



From: Name Redacted  
SCS: Name Redacted  
I&S

To:  
1. Home Secretary  
2. Minister for Safeguarding

Date: 26 March 2020

### **Update on Violence Against Women and Girls and COVID-19**

**Issue:**

Government response to the potential impact of COVID-19 on crimes involving Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).

**Timing:**

Pressing. A speedy response will allow us to implement the plans below as quickly as possible.

**Overview:**

HO, MHCLG and MOJ are working together to understand how best to support victims of domestic abuse and VAWG during COVID-19. We have also engaged with HMT.

There is also a separate work strand on protecting vulnerable children which is being led by the Tackling Exploitation and Abuse Unit and our work on domestic abuse and children is feeding into that project.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home office has been asked to reply on behalf of Government. The Victims Commissioner has also written to the Prime Minister pressing for action, and the Home Office has been asked to draft a response for No10.

This submission summarises our initial recommendations for action and includes draft responses to both letters (Annex B). Original letters are at Annex C and Annex D.

As the situation is moving fast, we are likely to recommend further actions once we have more data.

**Recommendations:**

That you agree

- i. Funding: to double the funding to HO domestic abuse helplines to provide immediate contingency funding.

- ii. Stakeholder engagement: that you agree to a ministerial virtual round table to reassure stakeholders that government is taking this issue seriously.
- iii. Communications: that you agree the plan in Annex A.
- iv. Letters: That you note the letters at Annex B and if content sign the letter to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and note that the draft to the Victims Commissioner will be sent to No10.

## Annexes

Annex A: Communications plan

Annex B : Draft letters to Domestic Abuse and Victims' Commissioners

Annex C: Original letter from Victims' Commissioner (attached to email of submission)

Annex D: Original letter from DA Commissioner (attached to email of submission)

Annex E: Submission to immigration minister on no recourse to public funds (attached to email of submission).

## Background:

### **1. Evidence from China and Italy suggests that VAWG crimes increased during isolation for COVID-19.** In particular, calls to domestic abuse helplines increased. Stakeholders in the UK are concerned that:

- Incidence of all VAWG crimes will increase during isolation including domestic abuse, honour based abuse and sexual violence.
- Victims will need more support as they are forced into confined contact with their abusers and also as court trials for all crimes including rape are put on hold.
- Helplines will face greater demand as face to face support services cease and if incidence increases.
- Isolation and staff sickness will impact on the ability of refuges to protect current victims and take in new victims.
- A collapse in usual fund raising activities will impact on charities sustainability doing short and long term damage to the sector.
- The public and front line services need better communications on how to handle VAWG crimes during this period.
- Victims with no recourse to public funds will be more vulnerable to abuse. A current submission on the package of support measures for migrants currently subject to no recourse to public funds is with the immigration minister and is at Annex E.

### **2. At this stage, there is little evidence of any increase in incidence, although anecdotally there has been more use of on-line resources and some helplines have reported more complex calls.** However, this

may change quickly as the restrictions are relatively new and we need to be able to respond quickly and flexibly.

Stakeholder Engagement:

3. **HO, MHCLG, MOJ and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner have been engaging with VAWG charities, police and local authorities.** We have a weekly call with the Commissioner, departments and stakeholders to ensure that we are working together effectively.
4. **A Victim and Witness Silver Command Working Group has been established to feed into the cross Criminal Justice System Gold Command.** Both the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner sit on this group.
5. **OPTION: You (Home Secretary or Minister for Safeguarding) may also wish to convene a virtual round table to ensure that victims groups, police and local authorities are working well together and to demonstrate that government is taking a lead on these issues.** The sector has been pressing for this and it would reassure them.

Funding:

6. **We are starting to get assessments from helplines about how much money they require but most organisations are still working through their contingency plans so cannot offer any detailed information as yet.** Those helplines who have sent returns have requested some further funding to upscale capacity.
7. **The refuge sector includes many very small voluntary organisations running on tight margins and with low reserves.** We are hearing from the second tier organisations that costs such as additional staff to cover sickness could impact the financial viability of the smallest very quickly.
8. **Therefore, we are working up proposals for various contingency funding pots that could be distributed flexibly depending on need as we gather more data.**
9. **This could be paid for by either:**
  - a) **Effectively doubling the grants we currently give domestic abuse and our other HO VAWG helplines.** The total amount is currently £1m, doubling this to £2m would provide significant contingency to allow helplines to scale up and invest in technology and staff to meet increased demand. We could also use this to pay for related comms activity (see Annex A). We could do this from contingency in our current allocated budget for 20/21 and ask organisations to apply to us for specific costs eg laptops etc.

- b) **Asking HMT for more funding.** HMT indicated they were considering increased funding to the voluntary sector last week. There may be an announcement this week. MHCLG and MOJ have asked that if we approach HMT for more funding we do it jointly.
- c) **If HMT do not allocate more funding, we could consider using 20/21 funding from HO, MHCLG and MOJ that we may not be able to spend as originally intended because of COVID-19 to cover extra funding requirements.** This could include for example some of the HO budget money for perpetrator programmes, MHCLG funding for capability building in local authorities for the domestic abuse statutory duty or MOJ funding for victims' services. We could use this to support for example smaller refuges and specialist services which might close. A note on this option has been sent up to MHCLG Ministers. MoJ are currently considering funding options. We do not yet have a read out.

**10. You (Minister for Safeguarding) also agreed to roll over £5m funding for a range of domestic abuse charities next year from the Public Protection Unit's 20/21 allocation.** We have asked organisations to target this at the COVID-19 response. We propose to announce the continuing funding shortly.

**11. Additionally, in the budget £1.6 billion of the £5 billion COVID-19 fund was designated for local authorities to help them respond to coronavirus pressures across all their services.** This includes increasing support for the adult social care workforce and for services helping the most vulnerable.

**12. However, there will be concern in the VAWG sector that this is not sufficiently sector specific or will reach groups dealing with DA and sexual violence nor their helplines.** Hence the work proposed above.

**OPTION:** we recommend that you double the funding to the current HO helplines and wait to see if HMT provide more funding. If they do not, then we recommend using the repurposed funding in option c.

**MHCLG and MOJ are also keen that we remain joined up on funding announcements to avoid the perception that government is not unified in its approach to this.**

Communications:

**13. All stakeholders have asked for improved communications during COVID-19 including:**

- a) Creating a one page fact sheet for victims, neighbours and low level perpetrators clarifying that they should still ring the police and clearly signposting to all the relevant helplines. This is underway and due to be published on gov.uk shortly.



- b) Using our channels to amplify the good communications that stakeholders are already doing in this area.
- c) A co-ordinated press campaign in the national and other media to highlight domestic abuse and where victims or perpetrators can go to seek help.
- d) Improved communications for local authorities. MHCLG are engaging with the Local Government Association and local authorities to disseminate best practice and guidance.
- e) Improved guidance for the police. HO, NPCC and the College of Policing are already creating guidance for police (see policing section below.)

**14. In addition, communications which have gone out so far are:**

- MHCLG have issued PHE-approved guidance to the domestic abuse sector to help to manage incidents of COVID-19 in supported accommodation. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-domestic-abuse-safe-accommodation-provision>
- MOJ has also set up a specific page on gov.uk giving information to victims and witnesses and directing them to helplines. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-victim-and-witness-services#the-survivors-trust>

**OPTION: We recommend that you note the above and agree to the communications plan in Annex A.**

Policing

**15. We are liaising with the national policing lead on domestic abuse – Louisa Rolfe.** The police are experiencing abstractions due to sickness and self isolation but are prioritising front line and call response over usual large meetings and project work. She is confident that policing will maintain its 999 emergency response, but there is beginning to be a switch to routine calls being routed to online enquiries and more cases will be investigated over the telephone. The College of Policing will shortly be issuing national guidance on the use of telephone resolution in DA cases with officers only attending the most urgent cases. This approach has been formally piloted and evaluated. It does however require complex assessment of risk by officers, although forces are increasingly well versed in conducting risk assessments with DA victims at the point of call. Forces are being encouraged to prioritise these and other vulnerable callers.

