

SURVIVING

ECONOMIC

A B U S E

Supporting banks and training finance professionals

Improving outcomes for victims-survivors
of economic abuse (September 2020)

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has taken some of the
burden off my shoulders.
I could honestly cry with
happiness."

Survivor



Surviving Economic Abuse

Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) is the only UK based charity dedicated to raising awareness of economic abuse and transforming responses to it. The charity works day in, day out to ensure that women are supported not only to survive, but also to thrive.

SEA was the first charity to challenge the focus on financial abuse, which refers to control over money and finances. We argue that the term 'economic abuse' better captures and recognises the array of tactics perpetrators use to control women's ability to acquire, use and maintain resources more broadly. Economic resources include money and finances, but also those things that money can buy, such as food, clothing, housing, mobile phones and transportation. SEA's extensive communications and media work has significantly improved awareness of economic abuse. It is through this dedicated lens that SEA successfully led the way in calling for economic abuse being explicitly named and defined within the Westminster Government's Domestic Abuse Bill.

Money Advice Plus

Money Advice Plus is a registered charity (Money Advice & Community Support Service) helping and supporting people experiencing difficulty managing their money or financial affairs. Alongside our face-to-face work with clients in Sussex, the charity runs a national telephone advice service.

Suffolk Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Suffolk

SISER, the Suffolk Institute for Social and Economic Research, provides an innovative approach to interdisciplinary research and a high quality evaluation service on domestic abuse; sexual abuse; online risk; social migration; youth justice and youth unemployment, to inform real-world public policy.

Background

The Domestic and Economic Abuse Project (DEAP) was funded from October 2018 to March 2020 by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and run as a partnership between Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) and Money Advice Plus (MAP).

The partnership integrated MAP's specialist knowledge of benefit and debt advice with SEA's expertise on domestic and economic abuse through:

1. A specialist national casework service for victim-survivors
2. The development of information resources for victim-survivors (Tools to Thrive) and frontline professionals (Tools to Support)
3. Training of professionals in the violence against women and girls (VAWG), money and debt advice and housing sectors, as well as some multi-agency groups
4. Support on cases for banks and the training of finance professionals

This paper presents an overview of the findings from a summative evaluation of the Project commissioned by Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) as they relate to supporting banks and training finance professionals.

The evaluation was undertaken by Dr Olumide Adisa at the Centre for Abuse Research within the Suffolk Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Suffolk. Using a multi-method approach, the evaluation examined the outcomes of DEAP to inform a theory of change model based on the project's activities, inputs, processes and practices.

In summary, the findings of this summative evaluation suggests that the Project achieved its purpose by improving outcomes for victims-survivors of domestic and economic abuse, as well as improving understanding of economic abuse among the financial sector and other agencies, who are likely to not have previous awareness of economic abuse.

Working with the banking sector

- The scale of economic abuse means that a range of sectors need to play their part in addressing it. In addition to statutory agencies, this includes the banking industry as part of the coordinated community response.
- As providers of everyday financial products, banks and building societies have an unrivalled ability to reach and support those experiencing economic abuse.
- Since perpetrators of abuse use joint financial products and banking systems to control their partner, including post-separation, banks and building societies can also take action to close down these loopholes.
- Over the years, a number of groups (including The Cooperative Bank and Refuge) have recommended the development of a Code of Practice to guide the banking industry's response to financial abuse.
- In 2016, Citizen's Advice, in partnership with the British Bankers' Association (now UK Finance), developed a useful framework to help banks, other creditors and advice providers challenge financial abuse.
- Also, in 2016, the Financial Services Vulnerability Task Force recommended providing further support to victims of financial abuse.
- In 2017, UK Finance worked with representatives from charities (including SEA), victim support groups and government departments, alongside UK Finance's Financial Abuse Project Group and Consumer Advisory Group to develop a voluntary Financial Abuse Code of Practice.
- The Code creates increased awareness and better understanding of what financial abuse looks like for firms, colleagues, victims, potential victims and their families, and ensures more consistency in the support available for those who need it.
- Nineteen firms publicly committed to implementing the voluntary Code when it was launched in October 2018.
- Following the launch of the Code, SEA hosted the inaugural Banking on Change conference in December 2018, bringing together charities and industry to explore how they could meet the principles within the Code.
- At the Banking on Change conference, SEA also announced a Best Practice Award for banks and building societies to encourage them to both meet the principles and be more ambitious in approach.
- In January 2019, and following a campaign led by SEA, the Home Office announced that economic abuse would be recognised within the statutory definition of domestic abuse introduced via the Domestic Abuse Bill.
- SEA was funded by the Home Office to support banks and building societies implement the UK Finance Code of Practice.

