

## Written evidence submitted by the Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner (COR0200)

### Executive Summary

- Over the last ten months there has been a significant increase in the number of people reaching out to domestic abuse services for support, and in the severity and complexity of the abuse. This rise has been sharpest in 'by and for' services for the most marginalised survivors, where specialist services have experienced up to a 49% rise in demand.
- We welcome the emergency funding from national government. However, the surge in demand for services has further exposed the vulnerability of the sector with regards to funding, with many services still struggling to cope with the increased number of survivors requiring support. This is particularly the case for specialist 'by and for' services and smaller grassroots organisations.
- Despite a small initial rise in police reporting rates, they have since dropped. We anticipate that as other crime types return to pre-pandemic levels, the police will have less time to focus on DA cases and as result, referrals to the CPS will continue to drop.
- During the first lockdown period there was a significant drop of 39% in prosecutions for domestic abuse cases between April – June 2020. In the Family Courts, there were also increases in the average times taken for care proceedings – taking an average of 40 weeks (up 7 weeks compared to the same period in 2019).
- In addition to the strain specialist 'by and for' services are under, the Domestic Abuse Bill currently fails to provide support for migrant women who are subject to domestic abuse. We strongly recommend that the Bill is amended to provide recourse to public funds for survivors and to create a firewall between public authorities and immigration enforcement to ensure that women are not deterred from coming forward for help.
- Whilst additional bed spaces have been created as a result of emergency funding, a significant percent have been created in temporary, non-specialist forms of accommodation, such as student halls of residence. This will not address the longer demand for accommodation created by the pandemic.

### Recommendations for Government

- **Explicitly include domestic abuse frontline workers (in both accommodation-based and community-based services) in the Priority 2 cohort of the JCVI's list to ensure they have swift access to Covid-19 vaccination.**
- **There is a clear need for long-term, sustainable funding**

- **for services to ensure they have the resources to increase staffing levels.** This is especially crucial as we near the cliff-edge of the end of the financial year. Funding should also include provision for clinical supervision in recognition of the huge toll that the past year has had on frontline workers. Linked to this **the Government should amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to include a new statutory duty on public bodies to commission community-based services – to mirror the statutory underpinning of refuge provision.**
- **A single dedicated cross government ringfenced pot of funding for specialist ‘by and for’ services** for survivors who face the highest levels of exclusion (including BAME, LGBTQ+ and disabled survivors) that is administered directly from national government straight to frontline services.
- **Significant work to clear the backlogs in both Crown and Magistrates Courts to ensure that more perpetrators are brought to justice** and mitigate increased victim attrition as victims have to wait many months before their cases reach court.
- **Funding guarantees to local service providers to prevent a cliff-edge of funding from April 2021.** This will also prevent loss of expertise as specialist domestic abuse workers may seek more stable employment elsewhere.
- **Greater coordination across Government and with local services to ensure the entire system responds better to domestic abuse.** Lack of statutory sector support throughout this period has resulted in the domestic abuse sector often needing to step in and provide mental health and other support, which they do not have the capacity for.
- It will be essential that the government **continues to sustain investment in public communications campaigns beyond the public health lifetime of the pandemic** to ensure we continue to reinforce the message that preventing and tackling domestic abuse is everybody’s business.

### The scale and nature of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Over the last ten months there has been a significant increase in the number of people reaching out to domestic abuse services for support.<sup>1</sup> For the period 1st April to 31 December 2020, the number of calls and contacts logged on the National Domestic Abuse Helpline run by Refuge (both incoming and outgoing) increased by 34% on the same period for the previous year (114,986 in 2020 vs 85,771 in 2019). This number only increases for specialist ‘by and for’ services, with Galop’s national LGBTQ+ helpline experiencing a 36% increase in calls over the same period; Karma Nirvana’s so-called ‘honour-based’ abuse helpline experiencing a 49% increase in calls; and the Respect helpline for male survivors experiencing a 39% increase in calls.

2. While Covid-19 has not in itself caused domestic abuse, what the very necessary public health measures have done is to create a conducive context for it to happen. For many, this period has led to an escalation of violence and abuse, closed routes for people to escape

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to our previous written submission for further information on the helpline data: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22154/pdf/>