

Written evidence submitted by Solace Women's Aid (COR0208)

Written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee call for evidence: Home Office preparedness for Covid-19

Introduction

1. Solace Women's Aid (Solace) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into Home Office ongoing preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus). Solace is the leading specialist charity in London supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence and this submission is therefore focused on the area of Domestic Abuse and its impact on women and children.
2. In 2019/20 Solace touched the lives of 27,414 women, children, and young people across our services, providing direct frontline services to 16,087 adults and children including 94 male survivors. Our core services include:
 - 22 refuges across seven London boroughs providing a total of 178 rooms for women and children, including a specialist refuge in Camden for women with mental health needs and problematic substance use with 24-hour support. Refuges provide crisis accommodation with support and advocacy for women made homeless by domestic or sexual abuse;
 - A dedicated advice line that takes calls and emails from individuals and agencies from across London. Solace's advice line is also part of the London-wide Ascent Advice and Counselling partnership of 14 specialist organisations led by Solace with two hubs, one run by our advice team and one run by the Women and Girls Network. Ascent generally supports survivors deemed medium and standard risk;
 - Community advice and support teams that work with survivors of domestic and sexual violence in their community, often working with those deemed high risk and referred by local multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs). Our community teams work in eight London boroughs and in 2019/20 supported 10,692 survivors through advice, advocacy and support, and;
 - North London Rape Crisis Centre, one of four rape crisis centres in London, providing a helpline, advocacy, counselling, group work, and therapies. In 2019/20 the helpline received 1,655 calls and we supported 662 survivors with counselling, advocacy and group work.
3. We also deliver a number of specialist housing and support projects for particular groups of survivors including women who have experienced severe and multiple disadvantage including street homelessness; older women; children and young people; young BME women; and Irish travellers¹.
4. When the first lockdown was announced we, like many in the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector, saw an increase in calls and emails to our helpline and foresaw the lack of movement in the temporary accommodation sector that would mean women would be unable to move on from refuge during lockdown, leaving us with little capacity to meet the increase in need. The week before lockdown was announced we were receiving around two referrals for every refuge space we flagged on the national

¹ <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/get-informed/professional-resources/solace-impact-report-2020>

database, which is standard, but by the time survivors had been locked down for four- and five-weeks enquiries spiked, and we were getting around four enquiries for every refuge space that became available.

5. With funding from the Mayor of London and the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust, Solace worked in partnership with Southall Black Sisters (SBS) to set up an emergency hostel providing crisis accommodation with specialist support to women and children fleeing domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), across London during the Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis project opened in May with specialist support provided by several Ascent partners for women housed there, and with SBS providing specialist support for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The crisis project has been funded by MOPAC to continue at a reduced scale until June 2021, with one-third of spaces allocated for women with no recourse to public funds. The project had accommodated 135 women and 62 children up to November 2020 and continues to operate at full capacity.

Government communication

6. As the Committee set out in your previous report on the Government's preparedness for Covid-19 in relation to domestic abuse, it took three weeks of lockdown before the Home Secretary announced measures to support survivors of domestic abuse including a communications plan to inform the public that lockdown rules did not apply to people experiencing abuse in their home. We welcomed the Home Office's #YouAreNotAlone campaign and we saw an increase in the number of emails to our advice line compared to normal and a decrease in phone calls, so we were pleased women knew they could still reach us even when it was not safe for them to make a phone call.
7. It was frustrating however, that despite sustained media coverage of domestic abuse and a new awareness among the public – experienced as an increase in individual donations to our charity compared to pre-Covid-19 – the message has not been routinely delivered by Government ministers and spokespeople at the daily press briefings, in the media rounds or in Parliament. It was not until the third lockdown was announced on 4 January 2021 that the Prime Minister delivered the message that people could leave their home if at risk of harm including domestic when he announced the new measures imposed from 5 January².
8. On the 19 December 2020 during his announcement that large swathes of the country would now be in tier 4 and tighter Christmas restrictions in place across the entire country in light of the new variant of Coronavirus, the Prime Minister referenced "limited exemptions" to the law requiring everyone to stay at home³. Christmas is historically a period when levels of abuse can surge and this year it was exacerbated by the restrictive measures, so we were disappointed at the omission in this key public announcement. Police records released in mid-January indicated that incidents indeed reached record levels this Christmas⁴.

The Home Office's subsequent launch of its partnership with pharmacies was another welcome step, and we do not underestimate how hard Home Office officers and partners

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-19-december-2020>

⁴ <https://www.itv.com/news/2021-01-14/he-used-to-punch-me-while-i-was-asleep-domestic-abuse-cases-rise-to-record-high-over-christmas>

including SafeLives and Hestia have worked to make it happen. We do however have some concerns about the capacity of VAWG services to support them as pharmacies refer women to us when they come forward, and about the way schemes like this are publicised by the Government, which could alert perpetrators as well as survivors.

