, secondary school-aged children)

“Creating a staff ‘buddy’ for students who can be a trusted adult they can go to for support – more than just a school counsellor. These staff members would need to have specific training around RSE and DA.”

(Youth board panel)

Children recognised the stresses involved in teaching, and how insufficient training made it difficult for teachers to respond appropriately:

“Teachers haven’t got it easy either, students insult [them], and [they] put up with a lot of stuff. Teachers in the mainstream [schools] don’t maybe get enough training.”

(Group discussion, children aged 7 to 19 years)

Children felt that the lack of understanding among teachers can mean that children experiencing problems can go unnoticed, unless they become disruptive at school:

“I think schools don’t always understand – it can affect attendance and there are limited options for young people who behave to expectations but can’t cope with mainstream school – you have to behave ‘badly’ to access alternative education options.”

(Postcard, young person aged 7 to 19 years)

2.5.2 Attitudes within school towards children experiencing trauma

Another key issue when children discussed schools was the lack of understanding from school staff about the behaviour of children who had experienced trauma. Children asked for a more caring and understanding approach to children affected by domestic abuse, for example asking how they feel:

“Schools need to look out for the signs. If someone is acting up, instead of being hard on them, pay attention, find out why, give them a safe space. If someone changes, i.e. quieter, ask them if they are OK. Kids from domestic violence aren’t attention seeking. This is our way of asking for help.”

(Postcard, young person aged 7 to 19 years)

Children described the type of off-putting reactions they had received from teachers that made them feel less likely to approach the teacher to seek help:

“Stop judging me – least I’ve come in.”

“Stop telling me to do better.”

“Getting shouted at for talking, but I am talking for a reason.”

“Our wellbeing is more important than if we have the right equipment or uniform.”

(Flipchart comments, young people aged 7 to 19 years)

They also felt that teachers sometimes punished children experiencing trauma instead of trying to find out what is causing their behaviour:

“Don’t punish us for not conforming to social norms and expectations. An example of this might include punishing us for not attending school due to poor mental health.”

(Acorns Youth Panel)

Use of isolation as a method of managing behaviour within school was seen as particularly unhelpful for this group, as it could make the situation worse for a child who is already isolated because of what is happening at home.

2.5.3 What information do children need?

When asked what information children affected by domestic abuse needed, older children emphasised the need to educate young children about consent, healthy boundaries and their rights and responsibilities within relationships. This needed to be done in a sensitive and non-blaming way:

“Avoiding victim blaming by balancing education on avoiding abusive relationships with an emphasis on helping to prevent harmful behaviours.”

(Acorns Youth Panel)

As children who had received specialist support for domestic abuse, their comments referred to safety planning, including the need to do this for contact visits:

“Safety plan! I know what to do in an emergency.”

(Poster submitted by The Den)

“Keeping safe around people you don’t trust and the abuser (if you have contact).”

(Poster by secondary school-aged children)

Children also thought that all children needed to have basic information about domestic abuse, how to recognise that something is abusive if it is something other than physical abuse, and who to tell if it is happening to you. They also felt that if the subject could be demystified and made less taboo, more children would have an awareness of domestic abuse.

2.6 What children want from professionals supporting them

Although often referring to school staff, children participating in Tell Nicole had advice that was applicable to any professional working with children who was affected by domestic abuse.

Children who completed the 'circles of support' exercise identified several different professions who could provide the second circle of support after their close family and friends. These included their social worker, counsellor, teachers, specialist support worker, and medical staff.

The children advised professionals who want to help them to:

- Take more time.
- Work at the young person's pace.
- Recognise and not misuse their own unequal power as an adult.
- Let the young person retain control of their own story.

2.6.1 Tension between confidentiality and safeguarding

Letting the young person retain control of their own story is a challenging area that was really important to the children, but also where children's views frequently differed from adult beliefs and responsibilities. Children wanted to keep their personal information confidential and retain control over what information about them or their family is shared with others:

"Ask us what we want to happen. Let us decide who we share our story to."

(Secondary school-aged children)

"Kids should be able to speak to staff 1:1 without it being passed on. To trust that information will be kept between you two."

(Postcard, secondary school-aged child)

This strong preference directly contradicts the safeguarding policy and procedures that most professionals are required to follow when they learn information that makes them suspect that a child is at risk of harm.²⁵ The Tell Nicole feedback demonstrates that professionals must think carefully about how they can enable children to feel updated and in control, while still safeguarding them. Professionals should critically reflect on their safeguarding procedures so that they are acting carefully to address the concerns raised by children.

Children suggested having the ability to 'anonymously write or tell someone' which, again most organisations would not support. None of the Tell Nicole groups mentioned the Childline service, which does offer a confidentiality promise within limits that are explained on their website.²⁶ We do not know whether the children participating were aware of the Childline service or would consider it as an option.