Supporting banks and training finance professionals.

- SEA recruited a banking advocate to create systems change to enable victims-survivors of economic abuse to receive an appropriate response from banks and building societies, as well as insurance companies.
- The advocate focused on providing resources for banks on how to implement the Code, offering training to their staff and providing general advice to their customer support teams via an advice line.

Evaluation findings

- The advocate supported five banks and trained 135 finance professionals over a 15-month period.
- Although many banks have customer vulnerability teams, this provision is often insufficient to address cases due to the complexity and the lack of knowledge about economic abuse within the wider financial service sector. Signing up to the Code was just a starting point.
- It is clear that several of the banks were spurred into action following the training provided by the advocate.
- The main issues concerning economic abuse cases involved coerced debt, joint accounts, and customer complaint resolution.

A customer vulnerability representative from a UK bank contacted the advice line to discuss three cases of economic abuse and seek guidance on how the bank should proceed.

In this case, the bank had been contacted by a customer who had disclosed that she had experienced economic abuse and had been coerced by the abuser to take out a loan in her own name. The abuser had benefitted from this loan and the customer was now faced with clearing the debt. They had asked the bank to see if any forbearance could be offered.

The bank sought best practice guidance and SEA indicated that writing off the loan would be the right approach in this case. The bank shared they had already considered this as an option internally and the representative said that having an outside professional opinion support the proposed decision was particularly helpful for her to advocate this course of action to be followed by the necessary departments within the bank, such as risk and legal.

The bank expressed it had been useful to speak to someone who is external to the bank's policies and procedures and who can focus exclusively on the needs of the victim-survivor.

A senior representative from a UK-wide banking group contacted the advice line to discuss a case which they had received a complaint about. The customer was very distressed as a letter from the bank had inadvertently disclosed her new address to the abuser. The customer was asking what the bank could do to support her.

The advice line was able to highlight the emotional and safety impact of inadvertent address disclosure to the bank and ask immediate questions around the customer's safety. The representative indicated they felt reassured by having a domestic abuse professional give oversight on the case to make sure they had considered the full implications of the error. The advice line provided further guidance on what a 'best practice' response might look like in this case. For example, the bank providing the deposit for the customer's new accommodation or funding temporary accommodation to ensure their safety. The advocate was able to provide further expertise on costs associated with moving and subsistence during the period of upheaval for the customer.

The bank representative expressed how helpful it was to run through the various options with an experienced professional who sat outside of the bank and who provided an important economic abuse lens on the customer's journey. The representative was then able to present the case to decision makers within the bank with confidence.

As a result, the bank took a survivor-led approach, providing them with options rather than outlining a specific solution, allowing the customer to remain in control of their finances. The representative fed back that the customer felt supported by the bank and was able to access safety.

- Banks valued having a specialist external organisation advocating for victims-survivors on economic abuse who they could then work closely with.
- The banking advocate role was considered to be pivotal to the outcomes achieved and assessed.
- This approach provided a pathway to providing more access for further collaborations with the banks and to share information on SEA's work.
- Outcomes for victims-survivors will be better if banks work with a survivor-led approach.

