

Witness Name: Rebecca Goshawk

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 12

Dated: 17/02/2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF REBECCA GOSHAWK, SOLACE WOMEN'S AID

I, Rebecca Goshawk, will say as follows: -

1. I am Head of Public Affairs and Partnerships at Solace Women's Aid. I make this statement in response to the Request for Evidence by the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 (Reference: M1/SWA/01).
2. In accordance with the request, my statement will speak to the state of the UK's pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience, at the time that the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

Brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation

3. Solace Women's Aid ("SWA") was established over 48 years ago and is one of the single largest providers of services to help end gender-based violence.
4. SWA's vision is a world where everyone is able to live safe and independent lives which are free from gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation.
5. Their mission is to end the harm done through gender-based violence and to work alongside survivors to achieve independent lives free from abuse. Their aim is to work to prevent violence and abuse as well as providing services to meet the individual needs of survivors, particularly women, young people and children.

SWA's key objective is the promotion of the physical, emotional and psychological well-being and safety of victims of domestic, sexual and associated abuse.

6. The legal status of SWA is as a registered charity and company limited by guarantee.
7. The work of SWA is England wide. SWA's services are concentrated in London, and our services include refuge and move on accommodation; community-based services; therapeutic services; North London Rape Crisis Centre; specialist provision for children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse or sexual violence; accommodation and support for victim/survivors who have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage; advice lines; prevention work with children and young people; and bespoke training for statutory agencies, third sector organisations and corporations.
8. SWA supports individuals who are survivors of abuse, particularly women, young people and children. We have an inclusive definition of women to include trans women. Our services seek to support and represent trans women and non-binary people. We support survivors experiencing homelessness and those who have No Recourse to Public Funds ("NRPF"). They support migrant women, women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Many of those SWA support face intersectional discrimination and come from working-class households. They also commonly suffer from poor mental and physical health as a result of the abuse they have suffered. In the Inquiry, SWA seeks to represent the viewpoints of all of the above.

Lack of emergency planning and pandemic preparedness in relation to violence against women and girls (VAWG)

9. SWA believe there was a lack of planning, preparation and funding by government to deal with the foreseeable consequences of locking-down women in homes with their perpetrators. In early 2020, when the UK Cabinet were undertaking preparatory steps for a likely spread of Covid-19 in the UK, and when they were considering the lockdown of the UK, a rapid increase in domestic abuse levels was

being documented in countries who had already locked-down and was being reported in the UK media. China saw a threefold increase in domestic abuse cases during the Covid-19 outbreak. Stark statistics were also coming from France. On 28 March 2020 France's interior minister said that reports of domestic abuse across the country had jumped by more than 30% since the country went into lockdown on March 17 2020. In Paris alone, cases were up by 36%. As such, even on the basis of the early international evidence of lockdowns, the rapid increase in VAWG was clearly predictable. Nonetheless, the Government seemingly ignored international experience as well as domestic expertise when decision making.

10. Like many in the VAWG sector, we saw an increase in calls and email to our helpline and foresaw the lack of movement in the temporary accommodation section 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. By the time survivors has been locked down for 4-5 weeks, we were getting double the usual number of enquiries per refuge space that became available (from two enquiries to four enquiries per refuge space).
11. In addition to the dramatic increase in the number of referrals to our service since the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the complexity of those cases also increased. They were often in greater distress with more complex needs, including increases in suicidal ideation. People who may have called their caseworker on a weekly basis began to call daily for support. This put greater strain on our staff and our service capacity, and the advice line was unable to support as many women despite an increase in demand.
12. The UK went into lockdown on 23 March 2020. On 26 March 2020, The Guardian ran with the headline 'Warning over rise in UK domestic abuse cases linked to coronavirus' (RG/1). Yet, the Government failed to provide emergency funding to SWA and others in the sector until 2nd May 2020, following the threat of a legal challenge by SWA and Southall Black Sisters. Similarly, there was a lack of consideration as to the need to increase resourcing of much-needed mental health and therapeutic support services for survivors when decision-making. The government were forced to act, as opposed to considering needs prior to decision-

making, allowing for provisions to be made available. There appeared to be no reflection and collection of data to analyse the increase of domestic abuse in the UK during lockdowns. Doing so in the first lockdown could have helped Cabinet decision making in subsequent second and third lockdowns

13. In addition to the above, we are not aware of any engagement between the VAWG sector and government regarding the extent to which inequalities and vulnerabilities should be factored into emergency preparedness and pandemic planning in the UK prior to January 2020. This further suggests that the government did not consider VAWG within their risk management and emergency planning procedures. If experts in the field had been consulted, such as SWA and other organisations responding to VAWG, the issues outlined above could have been foreseen, pre-empted and mitigated against.

