

THE PUBLIC INQUIRY TO EXAMINE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE UK

SUPPLEMENTAL SUBMISSIONS

SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS & SOLACE WOMEN'S AID

1. These supplemental submissions arise from the evidence of Simon Case on 23 May 2024. They amplify two points regarding government failures made in SBS & SWA Closing Submissions dated 15 January 2024 and confirm the need for one of the recommendations.

Fourth failure: cross government planning and response was inadequate¹

2. Simon Case took responsibility for policy on non-shielded vulnerable people, shortly after he re-joined government and contributed to “*Mapping of non-shielded vulnerable groups*”². In evidence, Case described the document as referencing a shortage of data, meaning government did not know what was happening at the ground³. On 7 April 2020, Case emailed Michael Gove “*After 36 hours of looking at this NSV problem... There are myriad SROs who are working away (phenomenally hard and often to a really high-quality, I have to say) in their silos, but there appears to be relatively little quality "junction-box" activity going on.*”⁴ He was also concerned to focus on new types of need, including those related to domestic abuse.⁵ He suggested “*Getting the 10 or more SROs (and their Ministers) already doing relevant things to join up more - well, this will just be a constant task!*”⁶. By 16 April 2024, a programme had been set up for Senior Responsible Officers (SROs)⁷. It included the non-shielded vulnerable⁸. There was no specific SRO for domestic abuse.

¹ [62] – [68] Closing Submissions.

² INQ000083379 . The document includes reference to “**those experiencing domestic abuse**” as a target group (INQ000083379_0002).

³ T36/ 34/25 - 35/1 14.

⁴ INQ000137204_0001

⁵ INQ000137204_0001: “*this leads us helpfully away from obsessing endlessly about definitions of cohorts of vulnerable people (which is something that Whitehall has been obsessing about in the last few days). We need to focus on the new needs that have arisen as a result of COVID-19 and the social distancing measures. Those needs can probably be articulated in quite basic ways (e.g. "I need access to a safe environment outside the home because of new/increased abuse".*

⁶ INQ000137204_0002

⁷ INQ000087171. See also the list of ten SROs and responsibilities at INQ000137209.

⁸ Where Simon Case was to be SRO.

3. At Cabinet on 24 April, Case presented on the Non-Shielded Vulnerable Programme. He said “*the three areas where there was the highest risk of the Government failing to meet the needs of Non-Shielded Vulnerable individuals were: food provision; domestic abuse, where the risk was acute; and people with disabilities*”⁹. In discussion, the point was made, almost certainly by the Home Secretary¹⁰, “*the latest data available on the victims of domestic abuse was revealing the scale of the problem. Helplines had received a 52% increase in volume of calls from victims of domestic abuse, but demand for refuges and shelters had fallen, indicating that victims were increasingly unable to leave their abusers.*”¹¹ On 26 April, Case proposed one “*gold*” SRO, possibly a Minister (Gove), to ensure that all elements of government were operating in a joined-up and effective way. He also noted that support for victims of domestic abuse may have to be added¹². Asked in evidence, Case did not know whether a gold SRO was appointed¹³. When the MIGs were abolished and replaced by Covid S, Covid O and the Covid Taskforce, the SROs in departments continued. The work of the non-shielded vulnerable was given to Case’s deputy, Kay Withers, in the Covid Taskforce, then to a small group, and then to Simon Ridley¹⁴. There was no specific responsibility for domestic abuse.
4. Case agreed in evidence that, given that work on domestic abuse was spread across government departments – Home Office, DLUHC, Department for Education, Ministry of Justice – it would be “*rather a good idea*” to have a specific co-ordinator at the centre at times of crisis¹⁵. He also agreed that, whilst he did not know what was happening in the Covid Taskforce to join up departments, he was sure that the analysis was right that there was unmet need, particularly in relation to domestic abuse¹⁶.
5. Case’s evidence confirms that there was no designated central government responsibility for domestic abuse. The data showing the rise in domestic abuse had been discussed in Cabinet on 24 April¹⁷. Domestic abuse did not specifically fall within any of the remits of the ten SROs. The SROs were working in silos, and it does not appear

⁹ INQ000088638_0004

¹⁰ T36/186/2: “*I’d be very sure it was the Home Secretary*”.

¹¹ INQ000088638_0006 - 0007

¹² INQ000137209_0002.

¹³ T36/187/18 – 25. He has offered to check and inform the Inquiry.

¹⁴ T36/188/11 – 189/1.

¹⁵ T36/189/6 – 16.

¹⁶ T36/191/16 – 23.

¹⁷ INQ000088638_0006 - 0007

that a gold SRO was appointed. SBS & SWA submitted in Closing Submissions that the move from MIGs to Covid S, Covid O and the Taskforce would have been the opportunity to ensure effective cross government working on domestic abuse, but it does not appear that this opportunity was taken¹⁸. Case's evidence confirms this submission.

Seventh failure: Government failed to learn lessons from the first lockdown for the second and third lockdowns¹⁹

6. Case's recollection of the government's response to domestic abuse was the "Ask for Ani" scheme (launched 14 January 2021²⁰), and nothing from 2020²¹. SBS and SWA note that the agenda and minutes for Covid O & Covid S do not contain discussions of domestic abuse. They submit that Case's evidence, tellingly his recollection of "Ask for Ani"²², confirms their Closing Submission that no lessons were learned from the first lockdown to inform sufficient government actions regarding domestic abuse for the second and third lockdowns.

Conclusion

7. SBS and SWA submit that Case's evidence shows that overall government responsibility for combating domestic abuse fell between the cracks of different government departments. It confirms the need for SBS & SWA's recommendation that government to undertake a review, with advice from external stakeholders including the VAWG sector, into the effectiveness of the division of responsibility for domestic abuse between government departments, with a view to creating specific Ministerial responsibility and a cross departmental group to co-ordinate government policy and operations on violence against women and girls²³.

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¹⁸ [65]

¹⁹SBS & SWA Closing Submissions [78] – [89].

²⁰ Hayes, INQ000215599_0051, [172].

²¹ The Inquiry will recall that Boris Johnson's evidence, when asked what lessons had been learned from the first lockdown, had also replied "Ask for Ani" and the Domestic Abuse Bill: T32/189/8 – 190/22.

²² A scheme that was welcome but not sufficient to tackle the increase in domestic abuse.

²³ Recommendation at [105(b)(ii)] SBS & SWA Closing Submissions.