

**IN THE UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY  
BEFORE BARONESS HEATHER HALLETT  
IN THE MATTER OF:**

**THE PUBLIC INQUIRY TO EXAMINE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE UK**

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**SUBMISSIONS**

**SOLACE WOMEN'S AID**

**PRELIMINARY HEARING**

**1 MARCH 2023**

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**Introduction**

1. Solace Women's Aid appears without the benefit of legal representation at the preliminary hearing. As the Chair knows, she decided on 23 January 2023 that we were a substantial organisation, who could be expected to fund our own legal representation.
2. We do not agree, and we ask the Chair to reconsider her decision.
3. In the absence of funding for legal representation, we do not have the resources, either to pay for legal representation ourselves or to devote non-legal in-house resources to the work involved to represent SWA effectively at the Inquiry. These written submissions are prepared in-house with pro bono assistance from Southall Black Sisters' legal representatives.
4. We will make oral submissions at the Inquiry on 1 March.

**Solace Women's Aid**

5. SWA was established over 48 years ago and is one of the single largest providers of services for survivors of violence against women and girls in the UK. Its aim is to work to prevent violence and abuse, as well as providing services to meet the individual needs of survivors, predominantly women and children. It runs 22 refuges, offering 178 rooms for women and children, including a specialist refuge for women with mental health difficulties and substance abuse issues. It also runs specialist housing and support projects for particular groups of survivors including women who are street homeless, older women, children and young people, young black and ethnic minority women, and Irish travellers. It runs the East

London Advice Line and the North London Rape Crisis Centre. In 2020, it supported 10,692 survivors of domestic abuse through advice, advocacy and support and accommodated 920 women and children in refuges.

## **Funding**

6. We applied for Core Participant status in order to assist the Inquiry in scrutinising government decision-making through an equalities lens, to consider what attention, if any, was paid to the particular impact on women and girls when government was making decisions about lockdown and the pandemic, most obviously the increase in domestic abuse experienced by women and girls as a result of lockdown.
7. The Chair, in granting us Core Participant status, stated “inequalities will be at the forefront of the Inquiry’s investigations. This will include a focus on the disparities evident in the impact of the pandemic on different categories of people”. We appreciate the commitment to considering unequal impacts and disparities of the impact of both lockdown and the pandemic.
8. The refusal of funding is therefore particularly disappointing given that those whose decisions are being scrutinised by the Inquiry – Government Ministers, public servants – are funded through the public purse to be represented, when they respond to requests, provide disclosure and give evidence. However, some of us who are here to help the Inquiry scrutinise that decision-making, in our case scrutinising the decision-making concerning the impact on women and girls, are not funded. We believe the failure to fund us puts us on an unequal footing when trying to scrutinise publicly funded decision-makers.
9. Our income, expenditure and reserves are fully set out in our representations for funding submitted by our then lawyers on 9 January 2023. We will not repeat the figures which are available to the Chair.
10. We re-state that each amount raised by contracts or grant funding is specifically earmarked for a particular purpose which is the delivery of frontline services which support survivors of violence against women and girls. The majority of the funding is ringfenced, through contractual arrangements, to be used to provide services to a particular geographical area and/or to provide a clearly defined service to a particular group.

11. The voluntary donations received were not raised in order to fund legal representation but to support the needs of survivors of violence against women and girls. The remaining funding is used to fund back-office support functions that help the effective running of our frontline services.
12. Our current reserves are modest, and it would not be appropriate, and contrary to the purpose of holding reserves, to use the funds in the reserves, to pay lawyers.
13. We are not able to, or feel it is appropriate, to divert funds from vital frontline services, which are already underfunded, to pay for legal representation for the inquiry, to scrutinise the decision making of public bodies who have access to legal support and representation.
14. We cannot carry out the work in-house as we currently only have one role within the organisation which is focused on policy and influencing. This role also manages a number of our partnership projects, and development of new projects with statutory funders, as well as seeking to achieve change around housing for domestic abuse survivors and funding for the violence against women and girls sector. We intend to address the Inquiry on 1 March and re-state our representations that our financial resources are not sufficient to pay for legal representation and that, without legal representation, we cannot effectively participate as Core Participants. We have been grateful for the pro bono support of SBS' legal representatives which has helped with this submission, but we recognise this cannot extend to oral evidence in the full hearings.

#### Other issues

15. We have seen the submissions filed by our sister organisation, Southall Black Sisters, and agree with their representations on rule 9 requests, the instruction of expert witnesses and the Listening Exercise.
16. In relation to the Listening Exercise, we reiterate the importance in ensuring that the voices of women and girls who experienced domestic abuse and wider forms of violence against women and girls during the pandemic and lockdown. We believe this can be best achieved if those organising the listening exercise work closely with specialists who understand trauma informed methods and violence against women and girls. We are not clear on how the current organisations running the exercise have the expertise to work with survivors who

have or may currently still be experiencing abuse and violence during the pandemic and ensure their psychological safety during the process of sharing their experiences.



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Rebecca Goshawk

**SOLACE WOMEN'S AID**

DATE: 24.02.2023