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Dear Carole,

Please convey my thanks to Sandra for her letter of 3 April to the Prime Minister, copied to the Home Secretary, on behalf of the violence against women and girls sector about preventing and responding to an increase in violence and abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am providing a response on behalf of the Government as the Home Office Minister for Safeguarding. I am very sorry indeed for the delay in responding to Sandra's letter. Events have moved on significantly since your letter (and we have of course spoken on the phone) so I have taken the opportunity to reflect that in this response.

All forms of violence against women and girls are abhorrent at any time and the Government recognises that the very necessary steps being taken to safeguard public health are likely to place some people in an even more vulnerable, isolated and dangerous situation.

The Government has maintained regular contact with the Domestic Abuse and Victims' Commissioners, who are very closely engaged in identifying and advising on the resolution of emerging issues. We have collaborated with and continue to work with domestic abuse charities on developing and publicising key messaging, aimed not only at victims and the general public but also at perpetrators. It is crucial that the police continue to investigate and prosecute offenders, sending a clear signal that the current situation can be no excuse for abusive behaviour. The Home Office has also launched an enhanced communications campaign on domestic abuse, #YouAreNotAlone, which signposts the support available.

As you know the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice and the Home Office have provided additional funding to help support domestic abuse and sexual violence services during this period, from the £750 million package for charities announced by the Chancellor. This was in addition to the £2 million funding announced in April by the Home Secretary to bolster helplines and online services in the light of additional demand.

As part of ongoing work to tackle the consequences of domestic abuse, the Home Office also announced £3 million of funding to specialist services providing support for children affected by domestic abuse, as a continuation of the Children Affected by Domestic Abuse Fund.

In relation to no recourse to public funds (NRPF), the Government recognises that some people living in the UK as the spouse or partner of a British citizen or other settled person, although able to take employment, will be subject to the NRPF condition and may

therefore face significant barriers in seeking support. There is more work to do to establish the scale of the current gap in the provision of support to this group of victims.

The Government therefore intends to invite bids for grants from a £1.5 million pilot fund to cover the cost of support in a refuge or other safe accommodation. We will use this pilot to better assess the level of need for this group of victims and build a sustainable programme of support.

We have announced a range of measures to ensure people can stay safe at the current time and many of these are also available for those with a NRPF condition, such as protection for renters from evictions, a mortgage holiday for those who need it, as well as support for those who are vulnerable and need assistance with access to medication and shopping. Local authorities are also able to help. They may provide basic safety net support to those with NRPF, if it is established that there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example, where there are community care needs, migrants with serious health problems or family cases where the wellbeing of a child is in question. The Government has provided £3.2 billion of additional funding to local authorities in England, and additional funding under the Barnett formula to the devolved administrations, to enable them to respond to COVID-19 pressures across all the services they deliver, including services helping the most vulnerable.

With regard to the other points raised in your letter directed to other Government departments, I hope you will find the information included in the Annex of this letter useful.

Tackling violence against women and girls and ensuring the continued safeguarding of all vulnerable people remains a top priority for this Government and on 21 May, the Prime Minister hosted a virtual summit on hidden harms, building on existing work right across Government to shine a light on these devastating crimes during the COVID-19 crisis.

As we discussed in our meeting, please do keep in touch with details of any potential issues that arise as we see local lockdown measures across the country. I am keen to be alerted if there is anything that the Home Office may be able to assist with in terms of answering any questions or addressing needs in areas with stronger local measures in place.

I am extremely grateful for the ongoing work your organisations undertake to protect and support victims particularly at this challenging time.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

Victoria Atkins MP

1. HM Treasury

As set out above, the Treasury has announced a funding package of £750 million to support charities, including those providing domestic abuse services. In line with both legal obligations and the Government's strong policy commitments on equalities, departments, including the Treasury, take care in the decision-making process to consider the impacts of policy judgements on women, as well as on others sharing protected characteristics.

2. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

Homelessness

It is critical that victims of domestic abuse get support and especially when they are in housing need. We have implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act, which for the first time puts prevention at the heart of the local authorities' response to homelessness, irrespective of whether they are a family or single person, what has put them at risk, or if they have a local connection to the area.

Under homelessness legislation a person who is pregnant, has dependent children, or is vulnerable as a result of having to leave accommodation due to domestic abuse already has priority need for accommodation. Combined with the new duties under the Domestic Abuse Bill and the Homelessness Reduction Act, this should ensure that all domestic abuse victims are supported to find accommodation that meets their needs.