2.6.2 How to communicate with children affected by domestic abuse

The Acorns Youth Panel produced and shared a useful list that can guide professionals on how to helpfully work with and support young people impacted by domestic abuse. Their suggestions encourage workers to listen, be flexible, go at the young person's pace, and enable them to retain control, for example "don't interrupt when someone is speaking and try to rush them" and "do remember we [young people] are experts in our own lives."²⁷

Many of the themes captured by the Acorns Youth Panel were also emphasised by other children participating in Tell Nicole.



Younger children talked about wanting workers who were kind, good at listening and were able to explain things in a way that is easy to understand.

“I would like for them to explain things in a way that I understand by breaking it bit by bit. I just want them to help children. To be kind as it is easier to work with them. Knowledgeable about what they are telling us”

(Children aged 6 to 9 years)

2.6.3 Skillset for working with children affected by domestic abuse

Children’s answers to the question “What makes someone good at helping children?” were insightful. They wanted workers who are:

- Experienced and have a good understanding of domestic abuse.
- Able to relate, having been through things themselves.
- Kind and respectful to children.
- Good listeners so they can hear what children are saying.
- Able to keep calm and positive.
- Patient and non-judgemental.

Children felt that professionals who were able to demonstrate these behaviours were more likely to build a good rapport and gain trust over time, as initially children may not want to share information with the worker.



Discussion and policy implications

The final section of this report highlights how the views of the children who participated in Tell Nicole align with the Commissioner's findings in other areas of her work. Their views will also inform her future recommendations regarding children affected by domestic abuse. We conclude with a discussion of children's engagement within the work of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office.



3.1 Previous recommendations from the Commissioner

Over the last four years, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has published a series of reports that have included recommendations relating to children affected by domestic abuse. The themes discussed by children participating in Tell Nicole reflect issues that the Commissioner has identified as requiring change. Examples include the following:

1. Listening to children

Centring child voices and using child-friendly methods of communication was recommended for social work assessments and decisions concerning contact arrangements.²⁸ The Commissioner has also set out child-centric principles for examining allegations of domestic abuse and understanding the presentation of the child in the Family Court.²⁹

2. Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on children

Within her report on the policy response to survivors with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds, the Commissioner included costings of the potential gains in children's wellbeing and lifetime outcomes through alleviating poverty and preventing further exposure to abuse.³⁰

3. Ensuring consequences for abusive behaviour

The need for professionals and the criminal justice system to effectively manage and hold perpetrators of abuse accountable for their behaviour are highlighted in the Commissioner's reviews of domestic homicide reports and the criminal justice system.^{31,32}

4. Ensuring access to therapeutic provision

Children experience difficulties in obtaining timely support after experiencing trauma. It is important that the workers who deliver support are able to develop good rapport with children.³³

5. Information and prevention

Schools need to provide education on healthy relationships and domestic abuse training for school staff. Information and resources for children about domestic abuse need to be child friendly and accessible.³⁴



3.2 New recommendations relating to children

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's recommendations to the government on how to better support child victims of domestic abuse can be found in her policy report: *Victims in their own right? Babies, children and young people's experience of domestic abuse*.³⁵ Themes and findings from Tell Nicole have informed these recommendations.

3.3 Other actions for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office

As a result of this feedback, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has also committed to do the following:

1. Include themes and findings from Tell Nicole within all other opportunities for the DAC Office to influence policy and practice in relation to children affected by domestic abuse.
2. Send a copy of the report with a letter directly to the Prime Minister and relevant Ministers within the Department for Education, Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.
3. Produce a child-friendly, accessible video for children.
4. Revise and update our Tell Nicole process and develop a new theme for 2025/26.
5. Include more information about children's gender, ethnicity and disability within future iterations of Tell Nicole.
6. Ensure greater focus on domestic abuse within young people's relationships in the future work of the DAC Office.

3.4 Children's participation in the work of the Commissioner

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's vision for children in England and Wales is that:

"All children and young people who are subject to domestic abuse should receive an integrated and comprehensive response, rooted in understanding, prevention, effective intervention and long-term support."

