



The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, The Prime Minister  
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CC: Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Secretary of State for Justice, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Secretary of State for Education, Minister for the Cabinet Office

3 April 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

**Re: Covid-19 pandemic and preventing and responding to an increase in violence against women and girls**

The Covid-19 pandemic, while a crisis of global proportions, is having a particularly damaging impact on women and children living with violence and abuse. For the millions of women and children experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, 'honour based' abuse, child sexual abuse, FGM and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), home is not a place of safety.

It is highly foreseeable that the Covid-19 pandemic, and the emergency measures that must be taken to control it, will lead to an increase in violence against women and girls in the UK. Evidence from China showed a three-fold increase in domestic abuse when strict 'lockdown' measures were introduced. France, Italy, Brazil, Cyprus, Spain and the US have all reported rises in domestic abuse as a result of measures confining families to their homes. As specialist organisations working with survivors of VAWG, we have already seen perpetrators use infection control measures as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour, and last weekend some police forces in the UK reported a rise in domestic abuse reports. There have also been reports that at least eight women have been killed in the last few weeks where men have been charged with or suspected of murder or murder-suicides. The mass experience of isolation measures, the diversion and repurposing of public services to respond to Covid-19, and the existing vulnerability of many women and girls at a time of less protection is a potential crisis. More women and girls will be abused and are at risk in this period. Every pandemic and major disaster has found this.

The Government is taking unprecedented measures to support businesses, workers and vulnerable people during the Covid-19 crisis. The ongoing planning of the response must also include a strategy to protect women and girls and to prevent abuse. We need commitment at the highest level of Government and from those leading key areas of public life to ensure there is zero tolerance of abuse, and to work with us so survivors of VAWG and their children can access the specialist services and other support they need. We have identified the following priorities for urgent action and attach a list of detailed recommendations for each relevant government department:

- 1. Resourcing the specialist support sector:** demand for many specialist VAWG services is increasing and many services including refuges, vital helplines and community-based services are incurring additional costs as a result of moving to home working in line with Government guidance. Some smaller specialist services have no access to the technology they need to adapt delivery. Some refuges will need to cease referrals to self-isolate current residents, and will lose rental income for unoccupied beds. Women in refuges are facing severe difficulties accessing food and essentials due to food banks closing and low stock of affordable food and household items in shops. Fundraised income is down across the board. In order to ensure that we can continue to provide life-saving support, meet additional demand and address the food insecurity survivors of VAWG and their children are facing, an immediate cash injection to the sector is required. This must include ring-fenced funding for services led 'by and for' marginalised groups and support and access to refuge for survivors with insecure immigration status and their children.
- 2. Crisis response planning and coordination involving VAWG and abuse experts:** at a time when domestic and sexual violence is likely to increase,

violence against women and girls must be factored into the highest levels of Covid-19 response planning. To achieve this, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner must be included in all relevant planning and coordination groups, particularly the Covid-19 ministerial group and relevant COBRA meetings. Every relevant Secretary of State should receive instructions to ensure that the interests of survivors of VAWG are represented at all levels of departmental Covid-19 response planning and include the prevention of increased levels of VAWG among their priority objectives. The inter-ministerial group on VAWG and National Oversight Group on Domestic Abuse should be urgently reconvened to prevent harm. Leadership on VAWG is vital at every level of the public health crisis response.

3. **Strong public messaging and guidance on VAWG:** clear public communications should be delivered on VAWG crimes. This must include the message that additional pressure families and individuals will be facing at this time is no excuse to perpetrate violence and abuse. The scale of VAWG, its nature and impact and the full range of support available for women and children and how to access it should also be promoted. Government guidance on social distancing and self-isolation urgently requires specific advice for those who experience harm at home, which should be developed in partnership with specialist VAWG services and relevant public sector agencies. This should include the steps adult and child survivors, their family, friends and neighbours, and professionals can take to safeguard survivors and children and seek help and support if they are concerned. Neighbours have a particularly important role to play in safeguarding at this time. Communications should speak to all communities and recognise additional barriers facing women and children from marginalised groups. 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.
4. **Equal protection for migrant survivors:** controlling the spread of the virus requires all of us taking action, so all women must be supported as part of the Covid-19 response. Women with no recourse to public funds are at particular risk from VAWG due to the major barriers they face in accessing support. In a time of public emergency no woman should fall outside a basic safety net. We call for the urgent ending of 'no recourse to public funds' conditions so that all women experiencing or at risk of VAWG have immediate access to financial and housing support to escape violence. No women should have to face the devastating choice of destitution or remaining with the perpetrator.