Refuge funding

The Government's priority is to ensure that refuge services stay open and up and running and we are working across Government to ensure that domestic abuse survivors and their children have the support they need to stay safe during the pandemic.

In addition to the £10 million specifically for refuge and safe accommodation, the Secretary of State has announced a total of £3.2 billion of additional funding for Local Government to help them respond to Covid-19 pressures across all of the services they deliver. This includes increasing support for services helping the most vulnerable, such as victims of domestic abuse.

The Minister wrote to Chief Executives of Local Authorities to ask them to work closely with domestic abuse safe accommodation providers, to ensure that victims and their families can be provided with safe emergency accommodation with appropriate support. He also stated that if they need additional accommodation to meet demand then they can book rooms through Crown Commercial Services.

The Government has confirmed that frontline domestic abuse workers are key workers for the purposes of testing those that are symptomatic, as well as for access to childcare, schools and educational establishments. We have issued guidance to providers of domestic abuse safe accommodation in support of their service delivery at these unprecedented times. The guidance will help protect victims and their children residing in safe accommodation. Guidance has also been published for social landlords on essential moves during the pandemic, clarifying that essential moves for victims and survivors of domestic abuse should still be prioritised. This should enable move-on from refuges.

3. Ministry of Justice

Representation

The Victim's Commissioner is a member of the Victim and Witness Silver Command Group which has been set up to advise and provide strategic direction and oversight to the MoJ to support victims and witnesses in response to Covid-19 and continues to engage regularly with the department at a ministerial level.

Supporting survivors with child contact arrangements involving perpetrators

Firstly, if any person is concerned about the safety and welfare of any child at any time, the best response would be to inform the police and/or social services immediately.

In regard to child contact arrangements, guidance issued by Sir Andrew McFarlane, the most senior family judge in England and Wales, is clear. Where parents do not agree to vary the arrangements set out in a Child Arrangements Order, but one parent is sufficiently concerned that complying with those arrangements would be against current Public Health England or Public Health Wales advice, then that parent may exercise their parental responsibility and vary the arrangement to one that they consider to be safe.

If, after the event, the actions of a parent acting on their own in this way are questioned by the other parent in the Family Court, the court is likely to look to see whether each parent acted reasonably and sensibly in the light of the official advice and the Stay at Home Rules in place at that time, together with any specific evidence relating to the child or family.

Where, either as a result of parental agreement or as a result of one parent on their own varying the arrangements, a child does not get to spend time with the other parent as set down in the Child Arrangements Order, the courts will expect alternative arrangements to be made to establish and maintain regular contact between the child and the other parent within the Stay at Home Rules, for example remotely, by video connection or, if that is not possible, by telephone.

The key message from the Family Court is that, where Coronavirus restrictions cause the letter of a court order to be varied, the spirit of the order should nevertheless be delivered by making safe alternative arrangements for the child. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) has also published helpful advice for families on child arrangements which is available at: <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/covid-19/advice-for-parents-and-carers-on-covid-19/>

Supporting survivors and perpetrators in prison

At the beginning of the pandemic, we took strong measures, including in the women's estate, to control the spread of the virus in our prisons. Public health modelling provides an indication that these measures have had a positive impact on limiting deaths and the transmission of the virus in prisons.

On 4 April, the Government announced the introduction of the End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) scheme, to allow the temporary release of risk-assessed prisoners who are within two months of their release date, as part of the national plan to protect the NHS and save lives. Those identified as at risk of perpetrating domestic abuse or of causing a concern related to child safeguarding were not eligible for early release. On 19 August, with the virus in prisons under control thanks to the hard work and dedication of our staff, we announced there was no longer a need to continue this temporary release of prisoners, though this decision will be kept under constant review over the coming weeks and

months.

Separately from the ECTR process, some prisoners, such as pregnant women, and prisoners with their babies in custody (in Mother and Baby Units) may meet the criteria for potential compassionate temporary release, including those defined by the NHS guidelines as 'extremely vulnerable' to Covid-19.

These prisoners may be considered for Compassionate ROTL based on a case-by-case assessment of whether it would be safe to do so. Where a prisoner is identified as 'extremely vulnerable' but is not considered suitable for release, we are working with prisons and health care providers to ensure that they are identified and offered the opportunity to shield within custody.

The National Probation Service's (NPS) approach to doorstep visits was not intended for those released on ECTR but for those subject to probation supervision as part of a licence or community order. The aim of doorstep visits was to focus on monitoring and control and the management of risk of serious harm. The NPS recognised that doorstep visits as a risk management strategy would not be appropriate for all cases, and staff were required to undertake a safeguarding or domestic abuse concerns assessment to include how to best monitor the safety of cohabiting partners and children. This may include calls with police and social care to review relevant recent call outs or intelligence. As restrictions are being lifted more generally, Probation have been scaling up face to face supervision, interventions and activities like unpaid work, where this can be safely achieved.

Communication

Our priority has been clear from the start that the justice system must continue, and that the safety of those who use it, including victims and witnesses, is paramount.

Domestic abuse cases remain amongst the highest priority work being dealt with by the courts. Domestic Violence Protection Orders and Non-Molestation orders have been placed in the highest category of work in the magistrates' and family courts, and they continued to be listed for urgent hearings during the pandemic.

Initially, the magistrates' courts were focused on cases where the defendant is being held in custody, but their work was extended to include bail cases where there is a vulnerable victim, such as domestic abuse cases, and these cases are being reviewed by the judiciary. Domestic abuse cases will continue to be afforded a higher priority, with magistrates' courts now hearing all types of cases and working to increasing their sitting capacity to pre-Covid-19 levels.

Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) has prepared guidance which ensures that anyone who needs to may issue an application for a domestic abuse injunction order which can be made to a court by email or other means and avoid the need for physically attending court.

HMCTS has also been working with Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors (FLOWS) to promote their service which aims to help victims of domestic abuse through a network of advisers and women's aid organisations, the service has recently introduced an encrypted self-referral app in response to Covid-19.

4. Department for Work and Pensions

Universal Credit and advances

Nobody has to wait five weeks for a payment under Universal Credit. Advances are a mechanism for getting claimants faster access to their entitlement; allowing claimants to receive 13 payments over 12 months with up to 12 months to repay the advance. The Government has announced measures that can be quickly and effectively operationalised and that benefit those facing the most severe financial disruption. Any change to this policy would require significant system development at a time when all resources are rightly focused on processing new claims. We will continue to review our policies but have no planned changes at this time.

For Universal Credit, New Claims Advances of up to 100% of potential entitlement are available within a few days if a claimant needs support during their first assessment period. Face-to-face checks for Universal Credit advances have been scrapped due to Covid-19, so people get the support they need despite Covid-19 restrictions. We have increased the Standard Allowance for everyone by over £80 a month on top of the existing 1.7% (CPI) increase already announced. This additional increase means all claimants will be up to £1,040 better off.

The Government has already taken steps to help ease the burden of debt repayments and has reduced the maximum deduction from 40% to 30% of a claimant's standard allowance. The Budget 2020 set out that the maximum level will be further reduced, so that standard deductions will not exceed 25% of a claimant's Standard Allowance from October 2021. The repayment time for advances has already been extended from six months to 12 months, and a further extension to 24 months from October 2021 was announced in the budget. Claimants can ask for repayments to be delayed for up to three months if they can't afford them.

The benefit cap

The Benefit Cap restores fairness between those receiving out-of-work benefits and taxpayers in employment. At this unprecedented time, the Government quickly and effectively introduced around £9 billion of measures that benefit those facing the most financial disruption. DWP is experiencing significant increased demand and so the Government has to prioritise the safety and stability of the benefits system overall.

Universal Credit households are exempt from the cap if they have monthly earnings of at least only £604. Entitlement to Working Tax Credits provides an exemption to the cap for Housing Benefit households. And if people have a sustained work record, they may be able to get a nine-month grace period where their benefits are not capped. Exemptions continue to apply for the most vulnerable claimants that are entitled to disability benefits and carer benefits. The likelihood of a survivor having the benefit cap applied is reduced because of existing beneficial rules. For example, where Housing Benefit is paid in respect of a person in a refuge, it is excluded from the calculation of the benefit cap. In addition, any Housing Benefit paid to a Universal Credit claimant living in Temporary Accommodation is exempt from the benefit cap. This provides women with breathing space while they stabilise their situation.

Claimants that need additional support to meet rental costs can approach their Local Authority for a Discretionary Housing Payment. Over £1 billion in Discretionary Housing Payments has been provided to Local Authorities since 2011 to help the most vulnerable claimants.

There is already £180 million in Discretionary Housing Payments for local authorities to distribute for supporting renters with housing costs in the private and social rented sectors in 2020/21. This includes an additional £40 million to tackle affordability pressures in the private rented sector.

We have made vulnerable groups, including victims of domestic abuse a suggested priority group for the allocation of Discretionary Housing Payments.

