

Dame Vera Baird QC

Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales

Office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales
5th Floor, 70 Petty France
London SW1H 9EX

e: victims.commissioner@victimscommissioner.org.uk

Rt.Hon.Boris Johnson MP
Sent by email

Dear Prime Minister,

Protecting Victims of Domestic Abuse During the Coronavirus Pandemic

We all recognise the Government must introduce emergency measures to protect those who are vulnerable to coronavirus and to ensure that services are not overwhelmed. Nevertheless, I have concerns about the impact these measures may have on victims of crime and in particular, victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

As Victims' Commissioner, I would like to draw to your attention to these and offer tentative solutions,

Early evidence from China suggests that in lockdown conditions, the isolation of families, could lead to the doubling of the number of victims of domestic abuse. Previous crises suggest that this is not a new pattern. For example, according to a recent article, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, saw a 13% increase in calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline from the Gulf area from April to June 2010. New Orleans and Lafayette, two of the largest communities affected by the spill, saw increases to their hotlines of 81% and 116%, respectively, during that same period. Reported in the same article, Hurricane Katrina saw domestic assaults against women nearly double, and both men and women reported increases of psychological abuse.

Obviously, the isolation of families is necessary to contain the spread of the virus, but we need to recognise and address the potential dangers of thousands of adult and child victims of abuse being locked in with their perpetrators for potentially a period of months.

Equally, we know victims of sexual assault often suffer acute trauma in the immediate aftermath of their ordeal. It is hard to overstate the need for personal and face-to-face support when they report the crime. Access to this will have significant impact on their long term recovery and their engagement with the criminal justice system. This support cannot be provided over skype or on line.

Along with others in the charitable sector dealing with domestic abuse and sexual assault, as well as my colleague the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, I would strongly encourage the Government to consider the following actions:

- Ensure domestic abuse and sexual assault professionals are included as part of contingency planning, helping local domestic abuse and sexual assault services to replace loss of capacity as staff find themselves ill or in isolation.
- Include domestic abuse, sexual assault and indeed all victim support professionals in the list of key workers. The majority of workers in this sector are women and more likely to have responsibility for dependent children, so it is vital that they can access childcare as they continue to work to support those who may be facing serious harm or devastating trauma. If this is not acted upon, the whole area of victim support faces a perfect storm of a surge in demand and a lack of face to face engagement at a time when support workers are all forced to reduce their hours or not work in order to look after their children who cannot get to school or nursery.
- Additional funding for specialist domestic abuse services in particular, so that services can absorb the likely increase in demand, and extra funding to the national domestic abuse helpline, including expanding online access to support services.
- Production of Public Health England guidance for statutory agencies on how to support domestic abuse victims and child victims who are self-isolating or otherwise endangered by the current pandemic.
- Refuges and Rape Support Centres to be given access to testing kits to help identify the virus early, so that they can isolate those who tested positive.

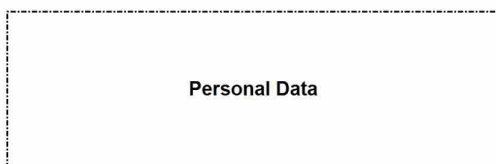
It is also important for the Government to send a clear message that the Police will not allow the pandemic to downgrade tolerance of domestic abuse or sexual crime.

At a fraught and difficult time for everyone in government and public services, I ask that the vulnerabilities of this section of the public are not forgotten and that the resources are made available to keep them safe and supported.

A copy of this letter has been sent to the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and ministers responsible for victims and vulnerabilities.

In line with my usual practice, a copy of this letter has been placed on my website.

Yours sincerely



Dame Vera Baird QC
Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales

CC: Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor, Alex Chalk MP & Victoria Atkins MP