



Questionnaire UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 and 2A - Rule 9: Reference: M2/M2A/R9R/SWA

Scottish Women's Aid

- 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 Scotland only.**

Scottish Women's Aid (SWA) is Scotland's leading voluntary sector organisation working to prevent domestic abuse and promote effective policy and practice responses for women, children and young people who experience domestic abuse. SWA was set up in 1976, and has developed from its collective roots to become a company limited by guarantee, with charitable status.

SWA's vision is that of a Scotland with no domestic abuse, where women, young people, and children enjoy all their human rights and have equal opportunity to explore all their ambitions and aspirations. Our mission is to work towards ending domestic abuse by:

- Supporting and advocating for the women in our network who work with women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.
- Engaging with government and other national stakeholders to help them understand and respond boldly to the problem of domestic abuse in Scotland
- Challenging the pillars of women's inequality – poverty of rights, autonomy, money, and power

Since devolution, SWA has worked closely with both the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, and our role was critical to ensure that the issue of violence against women and girls was addressed seriously in the new Parliament and in the development of successive Violence Against Women strategies. SWA is a partner on the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy Board and working groups, and also provides the secretariat function for the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Working Group on Violence against Women and Girls. SWA has a strong track record in developing and influencing policy and legislation, seen most notably in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, the Children (Scotland) Act 2020, and the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021.

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

SWA is the national umbrella organisation for 34 autonomous Women's Aid services that deliver direct support and advocacy to women, children and young people across Scotland. We represent local grass-roots Women's Aid services from the Scottish borders to Shetland –covering islands and rural areas and all of Scotland's cities.

The Women's Aid services are autonomous, locally based organisations which provide frontline, specialist support to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. The work of the local

services critically informs SWA's understanding of the realities of domestic abuse and supports the development of policy and practice.

SWA undertakes an annual Census of the network to provide a snapshot of activity. In September 2020, local services and Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline (SDAFMH) supported:

- 1130 women and 261 children and young people (CYP) received support on Census Day 2020
- 248 (22%) of these women were living in refuge
- 66 (25%) of these children and young people were living in refuge
- 19 women were pregnant
- Of those women and children, 111 women and 16 CYP had never contacted a WA group before that day
- 341 women and 357 CYP were living in refuge on Census Day.
- Multi-agency partnership working - 26 meetings with 109 individuals working on behalf of other agencies

3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and April 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of the (i) UK Government; and/or (ii) Scottish Government.

In early 2020 SWA became increasingly concerned about the looming pandemic and started contingency planning to try to prevent harm to our staff and to support our members. In the absence of a national decision, we closed our office on March 12th 2020. Our contingency planning meant that all staff could work from home, and in particular we ensured that Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline's (SDAFMH) transition to remote operation was seamless and achieved with no break in service.

Our focus pivoted to supporting our local services to radically redesign their services. We provided advice and support across a broad range of issues, from key worker status and childcare, to training and advice on new technology. We distributed Scottish Government emergency Covid 19 funding across our network and provided weekly and then monthly Covid briefings, ensuring that groups had access to necessary government information and guidance.

We were extremely concerned from early on about the disproportionate effect the pandemic and lockdown were having on women and children generally, particularly in relation to those experiencing domestic abuse. The pandemic simultaneously increased the risks of harm and made access to help more difficult. We saw that the longer-term impact was likely to increase demand for domestic abuse services, at a point when the funding environment (over many years) had already made service provision increasingly difficult.

Our report *Crisis and Resilience: The Impact of a Global Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and Service providers in Scotland*, makes clear the very broad range of concerns raised - from refuge and funding, women with no recourse to public funds, to the impact on Criminal Justice services in Scotland, and likelihood of increased demand. We were therefore in constant contact with officials in a variety of governments' departments, stressing the importance of

understanding the disproportionate effect the pandemic was having on women and children experiencing domestic abuse and taking it into account in all decision-making.

SWA's CEO and her counterparts in sister organisations in Wales (Welsh Women's Aid), Northern Ireland (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland), and England (Women's Aid Federation England) began to meet monthly to discuss the gendered impacts of the pandemic, service redesign, availability of funding, technology challenges, and staffing challenges.

