

## Covid-19 pandemic: new national restrictions and the impact on those subject to domestic abuse

From 5 November new national restrictions will come into place to help reduce and control the spread of Covid-19. These restrictions will largely mirror those that were put in place between 23 March to 31 May. The public will be required to stay at home except for specific purposes. During the last national lockdown, there was a surge in demand for domestic abuse services. While Covid-19 has not in itself caused domestic abuse, what the very necessary public health measures have done is to create a conducive context for it to happen. For many, this period has led to an escalation of violence and abuse, closed down routes for people to escape safely and made it more challenging to bring perpetrators to justice. By the end of May, Refuge reported that there had been a 66% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.<sup>1</sup> Within the first two weeks of lockdown there was a 41% increase in users visiting Women's Aid's Live Chat service<sup>2</sup> and even more significant surges to domestic abuse websites.<sup>3</sup> Use of helplines for people worried about their own behaviour also soared with calls to the Respect Phoneline at 71% higher in May than they were at the same time the year before. Beyond the period of the tightest lockdown restrictions, the demand for domestic abuse services has continued to remain high as the impact of abuse continues.

Research published by the charity Women's Aid at the end of August found that over three quarters of survivors (78,3%, 36 out of 46) of those living with an abuser said they felt they could not leave or get away because of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The research also found that two thirds of survivors, who were currently experiencing abuse, reported that their abuser used lockdown restrictions and the COVID pandemic and its consequence as part of the abuse. Data gathered by the organisation Counting Dead Women suggests that the number of domestic abuse killings has increased during lockdown. The project found that in the first three weeks of lockdown (23 March to 12 April 2020), there were 14 women killed by men. This is the highest rate for at least eleven years and double that of a hypothetical average 21 days over the last 10 years.<sup>5</sup>

During the last lockdown period, we saw strong national leadership which led to additional funding for domestic abuse services to help overcome some of the challenges imposed by national restrictions in the short term, and a significant growth in public awareness as a result of the government-back communications campaign, You Are Not Alone.

As we enter into a second period of national lockdown it is vital that we renew and double down our efforts to tackle domestic abuse and provide the robust and holistic support needed by all those who are subject to domestic abuse, including those who face the highest levels of exclusion from services. I am particularly concerned by reports from Police and Crime Commissioners in South Wales that following the introduction of stricter lockdown measures several weeks ago, there has been a 40% decline in the number of reports to the police of domestic abuse incidences. There are a number of lessons learnt from the first period, that can be used to strengthen our response going forward, as well as a number of additional factors to consider and address. This document sets out the measures that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales believes are necessary to build on the progress made over the last six months to ensure that where possible we can work

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-the-impact-on-victims-of-domestic-abuse/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-extend-live-chat-open-hours-during-covid-19-lockdown-due-to-huge-demand-and-support-for-the-service/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-the-impact-on-victims-of-domestic-abuse/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-the-impact-on-victims-of-domestic-abuse/>

together to prevent domestic abuse, and take swift action to stop it as quickly as possible where it does occur.

## 1. Raising public awareness

In April, the Home Secretary launched a new public awareness raising campaign highlighting that if anyone is at risk of, or experiencing domestic abuse, help was still available. The campaign, under the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone, aimed to reassure those subject to domestic abuse that support services remained available. It also encouraged members of the general public to show their solidarity and support for those who may be suffering, by sharing government digital content or a photo of a heart on their palm, and asking others to do the same, to show victims that they are not alone and to convey to perpetrators that domestic abuse is unacceptable in any circumstances.

The campaign publicised the support available including the freephone, 24 hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline number – 0808 2000 247 – run by Refuge, and [www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk). During this period there has been a proportional increase in the number of concerned neighbours and friends calling domestic abuse helplines. As we move into tighter national restrictions it is vital once again that we continue to raise awareness to help ensure that the alarm can be raised in instances of domestic abuse.

## Recommendations

- The Prime Minister and Home Secretary should utilise the daily televised briefings and social media to communicate that victims and survivors of domestic abuse do not have to remain in their homes during this period and highlight the public's role in sounding the alarm. The daily briefings must also have a BSL interpreter to ensure the communication is accessible to all survivors. The government should also make clear in public communications about the increased risk of institutional abuse and the distinct problems that lockdown creates in terms of accessing support.
- The Home Office should relaunch its #YouAreNotAlone campaign, backed with increased advertising spend in order to reach as many survivors as possible. The public campaign should also continue to promote the important role of friends, family and neighbours in reporting abuse as well as emphasising that perpetrators are responsible and should seek help for their behaviour.
- The government should roll out the Code Word programme. We would also welcome support from the government to work closely with online retailers to help promote the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.
- The MHCLG and DfE should make clear to local authorities and communicated publicly that all domestic abuse workers are considered key, critical workers.

