

27 May 2020

Weekly Update from the Domestic Abuse Sector

Background

1. Every week, Nicole Jacobs chairs a conference call with national helpline providers, second tier organisations, and Government Departments to share emerging trends, facilitate cross-sector working, and to escalate issues as required.

Helplines

2. **There continues to be increased demand across national helplines and most support services in comparison to pre-Covid levels, with an overall increase in demand of 66% on the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.** The following key issues were also noted:
 - a. **Calls continue to be complex and average call times are longer than pre-lockdown**, reflecting an increase in emotional support calls rather than those that provide practical advice. There also appeared to be more victims and survivors calling to make plans in advance for when restrictions ease.
 - b. **Changes in types of callers were noted** -increases in family, friends and neighbours calling on behalf of loved ones, with drops in calls from statutory services. Karma Nirvana saw a 25% overall increase in new single victim referrals, a 20% decrease in police referrals since pre-lockdown, and a significant decrease in referrals related to children, with none reported since the start of April.
 - c. **Continued increase in web traffic and live chat across the board** - this confirms the trend of victims using more discrete forms of technology to access services. Refuge noted a 950% overall increase since pre-lockdown, with an average of 3000 visits per day to their digital platform, whilst Women's Aid Federation England noted a 56% overall increase in demand for their live chat service since pre-lockdown, and Surviving Economic abuse saw a 46% increase in web visits in last week, making it the biggest week-on-week increase since the April lockdown extension.
 - d. **Some helplines have been receiving a significant number of harassing calls**, with Rights of Women noting a particular increase in recent weeks to average at around 1 call per hour. Other services confirmed a generally high level of harassment, which is now looking like a trend across the board may be a concerted effort to target helplines.

General Sector Updates and other issues:

3. **There was some continued concerns over over a lack of clarity about different funding streams from across Government.** In particular, the Ministry of Justice funding prospectus contained definitions which could lead to misallocation of funds, including the current definition of commissioned service as any organisation which has received any funding of any sort. The sector called for further thinking on this, and a greater flexibility with PCCs allocating two-thirds of funds to previously commissioned services and one-third of funds to non-commissioned services.
4. **The sector continued to emphasise the importance of allowing sufficient time for smaller organisations to respond to funding competitions**, with several several pointing out the lack of capacity within many frontline organisations.
5. **While Departments on the call confirmed that funding would need to be spent by the end of October, there were continued calls for this to be extended.** It is likely that a

surge in demand will extend long beyond the end of October, and for particular populations this could be even longer. For example, disabled victims and survivors who may be shielding may seek help well beyond the lifting of restrictions for the wider population.

6. **There has been significant increase in demand for refuges during lockdown**, with Women's Aid reporting an average of only 120 refuge vacancies during the first 7 weeks of lockdown, compared to 239 for the same period in 2019 across the UK as a whole.
7. **There was a significant decrease in refuge requests over the last week.** Refuge recorded 106 per week on average a few weeks ago, and only 79 in the last week. Notably, Refuge were unable to find a suitable refugee space of 1/3 of these, indicating a potential clog in the system which requires further investigation and work to unblock.
8. **The sector continues to urge housing providers and local authorities to work closely with local DA services to ensure that move-on accommodation is available to house survivors.** Luke Hall wrote to local authorities with the offer of a CCS service to pay and secure additional accommodation, and the sector encouraged MHCLG to ensure that all local services were aware of this opportunity.
9. **There were challenges reported in terms of translation and no recourse issues in refuges**, with one survivor turned away from 6 refuges who did not have the capacity to translate for her. There remain significant difficulties getting women with no recourse to public funds both into refuges and then into settled accommodation.
10. **There is support for utilising retailers to raise awareness of domestic abuse and provide a safe space for victims and survivors to seek support, provided it is implemented safely and effectively.** It remains essential to make sure this is consistent across geographical areas, and that it does not come with any additional safety risks. There were concerns about ensuring sufficient training is provided to any retail staff involved in this kind of scheme. In particular, the sector raised the risks of rushing implementation of a 'code word' scheme, which risks survivors receiving a poor response if they use the code word, potentially increasing their risk or putting them off seeking support in the future.

Attendees:

Sector: Refuge, Karma Nirvana, Women's Aid Federation England, Welsh Women's Aid, Respect, SafeLives, Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition, Galop, Rights of Women, Latin American Women Rights Service (as representatives of the Step Up Migrant Women Campaign), IRISi, Surviving Economic Abuse, The Employers' Initiative, Imkaan, Rape Crisis England & Wales

Government Officials: Association of PCCs, Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health and Social Care, Welsh Government, Local Government Association, National Police Chief's Council