Two-child policy

The Government feels it is proportionate to provide support through Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit for a maximum of two children. Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2019, of all families with dependent children, 85% had a maximum of two in their family. For lone parent families, this was 86%. Recognising that some claimants are not able to make the same choices about the number of children in their family, the Government has put in place exceptions for certain groups. These exceptions continue to be available during this challenging time.

Exceptions apply to third and subsequent children who are:

- i. Additional children in a multiple birth: an extra amount is payable for all children in a multiple birth other than the first child; or
- ii. Likely to have been born as a result of non-consensual conception, which for this purpose includes rape or where the claimant was in a controlling or coercive relationship with the child's other biological parent at the time of conception.

An exception also applies to any children in a household who are:

- iii. Adopted when they would otherwise be in Local Authority care; or
- iv. Living long term with friends or family and would otherwise be at risk of entering the care system, or where a child (under 16) living with their parents or carers has a child of their own (until they make a separate claim upon turning 16).

Representation

The DWP's priority is ensuring people get their benefit payments and that we can continue to support those who need us the most. We have mobilised our robust business continuity plans to ensure we can do just that. The Government has been clear in its commitment to support those affected in these difficult times and we have made a number of changes to the welfare system in the past fortnight to ensure people are receiving the support they need. The Department has taken measures that can be quickly and effectively operationalised, and that benefit as many people as possible. As we have delivered these measures, we are engaging with a range of organisations, to make sure we continue to support those who need us the most.

The Department is committed to listening closely to stakeholders' insights about the impact that Covid-19 is having on all of those that access the Department's services and that includes the most vulnerable. The Department is actively reviewing how best we can gather these insights while prioritising getting all payments made as soon as possible. We have comprehensive information in our new Covid-19 wellbeing guidance relating to domestic stress and domestic abuse in addition to a suite of policy guidance relating specifically to domestic abuse which reflects the cross-government position on this subject. This guidance offers practical help and support and links to charities such as the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, Women's Aid, Samaritans, MIND, Charity for Civil Servants in addition to emotional support via PAM Assist Employee Assistance Programme and the DWP Mental Health First Aid community.

5. Department for Health and Social Care

Protecting those who protect us has been one of our most important goals in our fight against COVID-19. We have worked hard to get NHS and social care staff the personal

protective equipment (PPE) they need, so they can do their important jobs safely and with confidence.

During the coronavirus pandemic, we have needed to expand our PPE supply chain from 226 NHS trusts in England to over 58,000 different settings, including care homes, hospices and community care organisations.

This has meant we needed a Herculean logistical effort, of unprecedented scale and complexity, to make sure our healthcare heroes get what they need. We have created a whole new logistics network from scratch, bringing to bear the experience and expertise of the NHS, industry and the armed forces.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has distributed over 3.5 billion PPE items for use by health and social care services in England; and this strategy shows the work we are doing to put ourselves in the strongest possible position ahead of winter. This winter presents a particular challenge, as we may need to deal with COVID-19 along with the usual pressures that the season will bring.

To ensure we can respond rapidly to demand surges in the future, DHSC is building a strategic stockpile. This will be equivalent to approximately four months' stock of each product category and will be in place and stored in our warehouses by November 2020. As the people who helped us manage the procurement and distribution of PPE during the late winter and spring return to their normal roles, we have ensured that we are prepared to respond to any future need. We have developed a robust plan to stand procurement and distribution back up at pace to provide an effective and timely response.

DHSC is committed to understanding the needs of individuals using PPE and improving their user experience. We are listening to the reported practical difficulties with the use of some PPE experienced by women and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals, among others, and are taking action to make sure user needs are adequately addressed in future provisions of PPE.

There is Government guidance on social distancing and shielding, which includes a list of those considered 'clinically vulnerable' or 'clinically extremely vulnerable'. This can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'Guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19'.

Supporting survivors

General practice has a vital role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering high-quality care for both patients with the virus and for people requiring urgent care or essential routine care that is non-COVID-19 related. Practices are now offering more telephone appointments and video consultations; this is to ensure that they see as many patients as possible while protecting staff and patients from avoidable risk of infection. Where a face-to-face appointment or a home visit is clinically necessary, practices will take all the necessary steps to reduce the risk of infection, including using PPE.

Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) continue to provide non-judgemental advice and support services to victims and survivors of sexual assault or abuse. SARCs are available to all regardless of gender, age or when the incident happened. We would advise people to call their local SARC to arrange care and support, which may be provided in person or remotely depending on their needs.