## 2. Funding for domestic abuse services

During the first national lockdown period, the government made additional funding available to organisations working to support those affected by domestic abuse. The Ministry of Justice secured additional funding to support victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse. This included £10 million to be distributed to domestic abuse services that were already commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), £5 million for domestic abuse services not currently commissioned by PCCs, £5 million for sexual violence services that are already commissioned by PCCs and those that are not currently funded by PCCs. This funding was in addition to the extra £10 million that was made available by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government for safe accommodation and the £2 million for national and regional community-based domestic abuse support announced by the Home Office.

The provision of emergency funding, as well as the extension of the original deadline of 31 October to the end of March 2021, has been extremely welcomed. However, given that the original deadline only gave domestic abuse services four months to spend those additional funds, many have been unable to create the more substantive posts needed to support the increase in demand. For services, including the Respect helpline, the grant was spent by the 31 October as per the initial terms of the grant and without additional funding they will soon be forced to return to their pre-covid funding without the capacity to meet the additional demand.

As we move towards tighter national lockdown restrictions, there are a number of financial challenges facing frontline domestic abuse services that will hamper their ability to meet the increase in demand that they are still experiencing from the last lockdown, and the expected surge over the next month. There continue to be a number of challenges for domestic abuse services in terms of delivering digital services. Research from Safe Lives during the pandemic with frontline services found that of the respondents who discussed remote working, 86% cited IT and tech challenges in delivering services remotely under the current circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

We are increasingly hearing from commissioners that uncertainty over budgets for local authorities for the next financial year is very challenging. The uncertainty created by the March 2021 cliff edge in funding also makes it very difficult for services to recruit and retain staff, which is vitally important during this time in order to meet the increased demand for services. Another round of short-term additional emergency funding on its own will not, for many organisations, be administered in time to recruit and train additional staff. Research from Safe Lives during the pandemic with frontline services found that over one in ten respondent(13%) said they have unsafe staffing levels at present. Over a third of those (38%) said that this would affect their ability to deliver a safe service.<sup>7</sup>

## Recommendations

- The Home Office, MOJ and MHCLG should make an urgent needs assessment of those projects who received emergency funding to establish what further resources are needed between now and 31 March to meet increased demand.
- We are aware that the MOJ has already carried out this exercise and have found that there continues to be a significant demand for services and that people are now more often presenting with higher and more complex needs. In particular survivors are presenting with additional mental health needs. The assessment also found that services have been attempting to provide bespoke digital packages including adaptations to existing helplines to ensure call handlers can work remotely and use innovative ways to deliver on-line counselling packages for victims (adults and children) to ensure they get the support they need during the pandemic. The assessment found however, that currently not all demand is being met and waiting lists are increasing rapidly. The MOJ have calculated that a further £16 million is required for those services to meet demand up until the end of March 2021.
- Further emergency funding should include a tech innovation fund to support services who are still redesigning their digital service offer to include specialist tech advice, as well as software/hardware.

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<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%20Front%20Line%2020200615.pdf>

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<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%20Front%20Line%2020200615.pdf>

- Given the high levels of demand for mental health support during this period, we would also recommend additional funding, which would enable frontline specialist domestic abuse services to 'spot purchase' additional mental health expertise where required.
- To maximise the resources for frontline domestic abuse services it is essential that the government address the instability facing services by guaranteeing longer-term funding of at least a year from March 2021 until March 2022 as quickly as possible. Research carried out by Women's Aid in 2019, estimated a total cost of £393,326,676 to provide specialist community-based and refuge accommodation per year.<sup>8</sup> This guarantee will help retain current staffing levels during the lockdown period. This is particularly important at a time where we know that there are already high levels of burn out as result of the increase in demand. Based on the patterns of demand for services, we also know that the pressure will continue to remain high for at least a six-month period following the tightest lockdown restrictions.