An urgent response to and implementation of these recommendations is absolutely necessary if we are to limit the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on survivors of VAWG and their children. Ultimately, women's lives depend on it.

Yours sincerely,

Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive, Refuge  
Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England  
Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters  
Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda

Dr Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, Chief Executive, Surviving Economic Abuse  
Marie Vickers, Service Manager, SignHealth  
Natasha Walter, Director, Women for Refugee Women  
Dawn Jeffery, Director, Welsh Women's Aid  
Kyla Kirkpatrick, Director, Drive  
Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women's Rights Service  
Elizabeth Jiménez-Yáñez, Coordinator, Step Up Migrant Women Campaign  
Jo Todd, Chief Executive Officer, Respect  
Donna Covey CBE, Chief Executive, AVA  
Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan  
Suzanne Jacob, CEO, SafeLives  
Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice  
Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition  
Fiona Dwyer, Chief Executive Officer, Solace Women's Aid  
Gudrun Burnet, Chief Executive Officer, Standing Together and Co-Founder,  
Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA)  
Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women  
Dr C Quinn, CEO, Rape Crisis England & Wales  
Ruth Bashall, Chief Executive, Stay Safe East – supporting disabled survivors

## Recommendations for government departments

### Chancellor of the Exchequer

**Equal representation, monitoring and action:** there is a significant body of evidence demonstrating that women are disproportionately economically affected in health and other crises. Equal representation of women in all key planning and decision-making committees within the Treasury would help ensure the distinct economic impact on women during this emergency is considered in the Covid-19 response and that steps are taken to protect women's economic independence.

**Funding and supporting services:** specialist services supporting survivors of VAWG must continue to operate during the Covid-19 crisis to save lives. We are currently experiencing acute resourcing challenges as fundraised income declines, the cost of providing services is increasing due to costs associated with remote working and as we seek to prepare for an increase in demand on our services. An immediate cash injection is needed to protect VAWG organisations and the survivors we support. A VAWG fund should be established which can be applied for directly by VAWG organisations, including specialist by and for BME organisations, organisations supporting deaf and disabled survivors, those supporting LGBT survivors and other organisations supporting marginalised groups. The Canadian and Scottish Governments have established sizeable funds to support their specialist VAWG services during the crisis and equivalent action is needed in England and Wales. An emergency fund should:

- Enable specialist services, including national helplines and online services, the national network of specialist refuges and community based services, to prepare for an increase in demand as survivors are required to isolate in homes with abusers. We anticipate demand for support will be highest when restrictions start to be relaxed and survivors have more opportunities to reach out for help.
- Enable services to directly support survivors experiencing severe hardship as a result of the Covid-19 emergency with access to food, money and other essentials. Women we support are already having difficulty obtaining food as foodbanks are closing or struggling to meet demand, as well as difficulty engaging with remote services due to a lack of resources such as money for mobile phones, computers and phone credit, and are experiencing other financial difficulties as a result of job losses. Services urgently need to be able to financially support some of the very vulnerable women and children accessing our services.
- Enable services to provide increased online support for survivors who face challenges in accessing services due to isolation and reduced access to GPs and other key services where women commonly disclose abuse.
- Enable coordinated community responses, including Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC), to continue to operate and provide support for survivors.
- Cover increased costs for VAWG organisations as they transition to providing essential services remotely, training staff to use new remote working systems, and operate with lower staffing levels as a result of illness, self-isolation and the additional caring burden resulting from the Covid-19 crisis falling disproportionately on the sector's largely female workforce.