Funding and commissioning

9. The Government's announcement of £76 million in emergency funding for domestic abuse charities was welcome. Through MOPAC we were able to access funding to set up the emergency hostel, extended until June 2021, and add additional capacity to Ascent Advice and Counselling up to March 2021. However, the Government's response to the Committee's previous report accounted for a proportion of the funding but explained that the rest had been allocated across Government departments without any further detail. The Minister for Safeguarding was asked about how much of the funding had reached the frontline in Parliament in January and was unable to provide any more detail. One concern we and other services have had is that any of the emergency funding received up to now must be spent by the end of March, which is also when a significant number of our service contracts come to an end, creating a potential cliff edge for service users.
10. Despite now being in the third and potentially the longest lockdown, commencing 5th January, there were no further announcements for emergency funding until the end of January to meet the ongoing and increasingly complex needs of people living with abuse and violence under extreme circumstances. While the Ministry of Justice only this week announced a further £40 million from April 2021, we have not yet received details of how the funding will be allocated and we are less than two months from the end of March.
11. Spikes in calls to our advice line and referrals to services have fluctuated since the first spike just before the first lockdown commenced. We experienced a second increase when restrictions lifted in April but it was not sustained over the summer months. However, we saw another increase in September indicating that children going to school may be a window of opportunity for survivors to seek help. We can anticipate that a similar increase in calls to specialist services could take place when restrictions lift and schools return.
12. The calls we have been receiving in recent months and throughout the pandemic through our advice line, echoed by other organisations in the Ascent Advice and Counselling partnership, are often from women in greater distress and with higher needs, including an increase in suicidal ideation. Someone who may have called their caseworker on a weekly basis is now calling daily for support. The increased complexity and needs of callers means that the advice line is unable to support as many women despite an increase in demand. Referrals to our counselling services have seen a 100% increase and several of our partners have had to close their waiting lists meaning there is a significant backlog in people needing support (even before any restrictions are lifted and any potential surge in contact that may lead to).
13. The impact of this increased demand and the complexity of the needs of survivors is also having an impact on those frontline workers in the domestic abuse sector. Our staff have been tremendous throughout the adjustments we have had to make to services to follow Government guidance as it has changed at different points over the past year. Like many working in frontline services supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society

while at the same time handling the impact of the pandemic on their own loved ones and mental health, our staff are stretched, and we risk burn-out in the people providing our core life-saving services without sustainable funding for increased capacity.

14. We are grateful that a lot of the local and regional commissioners we work with have extended their current contracts by a year to avoid a cliff edge in April 2021. But while very welcome in the context of the ongoing uncertainty about the lockdown restrictions, the vaccine roll out and the timing of the full implementation of the Domestic Abuse Bill, we now risk another cliff edge this time next year while dealing with the impact of at least a year of conditions that have exacerbated abuse and violence and affected staff mental health and wellbeing in direct and indirect ways.
15. We reiterate your recommendation that the Government needs a cross-Departmental strategy to address the ongoing impact of restrictions and prepare for the lifting of restrictions with the three commissioners, sector organisations and councils. This should include additional funding to councils, ring-fenced for domestic abuse services currently commissioned until March 2021, and to run into April 2021 so that we can ensure we have sufficient case workers, specialist advisors, counsellors and advocates in place by the time restrictions begin to lift and schools reopen – whenever that is. The funding should be unrestricted so that we can respond to the needs of survivors rather than meet sometimes arbitrary targets.
16. The Treasury announced a funding package in its 2020-21 spending review for councils to deliver on the new duty to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation in the Domestic Abuse Bill. However, the Bill is still making its way through the House of Lords and is not expected to receive Royal Assent until the Spring. This leaves significant uncertainty for both local authorities and specialist services they fund. We would recommend that guidance on the duty is published as soon as possible and that councils are given sufficient funding to meet the needs of their local area.
17. Until this week, there were no funding announced for funding community-based services, which support the majority of survivors, post March 2021. While the recent announcements are welcome, it risks simply being another sticking plaster unless the Government adopts key amendments to the Bill to widen the duty to include community-based services and avoid a two-tier system, and to extend protections in the Bill to migrant women.
18. The running of the crisis emergency project, funded by MOPAC, led to a number of lessons learned on how to fund support for women fleeing domestic abuse in the future. We recommend the following elements of the funding model for the hostel be replicated for services beyond the pandemic: funding both the accommodation and the support element for a short period, which women with NRPF can access. The ability to provide dedicated space to women with no recourse to public funds in the emergency hostel we run with Southall Black Sisters has given those women the time and support they need to obtain a domestic violence destitution concession and move into a standard refuge for further support.

