

Alternatives to the MARAC Model for Harmful Practices Cases

As a model for reducing risk in high risk domestic abuse cases, it is imperative that MARAC is effective for all victim/ survivors. However, one feature of our research on MARAC and harmful practices was that many professionals felt the time constraints of MARAC meant that there was insufficient time to discuss these cases satisfactorily. Many of these cases involve multiple perpetrators and multiple forms of VAWG as well as other factors such as immigration issues and English language barriers. There may also be risk to multiple family members. In our survey of 50 MARAC Co-ordinators, only just over half (54%) felt that the MARAC format allowed sufficient time to discuss these cases, and of those who did agree some felt that this was because professionals' meetings could be utilised to discuss in more detail. However, previous research by STADA found that in some cases there are insufficient agencies involved for a professionals meeting to go ahead. Some MARAC's have identified ways in which these cases could be heard separately, either as stand alone MARACs' or as part of an existing framework for more complex cases. This includes repeat harmful practices cases being heard at complex case meetings with more senior staff present, a 'closed MARAC' for any cases which require enhanced confidentiality or being heard at the beginning or end of MARAC with more time allowed for these cases.

As well as time, other reasons for harmful practices cases being heard separately include confidentiality and enabling expertise to be provided. Some areas feel that these cases are so high risk that they need to be kept separate and on a 'need to know' basis within the MARAC, whereas others feel that MARAC already has a sufficient level of confidentiality and extra restrictions only need apply where there is a victim, perpetrator or associate employed within a MARAC agency. A further feature of some of these stand alone, closed or complex case MARACs is the involvement of a harmful practices expert, usually employed by a by and for agency, to both provide advice on cases and upskill other reps. One of the benefits of having specialist agencies consistently at MARAC is their ability to advise on their area of expertise throughout the meeting, not just on their cases. However, our research found that due to time and capacity constraints, many by and for agencies are only able to attend MARACs for the cases they had referred, often heard at the beginning of the meeting. In the stand alone model a by and for can be commissioned, either as part of a larger contract, or specifically for this work to support the MARAC. Where a stand alone model is not being considered, consideration could be given to commissioning an expert to provide advice at the MARAC meeting itself, incorporating expertise on harmful practices, as well as other areas such as addressing barriers faced by victim/ survivors with no recourse to public funds and English language barriers.

Case Study:

now that I go into those HBV discussions, I feel some of the reps are thinking about it in a different way

- Kavitha Ramakrishnan Domestic and Sexual Violence Reduction Policy Officer Kingston Council

In November 2021 the borough of Kingston in London started a stand alone MARAC for 'honour' based abuse cases. This was in response to concerns that the traditional MARAC model provided insufficient time to information share and risk manage these cases. As in many areas, MARAC cases in general were rising, and as time constraints increased there was a feeling that 'honour' based abuse cases weren't being allocated as much time as needed.

In Kingston, cases are usually heard within a week of referral, and are discussed for approximately 30 minutes. All agencies who can support or advise on the cases attend this meeting, as opposed to just those who are working with the victim/ survivor, perpetrator and/ or children, and IDVAs are consulted on who to invite. Cases are also added to the AOB of the next MARAC meeting to make sure that all agencies are flagging the cases, even if they are not involved. Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) a by and for agency who specialise in harmful practices, including leading the pan London P&ACT Ending Harmful Practices Partnership, is commissioned to provide expertise at these meetings. If a case is not identified in advance as involving 'honour' based abuse but this became evident at the main MARAC, the case would be heard but information would be sent to AWRC after the meeting to gain any further insights into the case.

Alongside the stand alone MARAC, Kingston has also set up a harmful practices sub group, training for professionals, and have commissioned a 'BME IDVA' within the mainstream VAWG service who has expertise in harmful practices. Kingston have recently carried out a review of the model and found that:

- 90.9% of reps felt the stand alone MARAC was effective.
- 81% felt it benefited the immediate safety of survivors.
- 73% felt it raised the knowledge level of MARAC reps on harmful practices.
- 73% felt it had raised the quality of their practice/ interventions outside of MARAC.
- 73% felt it had helped them identify new pathways of additional support for clients.

The review from Kingston indicates that overall their MARAC reps feel that the stand alone MARAC has benefited the work of the MARAC in a number of ways – to make victim/ survivors safer, to increase the knowledge of reps in this area, and to enable them to better support victim/ survivors outside of MARAC.

Setting Up a Stand Alone Harmful Practices MARAC:

If you are considering setting up a stand alone harmful practices MARAC, consideration will need to be given to need, costs, time, and ensuring the buy in of all parties. It would be useful to carry out a review of the current effectiveness of your MARAC for harmful practices cases focussing on volume, knowledge of reps, outcomes of harmful practices cases, quality of risk assessment and quality and outcome of actions. This can influence the buy in of stakeholders such as MARAC agencies, reps, chairs and VAWG leads, and your MARAC steering group should support with this work. A number of the agencies we interviewed raised concerns that the stand alone MARAC model will struggle without the buy in of MARAC reps and chairs in particular. We were given examples of good and less good practice from MARAC chairs, and the importance of chairs coming with knowledge of harmful practices and/ or an openness to learning from expert partners. As MARACs are very often chaired by the police then the involvement of a police harmful practices lead could be valuable in this space. In other areas we understand that harmful practices cases may be chaired by other agencies, including specialist agencies who already hold expertise. We would suggest that training is provided for all MARAC reps, including chairs and co-ordinators for them to have a greater understanding of the complexity of these cases.

Additional costs and time will depend on the volume of cases in your area. Case numbers may however increase as professional knowledge improves, particularly if this is carried out alongside harmful practices training. One of the biggest concerns for both MARAC chairs and reps is time constraints. However, our case study area, Kingston found that having a stand alone MARAC reduced the need for professionals' meetings, freeing up time. Unlike professionals' meetings MARAC Co-ordinators arrange stand alone meetings, reducing the workload of other agencies. As these meetings are held virtually, time commitment is less than in person meetings, with an average of 30 minutes per case. Commissioning a harmful practices expert could be done as part of a larger contract with a specialist agency, or as a separate contract. In areas where there may not be an appropriate service with expertise in harmful practices, consideration could be given to an agency from another area being commissioned and engaged virtually.

Additional resources may also need to be considered for MARAC co-ordination, and this may need to be built into contracts when services are recommissioned. In some areas these cases are heard separately but on the same day as the MARAC, which depending on the number of cases, would minimally impact co-ordination and rep time.

Questions to Consider

What are the main components of a stand alone model?

The main components are: extra time allowed for case discussion (approximately 30 minutes), training for attendees on harmful practices, expertise in the meeting provided by a harmful practices specialist, all agencies who can advise or support the case invited to attend.

What model would work best in my area?

Alternative models include a stand alone meeting, a separate meeting at the beginning or end of the main MARAC meeting, or as part of an existing process e.g. emergency MARAC or MARAC Plus. Individual areas need to consider their pre-existing structures and capacity to decide what would work best. A review of case numbers will inform how you wish to go forward with this work and the potential impact on time and capacity. Bear in mind that a focus on harmful practices may increase the numbers of these cases as identification improves.

How do you ensure harmful practices expertise informs case discussion?

Consider what expertise is already held in your area, and whether these specialists are engaged in MARAC. Could an expert from a by and for agency be commissioned to provide this expertise – either as part of a wider contract, or specific to this work? If this expertise is not held locally, could a specialist agency be commissioned to provide this virtually?