Mental health services remain open and are working around the clock to support people with mental health problems through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The Government and NHS England are working closely with mental health trusts to ensure

those who need them have access to mental health services, maximising the use of digital and virtual channels to keep delivering support to patients. For those with severe needs or in crisis, NHS England has instructed all NHS mental health trusts to establish 24/7 mental health crisis lines, clearly accessible from trust websites.

We have provided a £5million grant to the Mental Health Consortia for a Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund to be available to voluntary and community sector organisations across England to promote mental health and wellbeing services, which complement NHS services and support those struggling with their mental health. On 22 May, we announced an additional £4.2million to be awarded to mental health charities, such as Samaritans, Young Minds and Bipolar UK.

We have published official guidance on mental health and wellbeing, and are promoting this through trusted channels like GOV.UK and Every Mind Matters. Public Health England also published additional guidance on 29 March, focusing on advice on how to look after your mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All NHS staff receive safeguarding training and are encouraged to use their professional curiosity, being alert to indicators of a safeguarding concern and taking appropriate action. In the NHS, routine enquiry is already in place in maternity and mental health services, to improve earlier disclosure and support people to get the care that they need.

6. Department for Education

The Government is committed to ensuring the safety and protection of vulnerable children and young people during the current period, which is why education providers will continue to offer services for these children. We have published guidance on vulnerable children and young people which is available on the GOV.UK website.

We are aware that attending educational settings is a protective factor for vulnerable children and young people. Providers have discretion – working with other partners where appropriate – to continue to offer education provision to children and young people who they deem to be vulnerable. The Government is working with local authorities, social workers, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, social workers practice leaders and others to ensure that the most at risk children are identified and that their contact with social workers continues at this time.

Where vulnerable children and young people are not attending nursery, school or further education providers, we have asked local authorities and educational settings to ensure every vulnerable child knows that their setting is there to support them, and that systems are in place to keep in touch with children who are unable to attend because of health reasons.

We have published guidance on safeguarding in schools and safeguarding and remote education during coronavirus (Covid-19), setting out that schools and colleges should be doing what they reasonably can to keep all of their children safe. It is important that all staff who interact with children, including online, continue to look out for signs a child may be at risk. Any such concerns should be dealt with as per the child protection policy and where appropriate referrals should still be made to children’s social care and as required, the police.

We are continuing to support Childline and are have provided an additional £1.6 million to the NSPCC to expand and promote their adult helpline. This means that, not only do children have someone to call, but more adults will be able to raise concerns and seek advice about the safety and wellbeing of any child that they are worried about.

Schools and colleges will also benefit from a new multi-million training programme run by mental health experts, to help improve how they respond to the emotional impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their students and staff.

Ahead of pupils returning to school and college in September, the Government announced the scheme will be backed by £8 million to launch the programme, providing schools and colleges all over England with the knowledge and access to resources they need to support children and young people, teachers and parents.

The Wellbeing for Education Return programme will support staff working in schools and colleges to respond to the additional pressures some children and young people may be feeling as a direct result of the pandemic, as well as to any emotional response they or their teachers may still be experiencing from bereavement, stress, trauma or anxiety over the past months. Part of the funding will be used to recruit local experts to deliver the training programme to nominated staff in schools and colleges, and provide advice to school leaders through to March 2021.

7. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

We recognise the pressures that several sectors are facing as a result of increases in demand for their services during the Covid-19 pandemic, including specialist women's charities. We believe that the best way to ensure the funding reaches disadvantaged women and girls who are most in need is through running a fair and open competition. A wide range of organisations work to support women and girls and we believe they should all be given the opportunity to apply for this funding.

The 20/21 round of the Tampon Tax Fund was launched on 16 March 2020, the application period closed on 7 June 2020 (following a four week extension due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In light of COVID-19 we also updated our criteria to welcome organisations that applied to this round of funding to include activities that seek to address the consequences of Covid-19 for disadvantaged women and girls. An announcement of successful applicants will be made on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) in due course.

8. Cabinet Office

The Government is working with the Devolved Administrations across the Covid-19 response. The Government has established a Cabinet Committee structure to deal with the economic, health, public sector and international consequences of Covid-19 on the whole of the UK. Ministers from the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive are invited to participate in these discussions where appropriate, currently on a daily basis. These have proven to be productive conversations, aiming to ensure that a UK-wide approach is taken on a comprehensive range of issues and catering for the needs of all nations while respecting the administrations' respective competences.