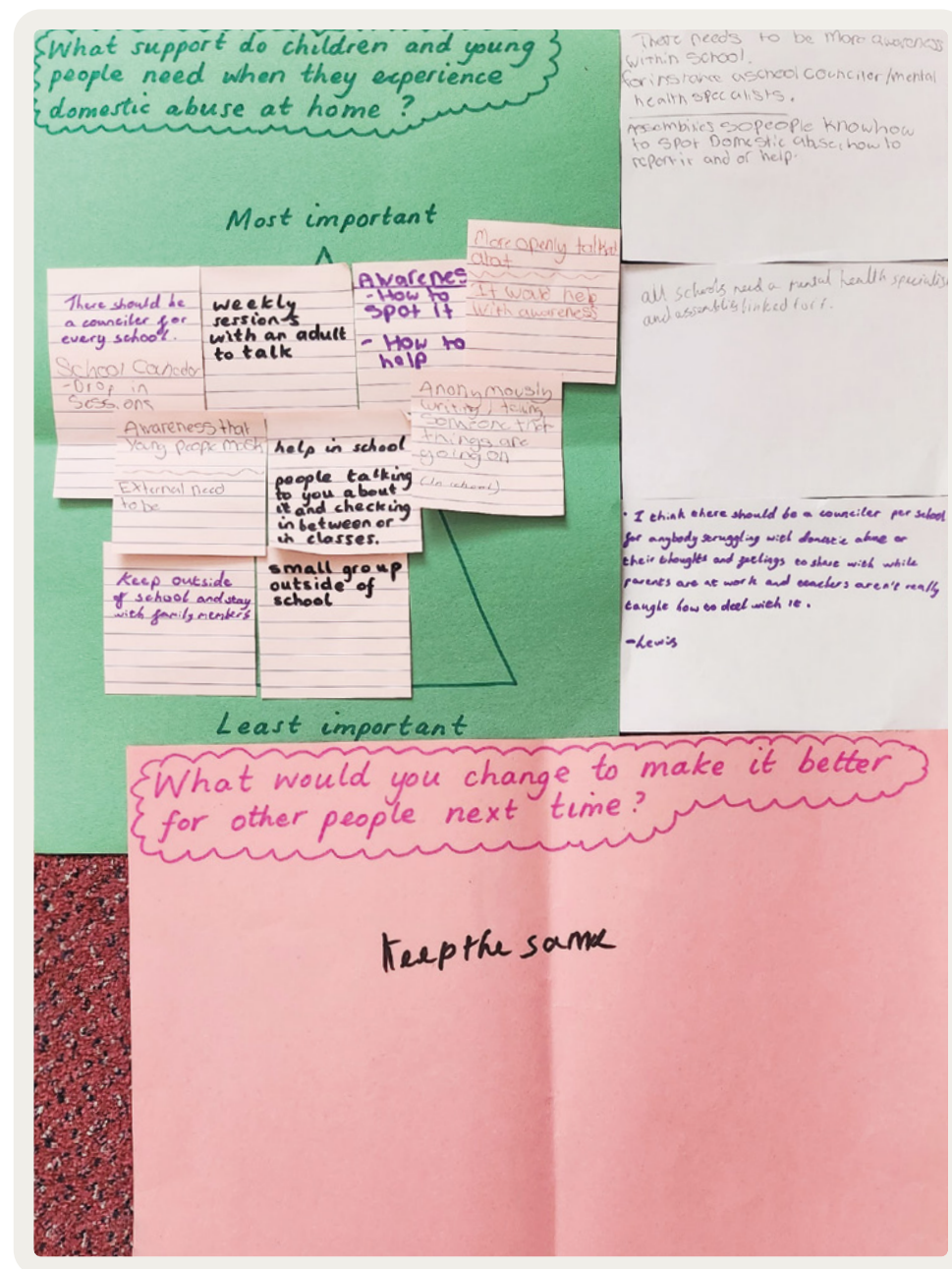
(Taken from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's website)

Critical to understanding the perspectives of children affected by domestic abuse was to hear directly from children themselves. While developing Tell Nicole, with its 'SAaFERr' elements (Safety; Accessibility; Analytical; Flexibility; Engage; Relevance; Reach),³⁶ we were reminded that our framework needed to address Mullender's 'three Cs and Ds' (Consent; Confidentiality; Child protection; Danger; Distress; Disclosure) to ensure a safe and ethical process.³⁷ We also wanted to ensure that we met Houghton's 'three Es' for promoting children's agency (Enjoyment; Empowerment; Emancipation).³⁸ Tell Nicole needs to be enjoyable – run by workers that the children know, using methods and activities that the children want to do. It was notable that an attempt to work with a group that had recently formed was less successful. This underlines the importance of using the Tell Nicole framework with established groups who can access support if needed.

Children's empowerment within the framework is the recognition that they are the experts in what it is like to be a child affected by domestic abuse and what needs to change from their perspective. The unique role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner contributes to the children's emancipation, as she can use her statutory powers to champion and amplify their views directly with ministers and government.

We recognise that this pilot of Tell Nicole is a starting point in our efforts to include children within the work of the Commissioner's Office. We will continue to review and improve our processes and look for new opportunities to include children in meaningful ways.