Lack of clear messaging in relation to VAWG

14. The government's lack of preparedness was compounded by unclear messaging in relation to VAWG in the period of January 2020 to February 2022. 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 the home. It was frustrating, however, that despite sustained media coverage of domestic abuse and a new awareness among the public, the message had not been routinely delivered in government press briefings, 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 abuse.
15. 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 home, but did not explicitly reference people subjected to abuse at home. 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 Christmas.

16. The Home Office's subsequent launch of its partnership with pharmacies was a welcome step. 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.
17. In absence of this SWA along with other VAWG groups wrote to the government on 3 April 2020 calling for "Strong public messaging and guidance on VAWG" including clear statements that "violence and abuse will not be tolerated", that there should be "specific advice for those who experience harm at home" and that "all government communications, including the daily press conference, should be translated into a range of languages, including British Sign Language and be made available in easy read formats" (RG/2). Subsequently, the government announced a public campaign highlighting domestic abuse, under the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone, on 11 April 2020. SWA are unsure the extent to which translations were made available. Once again, SWA believe that if experts in the field were consulted at the material time prior to lockdown, issues like these could have been pre-empted and mitigated against.

Lack of planning in relation to funding for VAWG

18. The Government's announcement of £76 million in emergency funding for domestic abuse was welcome. However, as discussed above, this was provided only following the threat of legal action and following months of urgent calls from the VAWG sector. By the time funding was announced, services were already overcapacity and there were many women who had not received the urgent support they needed and/or faced delays to support as a result. It also remains unclear how much of this funding reached the frontline via support services. In the government's response to the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on Covid-19 preparedness, the government only 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 2021 and was unable to provide any more detail.

19. There were also delays on announcements around fundings at later stages of the pandemic. Further funding was not announced until February 2021 when the UK was facing it's third and longest lockdown. This funding was welcome to support the ongoing work from April 2021 onwards, but information on how the funding would be allocated was not provided until very close to the funding window starting. There were also considerable delay to announcements of additional funding for community-based services which support the majority of survivors. As a result, there was considerable uncertainty in the sector which detrimentally affected our own ability to plan and deliver our service to as many victim-survivors as possible, including complex cases. The delays in decision-making around funding and lack of clarity in the details demonstrated that, even a year after the pandemic struck, the government was acting reactively and with insufficient urgency to the evolving situation, rather than acting on effective planning and adapting to the urgency of the sector's needs promptly. We feel if the government's emergency planning had been more effective and, in particular, if it had taken on board the expertise in the VAWG sector and the experiences that frontline services were facing, the strain and shortfall in the service could have been mitigated. If more consideration of what impact NPI measures would have on domestic abuse rates had taken place at preparedness stage, funding may have been allocated quicker and more appropriately to services.

Lack of consideration of the disproportionate impact of VAWG on women with NRPF status

20. SWA has concerns that the acute hardship suffered by migrant women with NRPF (the majority of those from black and ethnic minority communities) impacted further by the pandemic, was not considered or acted upon by the Government. That is, in their initial decision-making, or subsequent decision-making throughout January 2020 – Spring 2022. SWA believes if these women, and any persons with NRPF in the UK, were properly considered then NRPF conditions should have been lifted

during the pandemic, to allow access to at least 3 month's benefit to relieve their acute hardship.

21. SWA believe, as a minimum, that consideration should have been given to the limitations of the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession ('DDVC') which enables those (with NRPF) who might be able to apply for leave to remain under the Domestic Violence Rule ('DVR') access to public funds while they submit their application. The DVR only applies to those on partner visas and not those on other types of visas. This left a number of women experiencing domestic abuse unable to apply for the DVR as they were in the UK on non-partner visas. At the very least, SWA believe the DVR should have been extended to all visa types during the pandemic.
22. Finally, in relation to migrant women SWA support, consideration should have been given to considering how to ensure funding would reach these migrant survivors who are generally harder to access. Actions, such as those documented above, would have ensured migrant women with NRPF would have access to public funds as an emergency measure to allow them to escape abuse during the pandemic. Yet no action was forthcoming, despite warnings from the Local Government Association.

