

## **UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2**

**Rule 9 Request to Refuge Reference: M2/R9R/REFUGE/TJS**

**Response from Refuge**

**December 2022**

**1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland only.**

- Refuge is the largest specialist domestic abuse organisation in England. On any given day our services support thousands of survivors, helping them to overcome the physical, emotional, financial and logistical impacts of abuse and rebuild their lives — free from fear.
- Refuge is committed to a world where domestic abuse and violence against women and girls is not tolerated, and where women and children can live in safety.
- Refuge opened the world's first refuge in Chiswick, London in 1971 and over 50 years later provide a national network of 44 refuges, community outreach programmes, child support services and independent advocacy services for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. We also run a specialist service for survivors of tech abuse. Refuge runs the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline which receives hundreds of calls from women experiencing domestic abuse every day.
- Refuge provides services in England only. The majority of our services are in London and the South-East. However, we also deliver services in Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Warwickshire and Cheshire. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline and Technology-facilitated abuse and economic empowerment service are national services.
- Refuge is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee.

**2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.**

- Refuge supports survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls. The vast majority of the people we support are women and children. We also support a small number of men across some of our services.
- In April 2021-March 2022, 1,777 survivors and their children accessed our refuge provision and 24,662 were supported in our community-based services • In April 2021-March 2020 the National Domestic Abuse Helpline supported 13,000 callers each month

**3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or**

**representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and Spring 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive.**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Refuge's activity included:

- Keeping all our specialist services accommodation and community-based services open and responding to the increased demand for our services. For example, Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline saw:
  - Activity on the Helpline increase over the first national lockdown – between April and June of 2020 the average number calls and contacts logged on our database every month was 65% higher compared to the previous three months
  - Visits to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline website increased from approximately 10,500 visits per month in the first three months of 2020, to an average of 73,595 per month between April 2020 – February 2021 – a seven-fold increase
- Adapting our services to meet the needs of survivors during the pandemic, this included launching Live Chat on the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, which enabled survivors locked down with their perpetrators to contact the helpline silently
- Increasing capacity of our technology-facilitated domestic abuse and economic empowerment team to respond to rising demand linked to Covid-19 • Developed and published Covid-19 safety tips for survivors of domestic abuse • Published National Domestic Abuse Helpline statistics to raise awareness of the impacts of Covid-19 on survivors of domestic abuse and publicise that support services were still open, and support was available
- Conducted primary research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on survivors of economic abuse
- Co-ordinated a letter of over 20 VAWG organisations to the Prime Minister detailing the impact the pandemic was having on survivors of domestic abuse and the action that needed to be taken by each relevant government department
- Lobbied for and secured emergency funding for VAWG sector organisations providing direct services
- Met regularly with ministers and officials to keep them updated on the way in which Covid-19 was impacting survivors of domestic abuse and make policy recommendations to mitigate the impacts on survivors

**4. A list of any articles or reports the organisation or body has published or contributed to, and/or evidence it has given (for example to Parliamentary Select Committees) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh**

**Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive. Please include links to those documents where possible.**

- Refuge, Covid-19 National Domestic Abuse Service Report, March 2021  
[Refuge-Covid-Service-Report.pdf](#)
- Refuge and The Co-operative Bank, Know Economic Abuse, September 2020  
[Know-Economic-Abuse-Report-2020.pdf \(refuge.org.uk\)](#)
- Oral Evidence, Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home. April 2020  
[Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home - Home Affairs Committee - House of Commons \(parliament.uk\)](#)
- Written Evidence, Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home. April 2020  
<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/2289/pdf/>
- Written Evidence, Women and Equalities Select Committee, Unequal Impact: Covid 19 and the impact on people with protected characteristics. April 2020  
<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/3055/pdf/>
- Covid-19 Safety tips for survivors [COVID-19/Coronavirus: Safety tips for survivors - Refuge Charity - Domestic Violence Help \(archive.org\)](#)

**5. The view of the organisation or body as to whether the group(s) it supports or represents was adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.**

It is Refuge's view that survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls were not adequately considered in the planning or policy decisions made by the UK government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, despite obvious and significant risks posed by lockdowns. While the UK government did act on some policy recommendations made by Refuge and other VAWG sector organisations including: launching a public awareness campaign making it clear survivors of domestic abuse could leave their homes; providing emergency funding for the VAWG sector; and designating refuge and other VAWG workers as key workers. These responses were relatively slow and piecemeal. Despite repeated calls from the VAWG sector, there was no co-ordinated cross-government activity to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on survivors and prevent abuse. Examples of areas where survivors of VAWG were not adequately considered include:

- Evidence emerged very quickly from countries that went into lockdown before the UK that reporting of domestic abuse increases and survivors needed enhanced support. Despite this there was no engagement with the VAWG sector to feed into policy development and no action taken to ensure VAWG services would be able to stay open or respond to anticipated increased demand. While



the Government had to act at speed and could not have been expected to engage in lengthy consultations, there did not appear to be any engagement or planning regarding the risks to survivors of domestic abuse, including with the Government's own Domestic Abuse Commissioner • Despite the clear risks of being locked down with your abuser, the UK government did not make it clear at the earliest opportunity that survivors of domestic abuse could leave their homes to seek help. A government press conference making clear that survivors could travel in order to be safe and communicating that the police would still respond to domestic abuse calls did not take place until 11 April 2020. While this press conference was welcome, we argue that it should have happened much sooner. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline received calls from worried survivors that they would be arrested if they left their home to escape of domestic abuse, demonstrating the importance of clarity about exemptions to the rules at the earliest opportunity

- Refuge workers and other domestic abuse workers were not originally included in list of key workers and were only added after significant lobbying from the VAWG sector
- Emergency funding for the VAWG sector took over four months to be made available and was then distributed via four complex funding streams. This meant money was very slow to reach the frontline, especially for the smallest organisation who lacked the staff capacity to apply for multiple, complex funding streams
- Decisions about which public services were to be scaled back to focus energies on the Covid-19 response did not sufficiently take into account the impacts on survivors of domestic abuse. For example, the Child Maintenance Service was reduced to skeleton staff, despite this being a vital service for survivors to domestic abuse. Refuge and other organisations raised repeatedly that perpetrators were abusing this and ceasing payments without any checks or follow-up from the Child Maintenance Service. This enabled perpetrators to continue control survivors and was forcing many women and children into poverty. As far as Refuge is aware, the Department of Work and Pensions did not respond to these concerns being raised
- No recourse to public funds status was not lifted despite the additional vulnerability of and risks to survivors with no recourse during the Covid-19 pandemic
- There was a lack of engagement with VAWG sector organisations when developing the Test and Trace system. Refuge has a specialist technology facilitated domestic abuse service and attempted to engage with the developers of test and trace to build in safeguards for survivors of technology facilitated domestic abuse, but these attempts were not successful

**6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh**

**Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive, when the Government(s) and/or Executive were making decisions about their response to**

**Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or the Northern Ireland Executive, including the dates on which the body or organisation wrote or such meetings were held, to whom the correspondence was addressed or with whom the meeting was held, and any response received from the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or Northern Ireland Executive addressing such concerns.**

Correspondence and meetings between the UK Government regarding the response to Covid-19 included:

- Letter to the Prime Minister, written and co-ordinated by Refuge and signed by over 20 VAWG organisations, April 2020 (attached). Response received from Victoria Atkins MP, October 2022 (attached).
- Meeting with Sandra Horley CEO of Refuge (until summer 2020) and Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary and Victoria Atkins MP, Minister for Safeguarding. April 2020
- Prime Minister's Hidden Harms Summit, Lisa King in attendance for Refuge, 21 May 2020
- VAWG sector response to Hidden Harms Summit, signed by Refuge, 12 June 2020 [Action-Plan-VAWG-Sector-Recommendations-Final.pdf](#) ([endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk](http://endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk))
- Ministry of Justice 'Silver Command' meetings. Tracy Blackwell and Ellie Butt in attendance for Refuge. Weekly from April 2020

**7. A brief summary of the views of the organisation or body as to any lessons, if any, that can be learned from any consideration which was given to the group(s) that the organisation or body supports or represents by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19.**

In Refuge's view the two of the key lessons to learn are:

- 1. Survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG must be considered when developing policy and making decisions.** 1 in 4 women in the UK experience domestic abuse in their lifetimes and two women a week are killed by a current or former partner. Covid-19 policy making, most notably lockdowns, kept survivors trapped with perpetrators and reduced their opportunities to seek help. This had a clear and obvious impact on survivors, but the needs of this group rarely factored in policy development and decision making. The overall picture was of government responding to advocacy from some VAWG sector organisations but failing to take into account the needs of

survivors in policy making or taking any proactive steps to prevent VAWG during the pandemic. In our view, had survivors been considered when making decisions and had VAWG experts been included in any of the key decision-making groups or processes, many of the problems listed in response to question 5 above could have been avoided. In the event of another pandemic the Domestic Abuse Commissioner should play a key role in policy development and decision making and VAWG sector experts should be consulted wherever possible. In addition, how to prevent violence against women and girls during a pandemic and ensure support services remain available should form part of pandemic preparedness and planning.

2. **Specialist VAWG services are essential in a pandemic and must be funded adequately.** The importance of specialist VAWG services was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Calls and contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline increased significantly and both specialist accommodation and community-based services were relied upon to support women and children locked down with their abusers. Specialist VAWG services have been underfunded for decades and there were not sufficient services to meet demand prior to the pandemic. Further, many VAWG services were insecurely funded, with multiple short-term contracts and funding streams commonplace. While the specialist VAWG sector demonstrated enormous resilience and innovation to adapt their services and respond to increased demand, they had to do this from a position of years of underfunding and investment. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates that specialist VAWG services are part of an essential network of services which are relied upon by government to help people be safe. They therefore must be funded in a way that enables them to meet demand as well as adapt to ensure they can continue to provide their essential services in a pandemic or other national crisis.