“There should be a counsellor for every school.”



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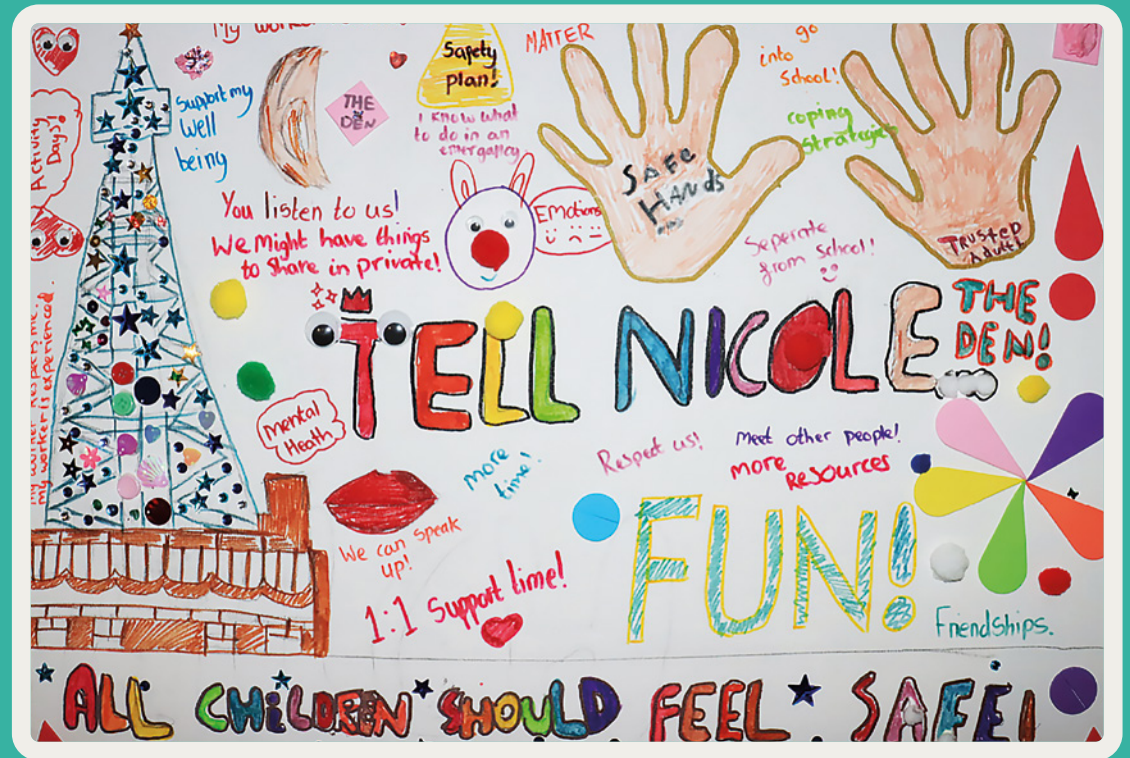
Appendix

Profile of Tell Nicole 2024 participants

Organisation	Session type	Number of participants	Gender	Age range	Region
Acorns	Face-to-face	12 young people from 4 secondary schools	Mixed group	7 to 19 years	North East
Acorns	Submitted material	Leaflet created by Acorns Youth Board	Not known	Not known	North East
Acorns	Online survey	4 young people	Not known	14 to 19 years	North East
DASH	Face-to-face	1 young person	Confidential	Confidential	South East
Hounslow	Face-to-face	3 young people	Mixed group	6 to 9 years	London
Hounslow	Face-to-face	2 young people	Mixed group	8 to 10 years	London
Hounslow	Face-to-face	4 young people	Not known	12 to 14 years	London
My Harbour	Face-to-face	12 young people from 4 secondary schools	Mixed group	11 to 16 years	North East

Organisation	Session type	Number of participants	Gender	Age range	Region
My Harbour	Face-to-face	2 young people receiving YP IDVA service	Mixed group	14 to 17 years	North East
My Harbour	Face-to-face	32 children from 5 primary schools	Mixed group	4 to 11 years	North East
Tender	Online	6 Youth Board Members	Mixed group	18 to 24 years	National
The Den	Face-to-face	12 attendees of half term activity	Mixed group	7 to 12 years	North West
The Den	Face-to-face	2 participants, discussions and artwork	Mixed group	4 to 7 years	North West
The Limes	Face-to-face	19 completed postcards	Mixed group	Not known but included 8- and 10-year-olds	South East
West Yorkshire Youth Commission*	Online	13 young people attending a Leaders Unlocked session	Mixed group	Not known	Yorkshire and the Humber

* This group comprised young people interested in working with their Violence Reduction Unit rather than children being supported following domestic abuse.



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