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 UK Parliament Select Committees or Scottish Parliament Committees) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Scottish Government.

- SWA Annual Report 2021 [SWA Annual Report 2020-21](#)
- April 2020: SWA Briefing on the *Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill*- copy attached.
- April 2020: Guidance for social landlords: Domestic Abuse: COVID-19 (April 2020) <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/0441-Domestic-Abuse-guidance-V1-003.pdf>
- May 2020: SWA response to EHRC call for evidence on domestic abuse and COVID-19 May 2020: <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Equalities-and-Human-Rights-Committee-submission-final.pdf>
- May 28, 2020: Evidence session with Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee, <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12665>
- May 2020: Scottish Government Homelessness Prevention Strategy Group – report from SWA in May 2020 on impact on women experiencing domestic abuse and failure of the homelessness/housing system to respond (attached)
- May 29, 2020: Letter from Scottish Government – Minister for Housing and Communities and the COSLA Community and Wellbeing spokesperson to social landlords in response to issues raised by SWA with on the impact of lockdown measures on allocations of social housing. 29.5.20: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-joint-letter-to-housing-sector-on-voids-processing/>
- May 2020- **Briefing: Scottish Women's Aid on criminal justice provisions in the Coronavirus (No2) (Scotland) Bill** (attached)
- May 2020: Written submission to Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee on position for children experiencing domestic abuse in the *Committee's inquiry into support for vulnerable Children and COVID*: https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S5_Education/General%20Documents/20200429Scottish_Women_Aid.pdf
- June 2020: "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Victims, Witnesses and Survivors – Evidence from Support Organisations Paper for Victims Taskforce - 10th June 2020": <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/minutes/2020/06/victims-taskforce-papers-june-2020/documents/paper-1-victims-voices-evidence-paper-on-impact-of-covid-19/paper-1-victims-voices-evidence-paper-on-impact-of-covid-19/govscot%3Adocument/AMENDED%2BAND%2BFINALISED%2BVERSION%2BJune%2B2020%2B-%2BVT%2BPaper%2Bfor%2B10.06.20%2BEvidence%2Bfrom%2BVSOs.pdf>
- July 2020: Contributed extensively to *Domestic Abuse - Children's Rights Impact Assessment Analysis Appendix 8* <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wpcypcs/wp->

- [content/uploads/2020/07/CRIA-appendix-domestic-abuse.pdf](https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CRIA-appendix-domestic-abuse.pdf) in the Observatory of Children's Human Rights and the Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland's publication *Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment on the Response to Covid-19 in Scotland* <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/independent-cria.pdf>
- August 2020: **"Learning from Lockdown: providing safe and effective support for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse in Scotland"** presentation to **Collective Leadership Group, Children and Families, Scottish Government**, Dr Marsha Scott, CEO Scottish Women's Aid (powerpoint presentation, attached).
 - September 2020: SWA Publication *"Crisis and resilience- the impact of a global pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and service providers in Scotland"* <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SWA-COVID-Report.pdf>
 - September 2020: COSLA *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Supplementary National Violence Against Women Guidance* https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/19668/COVID-19-Supplementary-VAW-Guidance-Sept-2020.pdf
 - September 2021: SWA Written evidence to Criminal Justice Committee's *Inquiry into Priorities for domestic abuse, gendered violence and sexual offences* <https://www.parliament.scot/~media/committ/744>
 - November 2021: Written response to Scottish Government consultation *"Covid recovery: public health, services and justice system reform"* https://consult.gov.scot/constitution-and-cabinet/covid-recovery/consultation/view_respondent?show_all_questions=0&sort=submitted&order=ascending&q_text=Scottish+Women%27s+Aid&uuld=840179144
 - February 2022: SWA Written evidence to the Scottish Parliament Criminal Justice Committee on the *Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill*: https://yourviews.parliament.scot/covid19/recovery-bill-detailed/consultation/view_respondent?sort=excerpt&order=ascending&b_index=60&uuld=665140141

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 (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Scottish Government. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.

As noted in our response to Question 3, there are a number of areas in which both Scottish and UK governments failed women and children – particularly those experiencing domestic abuse. A fundamental concern was the failure to apply a gendered analysis to the combined impact of the pandemic and lockdown. It appears that Equality Impact Assessments were not done.

Notwithstanding the need to act promptly and decisively, it is important to consider the potential impact of decisions on different protected characteristics. A failure to do so invariably delivers unintended negative consequences for already marginalised people, fails to prevent harm and can waste significant time and resources by having to mitigate or change approach. Decision makers in parliaments and officials in governments exacerbated disadvantage instead of ameliorating it, increasing harm and tragedy in families and communities and failing to abide by public sector duties and international commitments.

The pandemic and lockdowns disproportionately harmed women and children generally, but this is particularly so in relation to those experiencing domestic abuse, and indeed because of the high proportion of women in front line public services.

Whilst acknowledging successful aspects of the Scottish Government's approach and effective collaboration on many issues (including the prompt decision and allocation of emergency Covid 19 funding, which enabled us to distribute essential funds to our members for the necessary and urgent redesign of services), we can provide some specific examples which illustrate the failure of UK and Scottish Governments to consider the needs of women and children properly had significant consequences or failings:

- A particular concern was the Home Office proposal for the "Ask for Ani" code word scheme. In our view this proposal was not backed up by scientific data or research, and there was inadequate consultation. We were involved in extensive discussions with the Scottish Government Domestic Abuse – Support for Victims Advisory Panel, and the group expressed the concerns about the Ask for Ani proposal. These were shared with the Home Office but the response was disappointing. At a subsequent meeting with the Domestic Abuse – Support for victims- Advisory Panel representatives and the "Ask for Ani" Advisory Group we were disappointed by the response to our concerns and questions. For example, on being asked about child protection and cases where children and young people were involved the response was that they were "unwilling to open that can of worms."
- The public health focus on male rough sleepers failed to consider or act on women and children's homelessness, particularly the freezing of housing allocation processes when refuges were full.
- School closures meant that children who had accessed domestic abuse services (usually one-to-one support) in school were no longer able to do so. There were also varying practices relating to the identification of key worker status for school and child care places. Many Women's Aid workers have children and had significant difficulties getting key worker status or in making alternative arrangements.

On a more general point, both the UK and Scottish Governments cite gender inequality as a cause and consequence of domestic abuse. We were therefore concerned to see unhelpful mixed messaging, which could be interpreted as lockdown causing domestic abuse. Lockdown created a situation favourable to abusers, and presented considerable obstacles to accessing services. It did not cause domestic abuse.

- 6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Scottish Government, when those governments were making decisions about their response to Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Scottish Government, 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 or the Scottish Government, addressing such concerns.**

As noted previously, SWA was dealing with a very broad range of issues and concerns and therefore in constant contact with officials in a variety of governments departments, across both the UK and Scottish Administrations. The majority of these were with the Scottish Government

on devolved issues, and contact included phone calls and meetings between our staff and civil servants, as well as high level ministerial/CEO meetings. There was a significant flow of information and correspondence. We have not attempted to include all of these because of capacity constraints but have included a range of examples in Table 1 below. Further information can be provided if necessary.

Table 1

Letter/meeting	Date sent/ Meeting held	Response received
Marsha Scott (Chief Executive) & [NR] (Scottish Govt Equality Unit) – zoom meeting Funding proposal submitted by SWA 20/3/20	19/03/20	Exploring potential scope for proposed funding request for emergency needs for network and SWA. Grant award letter 27/03/20 [NR] Scottish Govt Equality Unit) Public announcement 01/04/20
Email correspondence Ash Kuloo (Member Services manager) with Scottish Gov officials	24/3/20 and on-going	Various operational issues on behalf of WA groups eg data and Housing benefit; enhanced cleaning measures; alternative accommodation; impact of Covid on children and young people eg contact arrangements
Ash Kuloo email re Key Worker status for WA staff and request for this to be confirmed via Local Authority contract managers	24/3/20	Contact made with COSLA to confirm what communications they had sent to LA's. Asked for further detail as to what WA workers may need key worker status for
Email from [NR] to Ash Kuloo, Marsha Scott & Jo Ozga (Policy Officer)	30/03/20 and follow ups	Consultation on Covid 19 – supporting WCYP experiencing domestic abuse policy paper
Ash Kuloo – Zoom meeting with SGovt – Track and Trace	July 2020	
On going liaison – meetings and emails - with Scottish Govt on further funding: Marsha Scott; Ash Kuloo; Lucy Aitchison (Operations Manager) with [NR], [NR], [NR] (Scottish Govt)	August 2020 – August 2021 29/7/21	Covid 19 Recovery Fund award 2020 Progress reports on funding submitted March to Sept 2020; October 2020 – March 2021

