Sally and Carl were in a relationship for around fifteen months, though they never lived together. They both have children from other relationships. Sally has an intellectual disability that affects her comprehension, communication and general coping skills, and she takes medication to help her manage anxiety and stress. She never received a diagnosis for her disability but has difficulty reading and writing, concentrating and remembering things. Sally has however completed secondary schooling and was employed prior to having children. Sally and the father of her children have a good and workable relationship as parents, and have Family Court consent orders that accommodate their circumstances and capabilities, and ensure that their children’s best interests are served. Sally says that the children more often live with their father than with her, and she feels that this is best for them. Carl has, over the years, experienced problems with his mental health, misuse of alcohol, anger and self harming. He has been employed in unskilled jobs briefly, from time to time.

From early in the relationship, Sally recalls Carl wanting to control when and how often they saw one another. While Sally was pleased to have found companionship in Carl, she also values her privacy and being able to live in her own home. Carl would insist that she travel at night to see him, which she found frightening as she would have to use public transport. When she refused, Carl would become angry and repeatedly call and text her (often tens to hundreds of times in a single day), or arrive at her home unannounced. Carl would press Sally to take and send to him (via smart phone) highly personal photos of herself, which, sometimes, she did, and Carl would then threaten to share the photos publicly with others if Sally didn’t comply with his demands. Carl also appeared jealous of Sally’s relationship with her former partner and father of her children, complaining to Sally whenever he was present at her home caring for the children.

Carl’s behaviour worsened and became more violent and intimidating to Sally when he was drinking alcohol. There were two occasions a couple of months apart where Carl injured Sally badly around her head, face and chest by pulling her hair and throwing her against walls and cupboards, resulting in her admission to hospital. On the first occasion, a social worker spoke to Sally at the hospital about her options, and the police were alerted. At that stage, Sally was not prepared to apply for a protection order as she felt she could cope with the situation, and she still wanted to make her relationship with Carl work. On the second occasion, as well as severely bashing Sally, Carl stole money from her purse, and demanded that she participate in sexual acts, which she refused. Sally telephoned the police who, on the strength of her complaint and her injuries as evidenced by the hospital records, initiated a protection order application on her behalf.

A temporary order was granted by the court, however Carl made service difficult and contested the order, resulting in Sally having to obtain Legal Aid assistance and return to the court on three occasions before a final order was granted requiring Carl to be of good behaviour towards Sally for a period of six months. Carl was at all times unrepresented. Sally’s lawyer had initially tried to pressure her into an exchange of mutual undertakings with Carl where they would both agree not to be violent towards the other, however Sally was not satisfied with this option, and the final order (as granted) was offered by way of compromise. Sally felt that six months wasn’t long enough, and that she needed protection for two years. She was however happy with the “good behaviour” condition as she still wanted ongoing contact with Carl.

Following the protection order, Carl did at times, though less often, text and ring Sally repeatedly, however he no longer made physical contact. Sally changed her phone number more than once, but would forget and would call or text Carl using her new number resulting in Carl learning of her new contact details. While the protection order has expired, Sally feels very safe and settled now, having received financial help from Victim Assist to change the locks on her home and attend regular counselling. She no longer has any contact with Carl.

Through this process, Sally has had a positive experience with police and support services; however she feels that the Legal Aid lawyer could have better represented her needs. Sally is often confused about the nature, effect and origin of the various orders that have affected, or continue to affect, her and her children, and she will need ongoing support to ensure that she understands and her interests are protected.