**16. We are liaising with the College of Policing on whether police systems are able to accurately capture any marked increase in calls to police call centres around DA cases.**

**17. We are working with the national police lead, the College of Policing and other government departments to develop national guidance on the continued use of police protective orders such as Domestic**

**Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) to protect victims of DA.** Police forces have raised concerns around issuing an order requiring an alleged perpetrator to leave an address if the perpetrator has also been directed to isolate at that address under the measures in the Coronavirus Bill, or where leaving the address would put the perpetrator or others at risk of COVID-19 infection. We are looking at joint procedural arrangements to deal with such potential conflict and consulting HOLA on any legal issues.

- 18. We are also working with MHCLG to explore options for emergency accommodation for perpetrators who are made homeless by the requirements of a DVPO, either because of the enforced closure of hotels and BnBs or because they cannot stay with family or friends due to the risk of COVID-19 infection.** Such persons may be eligible for emergency accommodation provided by the Local Authority, and an approach similar to that adopted for homeless people who need to isolate and use of hotel accommodation may provide a way forward.
- 19. In addition, we are working with MoJ to address police concerns that protective orders may be more difficult to obtain due to court closures.** The judiciary has identified a list of critical business priorities for each jurisdiction. In the family courts, and Family Law Act injunctions (eg. non-molestation orders and occupation orders), FGM Protection Orders and Forced Marriage Protection Orders have all been included. Arrangements will be made for remote hearings by telephone, video link or Skype as appropriate. In the criminal courts, DVPOs, cases involving vulnerable children and custody cases (which would include someone charged with an offence related to domestic abuse who is detained for court) have been identified as priorities.
- 20. Police forces are also involved in wider resilience planning and response and Louisa Rolfe is encouraging local multi-agency planning and preparedness work to consider how it mitigates the impact upon VAWG victim services, learning from experience in China and Italy.** This includes ensuring that MARACs (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences) continue to operate effectively.

#### **Financial implications:**

- 21. Doubling the helpline spending in 20/21 from £1m to £2m is affordable from within the Public Protection 20/21 budget allocation.**
- 22. This submission does not recommend asking HMT for additional funding.**
- 23. As further policy options are developed we will look to repurpose existing funding for domestic abuse and VAWG.** Funding options will be included as the further advice is developed.

## Comms handling :

**24. Over the past few days there has been a moderate amount of national media coverage focused on how domestic abuse victims may be more at risk during self-isolation.** Media has reported on concerns by campaigners and some MPs that police and charities may struggle with capacity to support the most vulnerable. While there has not yet been overt criticism of Government, some stakeholders, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner have asked that Government should step in and do more if the charitable sector struggles.

**25. While the evidence of an increase in domestic abuse is not yet fully established, it is anticipated to increase, and we can expect more media scrutiny on the issue.**

**26. Home Office comms therefore recommend that you (Home Secretary) get ahead of the issue and are seen to be driving increased support and protection for potential victims.** For example, depending on your response to the proposals contained in this submission, we could announce:

- that you are bringing together charities, police, DA Commissioner, other Government departments for a virtual roundtable to discuss what is needed
- an immediate doubling of funding
- a commitment to look at what more funding may be needed
- College of Policing issuing advice to all forces

**27. Messaging would emphasise that the Government's priority during this crisis is to save lives and protect the vulnerable.** That includes saving the lives of and protecting potential domestic abuse victims. That you (Home Secretary) are hearing from charities and the police there are concerns about a rise in domestic abuse over the coming weeks which is why you are taking action now.