		Grant Award letter – waiting list funding
Submitted Crisis and resilience report to Scottish Govt Crisis and Resilience	September 2020	
<p>Scottish Government, Homelessness Prevention Strategy Group Meeting chaired by Minister for Housing and Communities and COSLA Community and Wellbeing Spokesperson</p> <p>Issues consistently raised by SWA on women's inability to access refuge, to move on from temporary accommodation into tenancies, withdrawal of allocations by social landlords, resulting in women and children's continued entrapment and increased risk of harm, as detailed in minutes of the following meetings:</p> <p>https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-prevention-and-strategy-group-minutes-june-2020/</p> <p>https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-prevention-and-strategy-group-minutes-july-2020/</p> <p>https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-prevention-and-strategy-group-minutes-september-2020/</p> <p>https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-prevention-and-strategy-group-minutes-march-2021/</p>	<p>1.6.20</p> <p>14.7.20</p> <p>22.9.20</p> <p>9.3.21</p>	
<p>Scottish Government set up the Domestic Abuse – Support for victims- Advisory Panel, on which SWA was represented</p> <p>These early meetings included a focus on the proposed Home Office “Ask for Ani” scheme and options for suitable schemes in Scotland (minutes attached)</p>	<p>Early meetings:</p> <p>30/04/20</p> <p>6/05/20</p> <p>12/05/20</p>	
Meeting with Domestic Abuse – Support for victims- Advisory Panel and “Ask for Ani” Advisory Group	16/5/20	

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 (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Scottish Government when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19

As noted in Qs 3 and 5 above, our fundamental concern is the lack of a gender competence in decision making – the failure to understand, recognise and take account of the disproportionate effect of the pandemic and lockdown on women and children, particularly those experiencing domestic abuse.

Decisions regarding court operations were particularly problematic. Closing of courts with 24 hours' notice and no notification of witnesses—e.g., women and children possibly travelling many hours on buses to get to a court that is closed; insisting that victims and witnesses queue outside courtrooms with no risk assessment to reflect that accused perpetrators would be in the same queue; failure to incorporate language around virtual trials as a default (with appropriate exceptions) in emergency Coronavirus legislation to avoid the massive backlog of domestic abuse cases in summary courts—these are just a few examples where the systems protected themselves by transferring risk to women and children living with domestic abuse.

The failure to use the tools available – Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) – meant that there was a failure to understand the impact of specific proposals. Notwithstanding the need for swift decision making, using EIAs is not simply a bureaucratic exercise. They can enable the best decision and mitigations to be made, hence saving time, resources and preventing harm.

We had specific concerns across a broad range of issues, as illustrated in our Crisis and Resilience Report. It was published in September 2020 but the issues raised there remained representative throughout the pandemic, and have a continued legacy across our network.

It is vital that lessons learned from the Covid 19 pandemic include systemic improvement that protects those made vulnerable by the multiple oppressions baked into our society. Decision makers in parliaments and officials in governments exacerbated disadvantage instead of ameliorating it, increasing harm and tragedy in families and communities. Strengthening pandemic planning and broader emergency management and planning requires intersectional gender competence and genuine commitment on the part of those in power to realise the human rights of those most likely to have their rights violated. Undertaking competent equality impact assessments is just the minimum required in the context of scenario planning.