### 3. Ensuring that safe accommodation is available to survivors and their children

Lockdown restrictions and the very necessary public health measures have created a number of obstacles for survivors of domestic abuse to access safe accommodation during this period. During the full lockdown period from 23 March to 31 May 2020, there was a 42% reduction in the number of refuge vacancies.<sup>9</sup> This has largely been caused by a lack of move on accommodation for those already in refuge; a fear of spreading the virus in communal accommodation, a lack of PPE during this period and a lack of interpreters to survivors for whom English is not their first language. We have been particularly concerned about the provision of specialist by and for refuge accommodation for groups of people who experience the higher exclusion from service. This includes LGBTQ+, disabled and BAME survivors. For example, we have heard reports that funding will no longer be available for the STAR refuge in London, which provides specialist support for LGBTQ+ survivors, even in the context of a second lockdown. For many of the women supported by this project they would be unable to access a non-specialist LGBTQ+ refuge for fear of hate crime or because the environment itself doesn't respond to their trauma.

There have also been numerous reports of non-specialist refuge accommodation opening during this period to provide temporary accommodation, particularly in the North East. It should be noted that these providers are not providing the specialist and safe accommodation required by survivors and we urge government to work closely with local authorities to ensure that any newly commissioned services continue to provide the high levels of specialist provisions required during the pandemic. More broadly, the MHCLG should work closely with regional mayors to help rapidly respond to the ever-changing needs of local areas as the virus spreads.

Beyond refuge accommodation, there were very few alternative options made available to either ensure that survivors could move into another form of safe, self-contained accommodation or remain in their own home by rehousing the perpetrator.

#### Recommendations

- Ensure that staff and residents in refuges have rapid access to testing, PPE and clear, up to date guidance on how to accept and manage safe referrals. To help calculate the number of

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Funding-Specialist-Support-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>

tests that would need to be made available, estimates suggest that just under 100 women and their children access refuge accommodation each day.<sup>10</sup>

- Additional resourcing should be made available for interpreter services to ensure that women, for whom English is not their first language, are able to access refuge accommodation
- Any further funding provided through a second wave of extraordinary funding as outline must have a proportion earmarked for specialist by and for provision of accommodation-based services.
- Clear messaging should be provided to local authorities that women should not stay at home if they are not safe and that support should be given to those that leave
- The MHCLG should ensure that alternative accommodation options are made available for people fleeing domestic abuse by, including dispersed accommodation.
  - disapplying priority need and other legal tests in the homelessness legislation during this period so that those subject to domestic abuse can access temporary and settled accommodation
  - ensuring that survivors of domestic abuse who have no recourse to public funds can access temporary housing during this period. This instruction should be made clear to local authorities in formal guidance from the Secretary of State.
  - Work with housing associations during this period to help ensure that survivors of domestic abuse are prioritised in allocations policies.
  - Where it is appropriate support housing associations and local authorities to take action to rehouse the perpetrator so that victims can stay in their homes. This will help to ensure that the police can continue to issue DV Prevention Orders requiring the perpetrator to leave where appropriate.
  - Any rough sleeping strategy (similar to the Everyone In Programme) for the second lockdown should assesses the needs of women and ensure that ringfenced funding is provided to meet this need, including those who have been subject to domestic abuse.

#### **4. Providing emergency financial assistance to survivors**

Economic abuse and lack of access to economic resources create barriers for victims of abuse to leave a perpetrator and provide challenges to moving on post-separation. In addition to housing, it will be essential that survivors of abuse are provided with financial assistance during this period to enable them to leave a perpetrator. Research carried out by Women's Aid during the last lockdown found that the economic impact of Covid-19, including loss of employment and financial consequences, as a tool for abuse.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Recommendations**

- Increasing local authority welfare assistance schemes to ensure councils can deliver sufficient emergency cash payments to survivors.
- Ensure the Child Maintenance Service continues to operate fully and parents are not permitted to stop payments due to Covid-19 without further investigation.

#### **5. Child contact**

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<sup>10</sup> These rough estimates have been made by calculating the total number of women and children accessing refuge accommodation throughout the course of a year using Women's Aid Federation of England Routes to Support database.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>

During the first lockdown there have been reports of perpetrators pressuring survivors into facilitating contact with children even when this would breach restrictions and put women and children at increased risk of contracting the virus. There were also examples of perpetrators using restrictions as an excuse not to return children or to restrict women's access to their children.<sup>12</sup>

### **Recommendations**

- New allegations of a breach of a child arrangement order, where there are historic or current allegations of domestic abuse, must be dealt with carefully, and with awareness of the potential for perpetrators to use the pandemic as an opportunity to continue their abuse.
- In cases involving domestic abuse, careful consideration is made as to whether a remote hearing is appropriate or practical, particularly if the parties are litigants in person, or one party is not likely to be able to access childcare during the 'stay at home' rules.
- Parents who normally use a contact centre for child contact are not penalised for breaching orders because the alternatives offered are not safe - either for children or non-abusive parents.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>