- Cover all lost income for refuge providers resulting from Covid-19. The majority of this loss will be loss of rental income as a consequence of having to decline referrals, and even close refuges, due to resident survivors contracting or displaying symptoms of Covid-19. This will include loss of housing benefit for refuge spaces that will be necessarily left unoccupied, as well as rent arrears built up as women struggle financially due to the measures taken in response to Covid-19.
- For services to be able to source additional or alternative premises when refuges become full. Demand for space will increase because women and children cannot source alternative accommodation when they are ready to leave refuge, and reduced capacity if refuge spaces or entire refuges must be left vacant as a result of clients or staff contracting Covid-19 or displaying symptoms of the virus.
- Cover lost voluntary (fundraised) income as a result of Covid-19. Much of the sector is experiencing significant reductions in income as fundraising events are cancelled and postponed and corporate funding decreases. This funding is not an added extra, it maintains provision. 13% of refuges in England received no local authority funding at all in 2018-19.
- Enable services to increase capacity to work with survivors with complex needs such as those with substance misuse and mental health issues in recognition that many survivors are reliant on this wider infrastructure which is now experiencing similar restrictions on the support they can provide.

### **Home Secretary**

**Representation and leadership:** we call on the Home Secretary to chair the inter-ministerial group on VAWG and lead the establishment of a government working group on VAWG and Covid-19 which should include representatives from the specialist VAWG sector. Further, a meeting of the National Oversight Group, which concerns the police response to domestic abuse, should be convened by the Home Secretary in order to understand and monitor any changes in domestic abuse-related reports to the police and ensure that all police forces have what they need to prioritise responding to domestic abuse offences.

**Funding and supporting services:** as detailed above, there is an urgent need to support the specialist VAWG sector during the pandemic with a dedicated fund, which the Home Secretary has acknowledged publically. This should include increased funding for Home Office funded helplines which are particularly important at this time. The Home Office should work with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to repurpose the final £15 million Tampon Tax fund as unrestricted grant funding for specialist women's services to assist them in coping and adapting during the Covid-19 emergency. Such grants must work equally for all devolved nations and be available to all migrant survivors.

**Communication and awareness raising:** it has never been more important to communicate that domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG are crimes that will not be tolerated and to let women know that there is help and support available. We recommend that the Home Office launch an awareness raising campaign highlighting that there is never an excuse for any form of VAWG, sitting alongside a nationwide advertising campaign for the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, the Welsh National Live Fear Free Helpline and other forms of support. The campaign

should include working with the specialist VAWG sector and other key stakeholders to increase access to support through supermarkets, pharmacies, delivery companies and the Royal Mail. In addition, the Home Secretary should continue to reiterate that the police response to domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of VAWG will not be downgraded or deprioritised and instruct police chiefs to communicate this locally at every opportunity. Communication should speak to all communities and recognise the additional barriers facing women and children from marginalised groups. All government communications should be available in multiple languages, including British Sign Language.

**Protecting migrant women:** controlling the virus requires all of us to act, so all women must be supported to stay safe as part of the response. Women with no recourse to public funds, and those who are failed asylum seekers, are at particular risk of VAWG during this emergency due to the limited support available to them. In a time of public emergency no woman should fall outside of a basic safety net. We join calls for urgent policy change and public communication, including:

- Suspending the 'no recourse to public funds' condition so that all women experiencing or at risk of VAWG have immediate access to financial and housing support and are not forced to work in unsafe conditions or face destitution.
- Suspending immigration detention and all forms of information sharing between public services and immigration enforcement - in this pandemic, public health must come before immigration enforcement and women who are trapped at home with an abuser due to Covid-19 measures must not face escalating danger due to fear of the immigration authorities.
- Extending the length of the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) to protect women who are unable to make process with their immigration applications due to Covid-19.
- Producing public communications which include reassurances to migrant women that anyone accessing advice, healthcare or essential services will not have their data shared for the purposes of immigration enforcement.
- Publishing clear information in multiple languages about the latest changes to the asylum and immigration systems and the specialist BME support services that can offer support.

**Guidance:** we welcome the guidance on Covid-19 and domestic abuse published by the Home Office on 29 March and ask that it be updated, revised and expanded in partnership with our sector as the emergency continues. This should include guidance to agencies involved in coordinated community responses to VAWG, such as MARAC, and should be published in collaboration with the specialist VAWG sector.