Housing need and statutory agencies

23. The lack of clear messaging was also evident at the local government and statutory service level, and many women we supported faced considerable gatekeeping from local authority housing departments when fleeing domestic abuse. This problem preceded the pandemic and was not addressed despite the increased need. 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 experience (RG/3).
24. This situation is, in part, a product of the national housing crisis as the severe shortage 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. 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.

Lack of consideration given to those living in domestic abuse refuges

25. Around March 2020 the Government published guidance for refuges during the pandemic. This was welcomed, given the close proximity of living conditions in refuges. It is normal for families to live in one room and for three families to share a bathroom and kitchen. However, this guidance published early in the pandemic was not updated throughout the period in question. By comparison, the guidance for commissioners and providers of hostel services for people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping was updated. This points to a lack of adequate consideration of this group living in overcrowded and cramped conditions.
26. There was also a lack of clarity about whether refuge workers were able to gain access to test and trace equipment, PPE and early vaccination, despite working in close proximity and playing a social care role. Initially domestic abuse providers had to enquire with individual local authorities or health authorities to get clarity on whether they were eligible for testing and vaccinations in line with health and social care staff. When lateral flow testing (LFT) became available SWA had to approach individual public health departments to access them for their staff. Some local authorities supported access to LFTs where as others were not allowing refuge and outreach workers access to these services. There was a lack of clear instruction from the UK Government on access to tests which led to an inconsistency approach across SWA's London services which is likely to be replicated in other parts of the country. Vaccination status was later clarified by

NHS England in a letter to homelessness services on 2 February 2021 however this was following advocacy from organisations at a national and local level.

Lack of consideration of the impact on the workforce of the VAWG sector

27. During lockdown, SWA saw an increase in women contacting them for support during the pandemic and that those contacting them were often in more urgent and unsafe situations or had a range of complex needs which required increased levels of support. This led to SWA's frontline team facing increased pressures to meet the needs of people contacting them and were having to work for longer periods with women to support them.
28. Whilst refuge staff were often still on site, many SWA workers had to continue this traumatic work in their own homes and the increased case complexity impacted their work-life boundaries. Organisations sought to put steps in place to support the wellbeing of their workforce, despite stretched budgets, but additional funding was needed to increase the capacity of the sector. Whilst additional funds were provided by government following legal pressure, they did not match the increased need and it took four months and the creation of four different complex funding streams to deliver emergency funding to frontline VAWG services. This funding often took longer to get to frontline organisations to allow them to increase their capacity.
29. SWA and other specialist organisations employ nearly all women to deliver their services and therefore the pressure on these services and their staff was gendered. This was further exacerbated by the highly gendered impact of the wider pandemic including women taking on more caring responsibilities in the home and being more likely to be in low paid keyworker roles or insecurely employed. These pre-existing inequalities for a largely female workforce were not taken into account.

Summary of actions that ought to have been taken

30. As discussed above, there are a number of areas in which the government's emergency preparedness was lacking. We suggest the following actions which

would have built greater resilience into sector and improve the response, though this list should not be considered exhaustive:

a) Consultation and engagement with VAWG sector prior and during pandemic:

There was extensive expertise and experience in the VAWG sector which was available to the government to draw on. Had there been greater engagement with those responding to VAWG prior to the pandemic and during its escalation, pre-emptive plans could have been put in place and many of the risks could have been mitigated. This may well have translated into a reduction in the number of women that experienced and/or remained in domestic abuse situations in real terms. Consultation with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victim's Commissioner in both early consultation and decision making around emergency preparedness should have been undertaken.

b) Proper funding of both statutory and VAWG services, and prompt information about the details of funding plans:

As discussed, we welcomed the additional funding that was provided during the escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the funding was insufficient to meet the full demand; additional funding was delayed and required the threat of legal challenge for action to be taken; the details of funding allocation was unclear and restrictions on spending prevented us from effectively responding to the emergency; and related need for additional funding of statutory services, including housing, was not recognised. Emergency funding ought to have been included in planning prior to pandemic, and should have been adaptive to the evolving needs of the situation. It is particularly crucial that these funds reach those needs the groups that support the most marginalised including Black and minoritised, disabled, LGBT+, survivors of domestic abuse. This should be done by ensuring that national and local funding reaches led 'by and for' organisations supporting these groups.

c) Clearer messaging and communications plans on domestic abuse support and exemptions to NPI measures:

The messaging around domestic abuse in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic ought to have been clearer. For example, government representatives at all levels should

have stated early, clearly and regularly that lockdown rules did not apply to those fleeing domestic abuse. There should have also been promotion of support services through government communication channels alongside any exemptions from restrictions from the beginning of the NPI measures. The statutory rights of those fleeing domestic abuse should have also been made clear to housing officers, through training or other means, to ensure that victim-survivors were not turned away from essential support services at a time when they had limited options for alternative safe accommodation such as with family and friends. If stay at home or travel restrictions are implemented for future pandemics, it should be clearly and consistently highlight that there are exemptions for where home is not safe and for domestic abuse survivors to seek support from the start of the communications about such restrictions.

d) Suspension of NRPF conditions and broadening of DDVC

NRPF conditions ought to have been suspended after the pandemic struck and the policy reviewed overall to mitigate the disproportionate vulnerability to violence and barriers to escape that this policy creates for women with NRPF status. The DDVC ought to have been expanded to include people on all visas.

e) Greater consideration for trans women and non-binary communities

There ought to have been greater consideration for the needs of trans women and non-binary experiencing domestic abuse and the specialist services required to protect and support them.

f) Automatic recognition of domestic workers in refuge and community services as frontline health and social care workers to ensure so they have access to PPE, testing and vaccinations.

g) Joint support and collaborative between public, third sector and private sector bodies should be encouraged, and built into preparation plans. Solace was able to work in partnership with private sector organisations to provide significantly discounted accommodation provision to host emergency accommodation services

for domestic abuse survivors, and local and national governments can play a role in coordinating this.

- h) Ensure that there are sufficient plans for an increase in refuge and safe accommodation options for people fleeing domestic abuse when 'stay at home' orders, travel restrictions or closure of support services is a likely response in future pandemics. Solace and SBS with significant support from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime were able to mobilise a 70 bed safe accommodation project in May 2020 which ran until November 2021. The consistent need for these additional bed spaces showed the importance of additional safe accommodation provision due to increased domestic abuse, the lack of alternative places for women to flee and that bed spaces in existing provision were not becoming available due to a lack of move on options for survivors.

SWA's correspondence and engagement with the government

- 31. We had no engagement with Government regarding the extent to which inequalities and vulnerabilities should be factored into emergency preparedness and pandemic planning in the UK prior to January 2020.
- 32. From January 2020 onwards, SWA were active in publishing articles, writing to Government, contributing to reports and publications and participating in legal challenges. Listed here:
 - a) Letter on behalf of SBS and Solace Women's Aid regarding Covid-19 – Measures Urgently Required to Protect and Support Domestic Abuse Survivors, dated 31 March 2020 (RG/4)
 - b) Joint letter to the Prime Minister from VAWG sector organisations including recommendations for individual departments, dated 3 April 2020 (a response was not received from a minister until October 2020)
 - c) Easing of Coronavirus Restrictions: Joint Statement from VAWG sector organisations, dated 8 July 2020 (RG/5)

- d) Violence against women and girls, housing and homelessness: A joined up strategy report (RG/6)
- e) Solace and Justice Studio report on Covid-19 lockdown and domestic abuse (RG/7)
- f) Written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (RG/8)
- g) Written evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee on Covid-19: Housing for Rough Sleepers (RG/9)
- h) Written evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights Committee on The Government's response to covid-19: human rights implications (RG/10)
- i) 'The Government's 2021-24 VAWG strategy must respond to the scale and impact of the parallel pandemic of VAWG' – written submissions to the Home Office for new cross-Government VAWG strategy 2021-2024 (RG/11)
- j) 'Solace calls for Women's Health Strategy to include VAWG' - written submissions to the Department of Health and Social Care in response to their call for evidence for a Women's Health Strategy (RG/12)

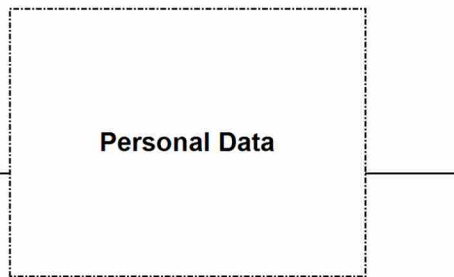
Other organisations that may hold relevant information to this module

33. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office are likely to have been an initial port of call for the Government on preparedness for the covid-19 pandemic, in relation to domestic abuse survivors and at a later stage acted as a conduit for engagement with the violence against women and girls sector. We would therefore recommend that they may hold relevant information about the above questions.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: __Rebecca Goshawk



Dated: ____17.02.2023_____