**28. Should HMT agree to provide additional support then, depending on timing, this could provide the basis of a second announcement demonstrating delivery and momentum.**

**29. Full media handling would be provided for any announcements targeting national print, broadcast and women's consumer programmes and publications and a push on social media.** In the immediate term comms will focus on using social media and Gov.uk to signpost victims to existing advice and support to keep them safe.

**30. Home Office comms have included a more detailed communications plan in Annex A.** This includes short and medium-term tactics to meet the key objective of communicating how the Government is protecting lives during this crisis.

**Copy List:**

Minister for Safeguarding, Home Secretary, Permanent Secretary, Special  
Advisers, **Name Redacted** Azita Abolhasani, Press Office  
Safeguarding desk, **NR** Tricia Hayes, **NR** Tony Grimshaw,  
Nicola Sills **Name Redacted** **Name Redacted** **Name Redacted** **NR**  
**NR**



## **Annex A: Domestic Abuse high level communications plan Covid-19**

### Overall aim is

- To reduce the incidences of domestic abuse and protect victims

### **Key Objectives for communications**

Demonstrate support is available for victims of domestic abuse during the coronavirus crisis by:

- Empowering victims and their network to spot the signs of abuse and to seek help
- Encouraging victims in immediate danger to call the police
- Increasing awareness of where people can get help and advice for victims of domestic abuse
- Encourage people to seek support if they are at risk or being an abuser of domestic abuse
- Increasing reporting of DA where victims are at risk of harm during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Demonstrating that Government is listening to those on the frontline and actively providing support to protect vulnerable victims of domestic abuse

### **Audiences**

- Victims of domestic abuse living with the household including children
- Neighbours, friends and family of victims who can seek support and/or information on their behalf
- Perpetrators who are willing to seek support
- Front line officers (being addressed by local forces).
- Charity sector including victims' groups

### **Insight**

- For the year ending March 2019, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) showed that an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years<sup>1</sup> experienced domestic abuse in the last year. This equates to a prevalence rate of approximately 6 in 100 adults
- In the current situation, people who are victims of domestic abuse may be less able to able to contact helplines, or seek information and support given the closer proximity of the abuser
- Women aged 20 to 24 years were significantly more likely to be victims of any domestic abuse in the last year than women aged 25 years and over. For men, there were few significant differences by age

- Incidences of domestic abuse are higher among women than men.
- Reflecting the age profile of victims, those that start to offend are typically male and younger (in their 20s).

### Media risks

- An individual case of femicide or large anecdotal increases in domestic abuse incidents will increase stakeholder criticism and media scrutiny
- There is a risk that the funding package may be seen as insufficient and there may be a public call for Government to provide more practical support as well.
- Increases in domestic abuse will likely prompt existing criticism that Government cuts led to a drastic fall in refuge spaces
- In the medium term as the crisis persists, stakeholders and campaigners may publicly voice concerns that the DA Bill will stall

### Strategy and implementation.

**There is a need for the Home Office to show leadership in this area and take immediate action.** Work has already started to consider the impact of coronavirus on domestic abuse victims and the anticipated increase in cases:

<b>Work in progress/ completed across Government and partners</b>	
Charities are being surveyed to understand what the specific needs are	MoJ/ HO/ MHCLG
Joint guidance has been issued to the sector to help to manage incidents of COVID-19 in supported accommodation	PHE/ MHCLG
A specific page on gov.uk giving information to victims and witnesses	MoJ
COP are running a pilot across 6 forces: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance has been given to telephone call handlers outlining first response criteria (a pilot taking place across 6 forces)</li> <li>• Advice for police referring victims of abuse to charities (National Domestic violence helpline) and Safelives (Victims and professionals)</li> <li>• Advice for police referring perpetrators to RESPECT</li> <li>• Advice for people that need urgent police help via 999 and are unable to speak (make yourself heard guide)</li> </ul>	COP

**The following highlights the recommended communications actions from the Home Office over the upcoming days and weeks working with relevant stakeholders, charities and OGDs.**