### **Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government**

**Representation:** due to the vital role MHCLG plays in the delivery of key public services and other types of service upon which survivors rely, we urge the Secretary of State to ensure the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner are represented on the MHCLG vulnerable groups planning committee. Further, as in all government departments, equal representation of women within all key planning and decision making committees is crucial. This will help ensure the risk of

VAWG and the steps needed to protect and support survivors are taken into account.

**Funding and supporting services:** the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has a crucial role to play in supporting accommodation-based support services during the pandemic. As part of supporting a central emergency VAWG fund as outlined above in the recommendation to the Chancellor, we call on MHCLG to:

- Compensate refuge services for any losses, which should include working with local authorities to provide block housing benefit payments to protect refuge providers who may have to leave refuge spaces unoccupied during and immediately after the Covid-19 crisis.
- Require local authorities to suspend all competitive tendering for VAWG and women's services to ensure staff can focus on frontline responses and managing increased demand.
- Continue funding for any refuge service which is due to close due to funding coming to an end, to ensure no reduction in provision during the crisis.
- Where refuge accommodation is not available, enable local authorities to work with specialist VAWG organisations to provide immediate alternative accommodation for survivors. This could include coordinating with hotels to provide safe and secure rooms free of charge, with referral and ongoing support delivered through specialist services, subject to this being provided in a safe way – who will need additional funding to deliver this. This is particularly important for migrant survivors and survivors with additional support needs and multiple disadvantages.

**Social services and social care continuity:** we urge central Government, local authority leaders and directors of social services to make the specific risks facing vulnerable women and girls during this crisis a high priority. Even as face to face visits and case management conferences become more logistically difficult, we need dedicated work to gauge the risks to girls under child protection plans who may not be supervised while schools are closed, as well as vulnerable women with disabilities and mental health problems whose usual support arrangements may be disrupted and who can face much higher levels of domestic and sexual violence. We urge you to engage with experts in the VAWG sector about the enhanced risks women are facing and about everything that can be done locally to try and mitigate these, which we strongly want to support. We are concerned about the suspension of measures in the Care Act which protect the rights of disabled people. We call for adult and children's social care to ensure that no care support package for disabled adults and children is reduced without a full domestic abuse risk assessment, and that safeguarding measures are maintained as far as possible, including regular independent contact with women in institutional care.

**Support for survivors at risk of homelessness:** domestic abuse is a core driver of women's homelessness and we are concerned this will increase further as a result of Covid-19. We welcome the action to halt to all evictions from social or private rented accommodation and this should now be built upon with measures to ensure families do not accrue rent arrears as a result of the pandemic. Automatic priority need for homelessness assistance must be extended to survivors of domestic abuse and survivors that are homeless or at risk of homelessness must have access to single



sex hostels. Work should be undertaken to keep local authority housing options services open to survivors. Local authorities should also be asked to work in partnership with specialist VAWG services to identify women and children who need to access safe accommodation and prioritise their placement into suitable and safe housing.

**Support for migrant women:** migrant women with no recourse to public funds or whose asylum applications have failed are at particular risk at this time. We urge the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to follow the example set by the Welsh Government in offering increased protection for migrant survivors through requiring local authorities to identify and support women with no recourse to public funds to access safe accommodation and support.

### **Secretary of State for Justice**

**Representation:** decisions taken by the Secretary of State for Justice will have a particular impact on the protection of survivors and monitoring of perpetrators during the pandemic. It is therefore vital that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner are represented in key departmental planning committees. In addition, steps should be taken to ensure that there is equal representation of women within all planning and decision-making committees within the Ministry of Justice. This will help ensure the risk of VAWG and the steps needed to protect and support survivors through the criminal justice system and victim support services are taken into account at the highest level.

**Funding and supporting services:** as well as working with the Chancellor on the establishment of a VAWG fund outlined above, we urge that additional funds are made available for Ministry of Justice funded services supporting survivors of violence against women and girls, which are likely to see an increase in demand during and immediately after the Covid-19 emergency.

