

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Secretary of State

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

2 Marsham Street

London, SW1P 4DF

9 April 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Emergency funding: COVID 19

I am writing today to warmly welcome the government's funding announcement for charities supporting victims of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and to urge you to ensure that support reaches all frontline specialist domestic abuse services, including life-saving refuges, to ensure they can cope with the unprecedented challenge of COVID 19.

Women's Aid Federation of England has surveyed local domestic abuse services about the impact of COVID 19 and the findings show that the pandemic represents a 'perfect storm' of staff shortages and reduced capacity, and practical challenges in operating refuges, and fears of increased harm to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Over a third of the refuge providers responding had needed to reduce or cancel one of their services, and less than half were able to comply with government guidance for existing service users and new referrals. Only 30% of responding refuge services reported that they had been provided with adequate PPE for their staff.

The survey found that significant proportions of staff are off sick or needing to self-isolate, requiring organisations to cover the costs of back-filling staff. Many have incurred significant costs in shifting to remote working which they don't have the resources to cover, and fear severe losses in rental and fundraised income in the coming months. As I know you will be aware, this could not have come at a worse time for the sector – we already faced a 30% shortfall in the recommended number of refuge spaces in England and around 13% of refuges receive no local authority funding at all. We are extremely concerned that without swift action, women and children experiencing domestic abuse during lockdown will be simply unable to access the safety and support of a refuge service if they need it.

We are working in partnership with colleagues in the wider violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector to call for action at the highest-levels of the COVID 19 response on preventing abuse and protecting survivors. Today, Women's Aid is making four immediate recommendations to government to ensure specialist domestic abuse services can cope with the challenge of COVID 19:

- The government to guarantee that least £48.2 million will be delivered to local specialist domestic abuse services, who deliver life-saving refuge services and other forms of community based support, to cover costs over the next sixth months. The fund should be flexible and deliver unrestricted income straight to frontline services, to avoid additional and unnecessary bureaucracy. It must also be

equitable, and include a ring-fence funding pot for services led 'by and for' BME women, disabled women and LGBT survivors who are essential for meeting duties under the Equality Act but over the past decade have suffered disproportionately from budget cuts and competitive tendering practices which fail to value their unique expertise.

- Action to protect life-saving refuge services, who are on the frontline of the response, with access to PPE, testing, a guarantee of compensation for any lost income lost through reduced rent or increased arrears and action to close the shortfall in bed spaces.
- The immediate abolition to 'no recourse to public funds' conditions to ensure migrant women can access the life-saving support they need.
- A secure funding settlement for life-saving VAWG services, including at least £393 million for women's specialist domestic abuse services in England per year, to ensure the sector is sustainable for the future. We are calling figure will need to be reviewed in light of any increased demand resulting from COVID 19.

We hope that the attached document – which sets out more detail on these recommendations – is useful as you consider how to deliver the funding commitments made by the Treasury yesterday. We would be delighted to discuss our proposals with you in further detail and hope that you will be able to get in touch with Lucy Hadley, Campaigns & Policy Manager on l.hadley@womensaid.org.uk or I&S, to arrange this.

Our members were incredibly reassured by your support for life-saving refuges when you spoke at our conference in January, and we very much hope to work with you ensure the sector is resilient in responding to the unprecedented challenges that COVID 19 poses for women and children experiencing domestic abuse.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

Nicki Norman

Acting Chief Executive (job share)
Women's Aid

CC: Luke Hall MP, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness