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SCS: Krisztina Katona  
I&S

To:  
1. Home Secretary  
2. Minister for Safeguarding

Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020

## **Action Plan for Domestic Abuse and COVID-19**

### Issue:

You requested an action plan and gap analysis for cross government work on domestic abuse during COVID-19. This note also provides an update on our previous submission with a potential announcement of funding, the latest information from partners and a chart to show where responsibility lies between various departments.

### Timing:

Pressing. A speedy response will allow us to finalise arrangements for an announcement and implement the plan as quickly as possible.

### Overview:

As you can see from the action plan there is significant cross government work ongoing which is being co-ordinated on a weekly basis both at official level and with stakeholders with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner as a focal point.

This is allowing us to surface and mitigate both longer term risks such as funding as well as shorter term issues that can be fixed more easily and will emerge on an ongoing basis.

Key points to note are:

- Initial feedback from police and stakeholders does not yet show a clear increase in domestic abuse. This may be because victims are finding it harder to ask for help because they are trapped with their abusers.
- We are therefore also looking at ways to support more covert routes eg online chat, apps and possibly code words. We recommend announcing £1-2m of funding from existing budgets to support this work and broader IT capability in the sector. (Although we would need to be careful about publicising the covert work to avoid perpetrators exploiting it.)

- We are also in talks with Fujitsu who may be prepared to offer some free laptops and IT advice to domestic abuse charities. We have linked into their press team in case they would be interested in being part of the potential funding announcement next week.
- Communications activity will be key to supporting victims, your (Home Secretary) op ed was well received and Annex D contains more potential planned activities.
- We are also reaching outside government to pharmacists, supermarkets, NHS volunteers, technology companies and employers to boost support.
- We are also continuing with business as usual such as the Domestic Abuse Bill (you and the Justice Secretary have a draft letter to send to PBL Committee to unblock Second Reading). Careful monitoring of the resilience of the domestic abuse sector is vital not just to maintain services during the COVID-19 period but also to ensure that the sector can support government's ambitious plans once the Bill is implemented.

#### Recommendations

- That you agree to provide additional funding for technological solutions to assist DA victims.
- That you agree to a formal announcement on this next week.
- That you note and agree the attached action plan.

#### Annexes

Annex A Gap analysis  
 Annex B Action plan  
 Annex C Timeline  
 Annex D Updated communications plan  
 Annex E Cross government responsibilities chart

## Discussion

### Strategic Aims:

1. **The text below and the action plan set out some of the key steps and approaches we are taking to achieve our desired outcomes.**
2. **Our overall aim is to mitigate the anticipated negative impacts on victims of domestic abuse during the social distancing period when victims and potential victims may be much more isolated and more vulnerable as a result.** Key priorities are therefore:-
  - to support and sustain the provider sector so that it can continue to support victims;
  - find novel ways of enhancing safeguards for victims eg chat rooms, code words and apps;
  - ensure that perpetrators continue to be pursued by the police and risk mitigation is considered wherever possible; and
  - develop and amplify effective communications to victims, perpetrators, the public and public service responders.

### Data:

3. **We are establishing a cross government data gathering process which will provide weekly updates on any increase in domestic abuse and monitor services' ability to support victims.** This will allow us to respond quickly and flexibly to changing needs. The data includes quantitative weekly data from police and helplines and regular data and surveys on refuge capacity as well as slower time data and qualitative feedback from local authorities, hospitals and victims.
4. **In the first week, available data does not yet indicate a clear increase in domestic abuse.** Helplines are reporting a decrease in calls but also evidence of an increase in online contacts, indicating that victims may find it harder to reach out for support while under lockdown with their abuser and that boosting online routes may be beneficial.

### Funding:

5. **We are starting to receive evidence on funding needs from helplines which at this stage largely relate to IT costs and increasing staffing to resource online channels.**
6. **A survey of 119 refuges and domestic abuse services by the charity Safelives indicates more pressing needs.** For example, 30% were experiencing staff shortage due to sickness or self-isolation and 16% were struggling with funding (this seemed more acute with the smaller organisations). 22% said that they could not effectively support adult

victims of domestic abuse at the moment and 42% said they could not properly support children.