Moving forward

- SEA was awarded continuation funding from the Home Office for its work with banks and building societies in April 2020.
- In the first 6 months of the year (end September 2020) SEA delivered training to professionals from 13 domestic abuse charities on how to support the banking needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse and how to engage with the banking industry.
- Work related to the Covid pandemic, included: giving a presentation to over 60 members at a UK Finance Customer Vulnerability workshop; developing a Covid specific resource to support firms in their response to customers during the outbreak, as well as a resource for customers specifically focusing on engaging with financial institutions and dealing with financial matters, including the latest information on government measures in response to Covid.
- In December 2020, it was announced that one of SEA's team has been seconded to the DAFA team at Lloyds Banking Group, utilising SEA's expertise across the Group and working to support both vulnerable customers and staff who are facing economic abuse.

Lloyds Banking Group: A profile

The launch of the Financial Abuse Code of Practice in 2018 allowed Lloyds Banking Group to build on their existing commitment to raise awareness of domestic and economic abuse to both customers and staff.

Lloyds Banking Group liaises with frontline domestic abuse experts as part of their undertaking to raise their level of understanding regarding economic abuse and tailor the bank's responses to individual victims and survivors. Giving customers the power to take control and restore things to normal as quickly as possible can transform their banking experience, building confidence and trust.

The bank has provided customer-facing staff with customer vulnerability training supplemented by a dedicated specialist Domestic and Financial Abuse team (DAFA) who assess complex cases on an individual basis to determine the most appropriate course of action for customers. The DAFA team offer in-depth and knowledgeable support to victims and survivors of economic abuse and help them safely regain control of their finances so they can begin to rebuild their lives.

With the help of experts at Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) and the charity Tender, Lloyds Banking Group has developed specific training for all customer-facing staff to increase their awareness and understanding of the impact of economic abuse and inform them how to appropriately identify and take a disclosure of abuse. In addition, the DAFA team take referrals from approximately 100 domestic abuse charities to help victims and survivors navigate the challenges they face when accessing or separating their finances from a partner.

In December 2020, it was announced that one of SEA's team had been seconded to the Domestic and Financial Abuse (DAFA) team. The collaboration means that SEA's expertise can be utilised across the Group, working to support both vulnerable customers and staff who are facing economic abuse. The partnership hopes to increase the understanding of economic abuse across all Lloyds Banking Group teams and products in order to provide tailored responses to victim-survivors.

“Yesterday I had a call from the Domestic and Financial Abuse team. They have been through my personal accounts and refunded twelve months' worth of fees. The lady who I spoke to has given me a direct phone number and within the next five days will be looking at my credit card to see what they can do. I am so pleased; the bank has taken away some of the burden off my shoulders. I could honestly cry with happiness.”

NatWest Group: A profile

Starting from the perspective of the new Financial Abuse Code of Practice as a minimum requirement, NatWest Group actively sought to engage with experts in the field of economic abuse and increase staff awareness of its connection to other forms of domestic abuse. As a large high-street bank wanting to support both customers and staff, they developed bespoke training with Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) and SafeLives, a domestic abuse charity, for all frontline teams, for all frontline teams. They also used internal communication platforms to encourage staff engagement and discussion on the personal and professional impact of economic abuse.

Natwest Group has commissioned SafeLives as expert partners to work with SEA to continuously review and improve banking policies, procedures and services to ensure those affected by economic abuse can be provided with the best possible support. Customers who may also have experienced economic abuse, now have the option of multiple channels to get in touch with the bank including phone, video call or an online form directed to a dedicated and bespoke-trained Financial Abuse specialist.

Increased awareness of the insidious nature of economic manipulation has lead NatWest Group to take steps to put customer safety and confidentiality at the forefront of their approaches. Financial Abuse specialist team members able to identify specific issues and refer to other banking institutions in instances where customer safety may be compromised by continuing to bank with them. Customer-facing communications, including the website, have been overhauled to include information and signposting to where independent support and guidance can be accessed.

As part of their commitment to social responsibility through driving change, the Financial Abuse specialists at NatWest Group respond to individual customer circumstances to reduce the specific impacts of economic abuse on victims and survivors and keep their safety and security paramount. Customers are given a named individual within the team, which minimises the need for them to repeat their circumstances, an experience they will value and remember.