**Supporting survivors with child contact arrangements involving perpetrators:** the safety of child contact is a serious concern for survivors of domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis. Perpetrators have always used child contact arrangements as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour, and may threaten to not adhere to contact arrangements due to Covid-19, or use it as a justification for flouting contact arrangements. Survivors are also concerned that they will be accused of breaching a court order if they limit or prevent contact during the crisis in order to keep herself and her children safe, for example. Whilst the President of the Family Division has issued general guidance which states that if parents cannot agree to an arrangement they may exercise their parental responsibility and vary the arrangement to one that they consider to be safe, the guidance is open to interpretation. With severe barriers to accessing legal advice at the current time, clearer guidance on varying contact arrangements in cases of domestic abuse is required.

**Supporting survivors whose perpetrators are in prison:** whilst we are mindful of the significant risk of Covid-19 spreading throughout prisons, we urge the Secretary of State to develop particular safeguards in relation to prisoners due for early release who are perpetrators of domestic abuse, to ensure that survivors are kept informed and protected. This should include monitoring and assessment of the National

Probation Service's 'doorstop' interviews with perpetrators of domestic abuse to ensure this is safe for survivors.

**Supporting survivors in prison:** the overwhelming majority of women in prison are survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and over 80 per cent of the female prison population are on remand or sentenced for non-violent offences. We therefore support the call from Women in Prison and others to plan for the early release of all women in prison who are particularly vulnerable to the virus as well as those on remand, nearing the end of their sentence or have been recalled for administrative breaches of licences.

**Communication:** there is a need for clear, ongoing public communication from the Secretary of State for Justice and all key leaders within the criminal justice system that there will be a strong criminal justice response to perpetrators of VAWG during the Covid-19 crisis. We recommend that this includes reassurances that courts will continue to hear applications for protective orders, that effective probation monitoring will be in place and that the safety and needs of survivors will be prioritised in any early release from prison scheme.

### **Secretary of State for Work and Pensions**

**Representation:** facilitating and protecting the economic independence of women is of the utmost importance to ensure survivors have opportunities to leave abusers and seek support. The Department of Work and Pensions should invite advice from experts including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims' Commissioner on its Covid-19 response. It is also crucial that there is equal representation of women within all key planning and decision making committees within the department. This will help ensure the risk of VAWG and the steps needed to protect survivors through the benefits system are taken into account at the highest level.

**Funding:** refuge providers face the loss of vital income through housing benefit if they have to close refuges or keep spaces vacant due to clients contracting or displaying symptoms of Covid-19. This will significantly hinder their ability to continue to run services during and after the Covid-19 emergency. We urge the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to commit to funding and working with local authorities to provide block housing benefit payments equivalent to what would be the income from housing benefit if all refuge spaces were occupied during the Covid-19 crisis in order to safeguard refuge income. This is a vital step to ensure refuge providers can continue to operate during and after this emergency.

**Supporting survivors through the benefits system:** we are seeing the poverty of many women in our services intensify as they lose their jobs, experience significant delays in accessing Universal Credit, struggle with access to food as foodbanks experience shortages and other sources of support close their doors. We are seriously concerned that some women currently in refuge are thinking about returning to perpetrators because they have no income to support their own and their children's basic needs. Immediate action is needed to process new Universal Credit claims quickly and make timely payments. Ending or suspending the five-week wait for a Universal Credit payment and removing the requirement for survivors to repay any advances is vital at this time due to the acute level of hardship being experienced. The Government must immediately end the welfare reform policies

which have disproportionate impacts on women, including the benefit cap and two child tax credit limit.

### **Secretary of State for Health and Social Care**

**Representation:** the necessary public health measures taken to stop the spread of Covid-19 pose significant threats to the health and safety of survivors of violence against women and girls. This threat should too be regarded as a public health emergency. It is crucial that the Department for Health and Social Care invites advice from VAWG specialists as part of its Covid-19 response, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Victims' Commissioner and representatives from the specialist VAWG sector. Further, women should be represented equally within all key planning and decision-making committees within the department to help ensure the impact on women of decisions taken is considered at the highest level.