### Immediate communications action:

1. Announce an enhanced package of financial support for charities and refuges
2. Develop a one-page leaflet offering advice to victims and signposting to relevant support will be uploaded to gov.uk ASAP giving advice to victims, friends, families and neighbours, also signposting where they can go for support.
3. Amplifying existing content from stakeholders, key charities and other government departments via social media.
4. Create our own social media assets highlighting ongoing Government action (inc DA Bill measures) and support for victims of domestic abuse
5. Work with stakeholders and charities to understand emerging trends and demand relating to domestic abuse.
6. If arranged, promote the Home Secretary virtual roundtable to demonstrate the department is listening to and responding to stakeholders' concerns
7. If additional funding is agreed press office recommends an announcement fronted by the Home Secretary. This would be targeted at national print, women's online consumer publications and social media. In coordination with No10, we also recommend the Home Secretary does broadcast media interviews to highlight the extra funding and provide reassurance. The announcement could also be supported with an op-ed from the Safeguarding Minister in a publication such as the Mail Online, which has a large female audience.
8. We have drafted a comprehensive cross Whitehall Q&A to respond to any questions related to our response to domestic abuse during the Covid crisis.

### **Upcoming week(s)**

**Although there is no evidence of an actual increase in domestic abuse cases at present, we propose preparing for an increase in incidences and recommend the following communications are worked up to support victims:**

1. **Work with charities to update advice to key audiences for those that need to stay at home due to Covid-19** . We recommend messaging is broken down into 3 key areas including
  - a) promote how to recognise abuse, seek help and report safely where needed, (victims focussed)
  - b) Know what you do if you suspect someone is being abused, (for wider public, friends and family)
  - c) Advice on how to recognise you are abusing your partner and how to seek help if you are at the onset/ early stages of this (perpetrators)
2. **We will develop new content that will be promoted via relevant paid for targeted channels** (for example LadBible, Instagram, Facebook) and working with partners (mumsnet). A bid has been put into the Cabinet Office for £200k to promote key messages and advice.

3. **We will provide a package of social content** that can be distributed to:
  - Local authorities, via MHCLG to promote this via their channels.
  - The NPCC and local forces to encourage them to amplify the campaign
4. **We would approach Respect, as an intervention for perpetrators, to improve their website search so that more people who are seeking advice are able to access it.** Currently it does not appear at the top of the list when entering a google search for support. We would work with them to improve their Search optimisation and, if incidences increase, use paid for search to increase awareness of their services.
5. **Other work with Respect could include a joint factsheet of bespoke messaging (including diversion tactics) to perpetrators** that could be pitched to titles such as Ladbible.
6. **We will closely monitor media reporting and adapt lines and Q&A accordingly.** We will also continue to engage with key stakeholders and look for ways we can feed into (such as provide supportive ministerial quotes) any media or social media content they are putting out.



**Annex B: Letters responding to the Domestic Abuse and Victims Commissioner.**

Nicole Jacobs  
Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales  
2 Marsham Street,  
London SW1P 4JA

March 2020

Thank you for your letter of 19 March to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which I understand has also been copied to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and to the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). I am responding on behalf of the Government as Home Secretary with oversight of domestic abuse policy.

I know that you have been very heavily engaged with the domestic abuse sector and with officials across a number of Government Departments since the outset of the coronavirus crisis. I am most grateful for the very constructive engagement that you have had with officials in both informing and advising on the developing situation and the co-ordinating role you have played with the sector.

I share your concerns that the very necessary steps being taken to safeguard public health are likely to place some victims, or potential victims, of domestic abuse in a more vulnerable, isolated and dangerous situation. Thank you for sharing the research paper on this. I want to do everything possible to help mitigate this and to ensure that support is still available to those who need it.

You will be aware by now, that those supporting victims of domestic abuse, including via helplines as well as in refuges, have been included as key workers, which I hope will assist in maintaining the necessary resilience in the advice and support services.

We are working closely with the sector to develop, and ensure the wide dissemination of, key messages to victims, perpetrators, members of the public and responders on what support is available and how to access it. A range of government advice and guidance has already been issued which may be of help to the sector and to victims of domestic abuse, including publication of details of helpline and support services, and guidance to refuges on managing safely in the context of Covid 19.

This Government is doing everything we can to support domestic abuse service providers to keep vital refuge and safe accommodation provision up and running during the COVID-19 emergency. I am aware that MHCLG are in close touch with Women's Aid, Refuge and Imkaan discussing concerns and issues with them as they arise. I can assure you that there are no plans at this time to reassign refuges for other Covid-related purposes.

The Chancellor has announced a series of measures to support the people and organisations of the UK. Any employer in the country – small or large, charitable or non-profit – will be eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) is also applicable to social enterprises and to charities which receive half their income from trading. Charities will also benefit from three-month VAT deferral to the end of June. Many charities are already eligible for 80% charitable rate relief, and they will benefit from the new enhanced retail rate relief at 100%. More information can be found here:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>

I hope that this provides you with some assurance that the issue of domestic abuse has a high profile at this time. We will continue to work closely with our own agencies and the sector to keep the position under review and respond to emerging issues. I am most grateful for your ongoing advice and support as we do this.

**Rt Hon Priti Patel MP**

Dame Vera Baird QC  
Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales  
Office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor, 70 Petty France  
London SW1H 9EX

March 2020

### **Supporting and Protecting Victims During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

Thank you for your letter of 19 March about the potential impacts of the current measures to reduce the transmission of coronavirus on victims of crime.

I fully understand your concerns, particularly in relation to potential victims of domestic or sexual abuse and violence. I recognise that for some people their home is not necessarily a safe place. The Government will do all that it can to ensure that the vulnerable in society continue to be safeguarded as we seek

to protect public health. We have already taken specific steps to ensure that this is the case.

I should like to reassure you that those working with victims of crime both at the front line and via helplines or other services supporting the delivery of key services have already been included in the definition of key worker.

Government departments including the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office and Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government are working closely with key stakeholders and providers of victims', specialist sexual, and domestic abuse services to evaluate the impact of current arrangements on them and to help ensure that there is sufficient resilience in helpline and online support and advice services and amongst refuges, to meet current, and any increasing, demands.

In the Budget, we announced a £5 billion COVID-19 fund, of which £1.6 billion will go to local authorities to help them to respond to coronavirus pressures across all the services they deliver. This includes increasing support for services helping the most vulnerable including domestic abuse.

The Chancellor has since announced a series of measures to support the people and organisations of the UK. Any employer in the country – small or large, charitable or non-profit – will be eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) is also applicable to social enterprises and to charities which receive half their income from trading. Charities will also benefit from three-month VAT deferral to the end of June, and many charities are already eligible for 80% charitable rate relief, and they will benefit from the new enhanced retail rate relief at 100%. More information can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>

We are collaborating with the domestic abuse sector on developing key messaging, including that directed towards victims, perpetrators, public service responders and services and the wider public, and how best to promote this.

The Home Office is liaising with the relevant policing leads to ensure that the police continue to prioritise appropriate support and response to the vulnerable and victims of any crime that may be committed in the home. The police are keenly aware of the potential risks to vulnerable groups and working to ensure that they are risk assessing and properly prioritising non 999 calls. Any perpetrators will continue to be dealt with to send a clear signal that the current situation can be no excuse for abusive behaviour. Anyone who believes they are at imminent risk should continue to dial 999.

The current social distancing and self-isolation guidance and requirements remain critical to curbing the spread of the disease. There is a strategy to roll out testing that includes frontline workers, but this may take some time.

This is a hugely challenging time for all of us. We will continue to work closely with our Departments, agencies, stakeholders and service providers to ensure that we do our best to support and protect the vulnerable through this extremely difficult period. I am most grateful to you for your work in coordinating and highlighting key issues arising in respect of victims of violence and abuse at this time.

**Prime Minister**

,