Housing need and statutory agencies' response

19. Prior to the pandemic London was the epicentre of the national housing crisis and supporting the 71% of our service users who have a housing need had become

increasingly challenging. We conducted research over the summer of 2019 including a survey of around 100 women, and found that 30% of women seeking shelter were turned away six times or more; 53% of women who had secure tenancies lost them after fleeing abuse and 62% of those seeking help from a local authority had a bad experience⁵. Under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018, the prevent and relief duties local authorities have should have improved survivors' experiences of making housing application when made homeless through domestic and sexual abuse.

20. There are some councils that have demonstrated real leadership in supporting survivors of VAWG and have excellent practice. But the scarcity of social and affordable housing in London had also led to housing officers in many areas increasingly gatekeeping and at times gaslighting rather than supporting survivors.
21. In spite of the increased awareness of domestic abuse during the first lockdown and the measures taken by the Government to support survivors as well as the emphasis on housing homeless people through 'Everyone In', negative experiences of women and their advocates with housing officers have been exacerbated by lockdown in many local areas rather than ameliorated by it. Women making applications to housing departments have been told to return to perpetrators by housing officers; they have had the police called to verify their description of events; and some have even had perpetrators called directly by housing officers, putting them in greater danger if they were to return.

A Solace Independent Domestic Abuse Advisor (IDVA) was working with Janet*, who had been made homeless through domestic abuse and violence and assessed as high risk. Janet's alleged perpetrator of abuse was on police bail having been charged. The IDVA supported Janet to make a homelessness application and was phoned by a Housing Officer who talked Janet into saying she was not experiencing domestic violence "right now" and didn't therefore need to make the application. The Housing Officer then told our IDVA that Janet hadn't disclosed domestic violence to them and did not meet the criteria for council provided accommodation.

A male survivor Simon* was supported by one of our IDVAs had been told by a housing department that he was not priority need. He was refused temporary accommodation and inappropriately referred to homelessness charities. After our IDVA sent the housing department several emails asserting Simon's rights to accommodation under the Housing Act 1996, a housing officer replied and said he had been offered and refused temporary accommodation. This was simply untrue but the case was bounced between housing advisers and housing officers with no accountability. Solace funded a hotel for Simon, who was desperate having sofa surfed for several days, using unrestricted funds from public donations.

*names changed

CASE STUDIES

22. We have also supported women who have been moved into temporary accommodation that is not fit for purpose. Survivors and their children are left to sleep on floors, left

⁵ <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/get-informed/professional-resources/safe-houses-report-how-system-failing-women-and-children-fleeing>

hungry and lacking facilities to prepare food. Women who leave their abuser with almost nothing are placed in housing without essentials like beds, fridges and sofas. Solace alone has supplied basic furniture for 150 women who have been provided accommodation after fleeing their abuser and two women returned to refuges having been placed in damp or inappropriate housing last year.

23. Provisions in the Domestic Abuse Bill, including the amendment to automatically make people made homeless through domestic abuse priority need for housing, should address some of the issues we have experienced. But we are calling for the Bill to go further and to ensure that survivors are given the highest banding/points so that their priority status translates into provision of a new home. We also remain concerned that given that housing officers are not fulfilling existing duties in all areas the new laws will not help as many women and children as they should. We are therefore calling for clear communication and guidance from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to lead from the top in the same way the Home Secretary led the Governments #YouAreNotAlone campaign. Access to unrestricted funding would also us the crucial flexibility to do what is needed at a time of crisis for our clients.

Short-, medium- and long-term strategies

24. While much of the work on the Bill and on the Home Office's refreshed cross-Government VAWG strategy was paused during lockdown for understandable reasons, work on both is now pushing forward but we are concerned that the Government is pursuing them without taking into account the changing and increasing strains on the system. The lasting impact of the abuse women and children and some men are experiencing now will be felt for months and years.
25. The average length of time women in Solace services experienced their current abuse is 6 years and 4 months. As we are now looking at double dip recession, and further job losses when the furlough scheme ends in March, we are facing further exacerbation of the conditions associated with an increase in VAWG and when survivors do get support, their needs are likely to be higher and more complex for some time.
26. We therefore echo the Committee's previous recommendation for an ongoing strategy, which should be reflected in the Home Office's longer term VAWG strategy, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's planning for the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Bill, and in the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England's long-term plan for mental health provision. All of these strategies should prioritise safe accommodation, community- based support, and a range of counselling and therapies for women and children to recover and rebuild their lives.

February 2021