**Supporting services:** in order to operate safely, it is vital that refuges and other VAWG services continuing to work directly with survivors should be given access to testing kits and personal protective equipment for staff, such as gloves and aprons. This will help identify the virus early and reduce the spread of it, protecting staff and survivors. It will also allow the isolation of staff who test positive and ensure staff who do not have the virus can continue to work to support women and children. Face to face support can be critical for deaf and disabled survivors who will now struggle to disclose abuse safely and access support. We know many survivors suffer from chronic conditions and issues with their immune systems, and ask that they be treated as a vulnerable group.

**Support survivors:** for many survivors of domestic abuse their GP surgery is a safe haven and many disclose the abuse they are experiencing for the first time to their doctors. Whilst we understand the need to reduce in person appointments to protect healthcare staff, the Department of Health and Social Care should work with NHS England to support GPs to keep lines of communication open and ensure women are alone and safe to speak wherever possible. Frontline health workers should be encouraged to make routine inquiries into domestic abuse.

**Guidance and awareness:** In addition to physical health risks, measures to decrease social contact are likely to have significant mental health impacts on the population, and this could be acute for survivors coping and recovering from trauma. There is an urgent need for Public Health England guidance for statutory agencies warning of the increased physical and mental health risks to survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG during the Covid-19 crisis and how to support adult and child survivors at this time.

### **Secretary of State for Education**

**Planning and response:** With school closures likely to be in place for many months, we urge that child protection arrangements recognise and respond to an increased risk of child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and relationship abuse. While high priority measures must be taken to maintain vigilance over those on the child protection, schools are often aware of many other children who are at risk of harm where attending school involves the only daily contact they may have with individuals outside their family. Vulnerable girls and young women, who will not be in regular contact with teachers and school staff, will have reduced opportunities to disclose

abuse or for problems and risks to be detected. There will also be an enhanced vulnerability to abuse by peers or adults in homes or online. We urge the Department for Education to estimate and record schools' concerns for children who are both on and not on the child protection register and to work creatively with school leaders to develop appropriate protection measures. The VAWG sector is available and eager to support the development of specific responses.

**Guidance:** This potential child protection disaster must be addressed with guidance for school leaders and local authorities on self-isolation and safeguarding vulnerable students against abuse. Abusers should not be enabled to use isolation as a cover for abuse.

### **Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

**Equal representation:** of women within all key planning and decision making committees within the department is crucial to help ensure that the potentially different impact of decisions and measures on women is taken into account at the highest level.

**Funding:** we welcome that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is playing a key role in discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the impact of the Covid-19 emergency on the charity sector and what support is needed. It is crucial that the particular impact of the crisis on survivors of VAWG and the charities that support them is given a high priority during these discussions and an emergency VAWG fund, as outlined above, is established as part of the Government's response to the issues the charity sector is experiencing. The Secretary of State should work with the Home Secretary to repurpose the final £15 million of the Tampon Tax fund as unrestricted grant funding for specialist women's services to assist them in coping and adapting during the Covid-19 emergency.

**Guidance:** perpetrators of abuse commonly use technology to control, monitor and isolate survivors. It is likely that this will intensify as survivors spend more time at home and must use online forms of communication to communicate with family, friends, public services and support services. In addition, many services are operating remotely for the first time, which brings considerable cyber security challenges. There is a need for DCMS guidance for frontline services to support them to deliver services in a digitally secure way and assist them in supporting survivors to communicate as securely as possible. Abusers should not be enabled to use isolation as a cover for abuse.

### **Minister for the Cabinet Office**

**Representation:** ensure that there is equal representation of women within all key planning and decision making committees within the department. This will help ensure the risk of VAWG and the steps needed to reduce violence and abuse and protect survivors are taken into account at the highest level.

**Planning and response:** we strongly welcome the inclusion of life-saving VAWG professionals in the Government's list of critical workers and their inclusion must be maintained as the pandemic progresses. Survivors who speak other languages,

including deaf survivors using British Sign Language, are struggling to access some public and support services as interpreters are not yet regarded as critical workers. We therefore urge the expansion of the list to include interpreters needed to enable people to access essential services. VAWG services should also be regarded as essential services that must continue to operate should further 'lockdown' measures and restrictions be implemented as the crisis develops.

**Coordination across the devolved nations:** all equivalencies in this letter for the devolved nations should be discussed with the relevant devolved legislatures, and actions coordinated.