**7. There is a range of possible options for supporting the sector immediately and in the longer term including:**

- a) Increasing HO funding to the sector specifically to improve their technology and availability of live chats/online facilities, remote working and use of apps. This is especially important at present given the difficulties of in person and even telephone contact. We could for example provide £1-2m for helplines and community services to bolster on line facilities, staffing of digital support and the increased use of specialist mobile phone apps for high risk victims. This could be met from existing budgets.
- b) Asking technology companies to donate IT, broadband and assistance to the sector to help implement digital solutions. Fujitsu indicate that they may be prepared to provide some laptops and also some IT consultancy expertise for free to domestic abuse charities. We would work with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to facilitate this between Fujitsu and the charities.
- c) Providing a larger package of up to £5m to encompass both the technological support in option (a) and to provide more general organisational funding for additional staffing, infrastructure or simply lost income replacement for running costs. This could also be covered from existing budgets but would significantly reduce our ability to introduce measures to support passage of the domestic abuse bill, Rape Review and VAWG strategy later in the year.
- d) We could explore if it is possible to find further funding to support for example specialist refuges. However, we do not have the funding in our budget to do this and we would not recommend this as MHCLG is likely to make an announcement on refuge funding shortly.
- e) Engaging with supermarkets, pharmacists, NHS volunteers etc to ensure they know how to respond if victims reach out to them.
- f) Working with employers to provide support as they are often the only remaining outside contact point for victims working from home.
- g) Setting up a code word that victims can use to indicate to the cohorts above that they need assistance. Some caution is needed here as if abusers find out about the word, it could put victims at risk.

**8. In terms of funding options at this stage we recommend option (a) on the basis that the need for this is much more clearly defined and there are a number of existing proposals for enhanced technological**



**provision which could be relatively quickly implemented.** We do not think it advisable to fund refugees directly which is a MHCLG responsibility. DCMS has also approached HMT for wider support to the charitable sector which may be a more appropriate source of general ongoing running cost funding at this stage.

- 9. We expect however that there will be ongoing emerging issues in both the short and longer term (with agencies predicting a sharp upturn in referrals for support as isolation conditions are lifted).** Reserving some funding would enable us to offer further targeted support at a later date when more evidence on need and maximum benefit may be available.

- 10. Option (a) would also assist us in getting money to organisations more quickly.** We would aim to work through existing grants with established partners – or using the existing government commercial framework, rather than having to establish new funding streams. Setting up a bigger funding pool into which organisations could competitively bid would be time consuming and bureaucratic for both the Department and provider organisations. It would also be a lengthy process and would not necessarily target the most urgent or important issues (all organisations big and small, would simply bid for additional funding and it would be difficult to distinguish the most worthy).

**RECOMMENDATION** If you agree option (a), an announcement of additional funding along these lines would be welcomed by the sector and could be the centre piece of wider general messaging about domestic abuse issues at this time. We could also explore with Fujitsu if they would be interested in making an announcement of support at the same time. **Do you agree?**

#### Refuges:

- 11. We are working with MHCLG and Safelives to understand where refuge needs are most acute.** Initial findings are that the smaller more specialised refuges are most at risk as they have smaller reserves and less resilience. It will be important to support refuges in the short term to ensure victims have somewhere to flee to and also to prevent the organisations collapsing as this would affect longer term support after the pandemic and as the domestic abuse bill progresses in parliament.

**12. Options for refuge funding are:**

- a. DCMS are approaching HMT for broad financial support for the voluntary sector. We and MHCLG have inputted into the cross government bid for domestic abuse.
- b. MHCLG ministers are minded to use some of their contingency funding for 20/21 to support refuges on a case by case evidence basis.
- c. Some refuges were also concerned that the majority of their income comes from housing benefit for victims. If they have to close the

refuge for only a few weeks then this income disappears. We could engage with DWP or HMT to see if there is any way of maintaining this income for a short period of time.

Other support for services:

**13. You (Minister for Safeguarding) held calls with some of the domestic abuse charities this week who raised a number of issues which we have added to the action plan and could be relatively quick wins.**

- a. Writing to Royal Mail to ensure that mail for victims which is sent to refuge PO boxes can be picked up. Currently this is an issue as victims cannot get access to letters on housing benefit, court cases etc as Royal Mail have closed some of their pick-up points. We have provided you (Minister for Safeguarding) with a letter to Royal Mail's CEO to address this.
- b. Increasing capacity for refuges by using the new Cabinet Office process for booking hotel rooms. MHCLG are leading on this although we need to be cautious as domestic abuse victims have greater security needs than for example rough sleepers or NHS workers.
- c. There are some issues that domestic abuse workers cannot access school/nursery provision for key workers. (50% of respondents to the Safelives survey cited this as a problem). You (Minister for Safeguarding) agreed to engage with DfE to seek to resolve this.

**Financial implications:**

**14. This submission does not recommend asking HMT for additional funding.**

**15. The recommended funding option can be funded from within the Public Protection Unit's 20/21 allocation.**

**16. Options for any further funding would need to be explored further as they would create unfunded pressures for the CPFG or broader HO budget.**

**17. We will provide further advice detailing funding options/choices and the implications of these, as the situation develops.**

**Commercial implications:**

**18. If funding is to be announced imminently and sent to stakeholders for immediate use, Commercial recommend the simplest way of doing this is by directly funding organisations with existing agreements. For example, this could include amending or updating**

existing agreements to provide an uplift in funding (such as with Refuge, who run the national helpline).

- 19. Running an open competition for funding (such as for a larger amount of £5m) is time-consuming, given the requirement for bids to be received, assessed and evaluated, which will mean that we are delayed in getting support to those that need it.**
- 20. Other alternative routes that could be explored include re-using extant arrangements owned by Government Digital Services, Crown Commercial Services and/or Government Communications Service.** All of these would provide easy access through existing frameworks.

#### **Communications:**

- 21. Over the last week, there has been increasing media interest in how domestic abuse victims have been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.** While the Home Secretary's op-ed was positively reported and well received by the charitable sector, there have been recent calls in the media for more funding, especially for refuge places. The Health Minister was asked at yesterday's (2<sup>nd</sup> April) press conference what the government was doing to protect victims of domestic abuse following a spike in calls to helplines. The Health Minister responded that he will look at "all measures to keep people safe". The Telegraph is also expected to report comments made by the Victims Commissioner Vera Baird who said that the government needs to take action to address a number of concerns including:
- a. Victims think services are closed so PCCs and victim services etc need big promotion campaign
  - b. Schools think DA and rape crisis workers are not key workers
  - c. Charities also lack resources and can't do the fundraising that is their lifeblood
  - d. Some small refuges have closed because they cannot do social distancing or have ill staff
  - e. Government urged to consider use of hotels as safe houses
- 22. 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.**
- 23. Home Office comms therefore recommend that you (Home Secretary) make an announcement on the lines set out at paragraph 10. We could announce:**
- That you will increase funding to the sector to improve technology and online support services

- That you are working with other departments to provide more funding for refuges
- A commitment to look at what more funding may be needed

**Messaging would emphasise that the Government's priority during this crisis is to save lives and protect the vulnerable, and that this announcement is immediate support, with further measures being considered.** That includes saving the lives of and protecting potential domestic abuse victims and that you (Home Secretary) and Safeguarding Minister 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.

**24. 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.** Subject to timely sign off and agreement with No10, we also understand there is a possibility that you (Home Secretary) may reference increased DA funding or allude to possible funding in the No10 press conference. In the immediate term comms will focus on using social media and Gov.uk to signpost victims and key audiences to existing advice and support to keep them safe.

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

**26. Press Office will continue to liaise with other government departments and co-ordinate any announcements around domestic abuse into a larger government package of measures.**

### Copy List

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



## **Annex D: 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:

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

### **Audiences**

#### **Primary**

- 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

#### **Secondary**

- Perpetrators who are willing to seek support

#### **Wider messengers to raise awareness**

- Front line officers (being addressed by local forces).
- Charity sector including victims' groups
- Employers of potential victims
- Retailers consortium and pharmacies association
- (NHS volunteers)
- 

### **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 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

NPCC have worked with charities to provide posters and leaflets for distribution to local retailers, such as supermarkets and pharmacists. These will highlight charity helpline numbers for victims. These have been sent to all police forces to distribute.	NPCC
Guidance has been sent to all officers on continuing to support victims of Domestic abuse and media has emphasised that response to DA continues to be business as usual. Local forces are promoting webchat capabilities.	
One-page leaflet offering advice to victims and signposting to relevant support	HO

**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:**

3. Announce an enhanced package of financial support for charities and refuges. If 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.
4. Amplifying existing content from stakeholders, key charities and other government departments via social media.
5. Create our own social media assets highlighting ongoing Government action (inc DA Bill measures) and support for victims of domestic abuse.
6. Work with stakeholders and charities to understand emerging trends and demand relating to domestic abuse.
7. 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)**

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
  - Employers to share with staff that may be working at home.
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.