

Witness Name: Denise Brown
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: DB/M8/01 - DB/M8/09
Dated: 17/07/25

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DENISE BROWN

Reference M08-REF-001

I, Denise Brown, will say as follows: -

Refuge – Organisational Information

1. Refuge is a UK-based charity dedicated to supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Its core purpose is to provide specialist services for survivors of gender-based violence, ensuring their safety, empowerment, and recovery. Refuge delivers a range of support, including emergency accommodation in refuges, community-based advocacy, and a 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

2. In addition to frontline services, Refuge plays a key role in advocating for policy and legislative reforms to better protect survivors and prevent abuse. The organisation actively raises public awareness about the realities and impact of domestic abuse, aiming to challenge societal attitudes and improve systemic responses. Refuge operates across England and Wales, working in partnership with local authorities, health services, and other agencies to ensure comprehensive and accessible support for those affected.

Refuge's Services

3. Refuge supports thousands of survivors on any given day, and every two minutes someone turns to Refuge for help. The organisation operates the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, which acts as the main gateway to accessing specialist support services across the country.

4. Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline is available free of charge on 0808 2000 247, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for confidential, specialist support. Refuge also offers a live chat service, which is available 10am-10pm, Monday to Friday.

5. Refuge provides a range of community-based support services, including Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs), Independent Gender-Based Violence Advocates (IGVAs), and Early Intervention Workers, who support children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. These services are delivered at Refuge centres or co-located with key partner agencies such as hospitals, children's centres, and police stations, ensuring survivors can access support in safe and trusted environments.

6. Refuge also runs a network of refuges that offer emergency, short-term accommodation in confidential locations for survivors and their children fleeing domestic abuse. Each refuge is staffed by specialist domestic abuse workers and includes dedicated children's workers, who help children access local services such as schools and healthcare, provide guidance, and support to parents, and facilitate activities and therapeutic support tailored to the needs of the children living in them.

7. Refuge recognises that domestic abuse often includes control over technology and finances. Refuge's Technology Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment (TFAEE) team offers practical and casework support for survivors, helping them to navigate and overcome tech-facilitated abuse and economic control. The team also delivers expert consultancy and training to professionals and partner organisations, strengthening sector-wide responses to these forms of abuse. In addition, Refuge hosts an annual Tech Abuse Summit, which raises awareness, shares best practice, and promotes innovation in tackling technology-facilitated abuse.

8. Refuge did not significantly change the core services it provides as a result of the pandemic, but it adapted delivery methods to ensure survivors could access support under lockdown conditions. This included accelerating the launch of Live Chat on the National Domestic Abuse Helpline and introducing British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation via video. Investment in awareness-raising activity was also increased to reach as many survivors as possible during a period of heightened isolation.

9. Following a rise in the number of referrals involving complex cases of technology-facilitated abuse, Refuge launched refugetechsafety.org – a dedicated online resource offering practical advice to survivors experiencing tech abuse. Between April 2020 and May

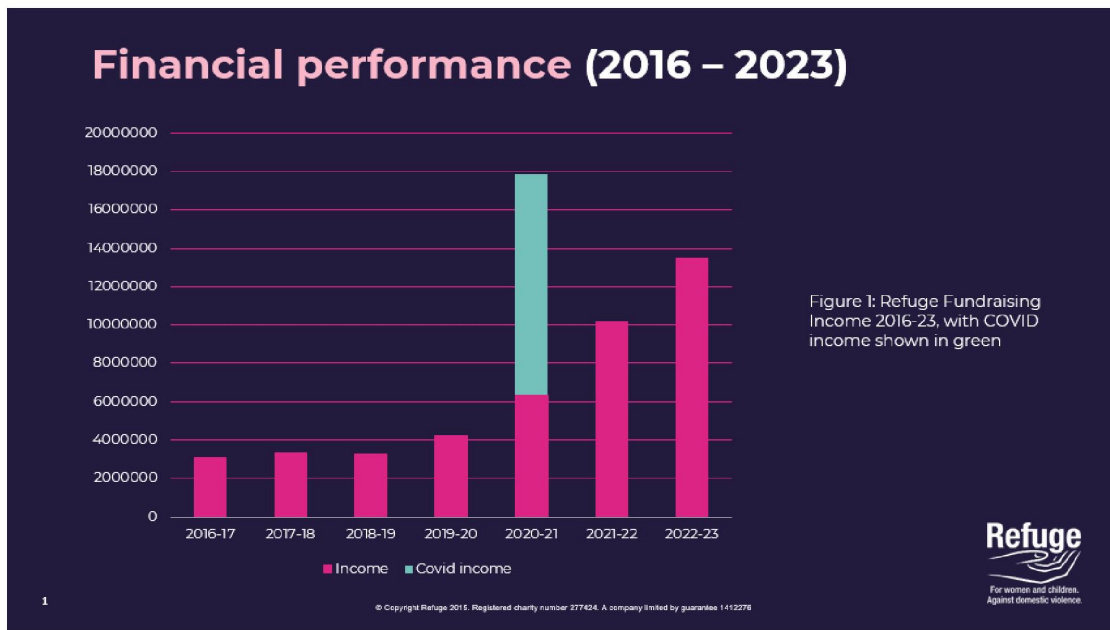
2021, Refuge recorded an average 97% increase in complex tech abuse cases requiring specialist support, compared to the first three months of 2020. In the five months leading up to May 2021, this figure rose further to an average 118% increase compared to pre-pandemic levels.

10. To reach women experiencing domestic abuse during the second national lockdown, Refuge launched the #ISeeYou campaign – a video-led awareness initiative supported by Google UK. Developed in response to the surge in demand during the first lockdown, the campaign used an organic social media strategy, led by public figures and advocates, to raise awareness and connect survivors and their families with support. Together, these initiatives formed a key part of Refuge's broader strategy to ensure survivors remained visible and supported throughout the pandemic.

11. Refuge was able to continue delivering refuge and community-based services throughout the pandemic, although it was necessary to adapt the way in which these were provided. For example, refuge workers were initially required to work remotely until confirmation was received that they were classified as key workers, allowing them to return onsite to support survivors and their children, and to maintain the safety and operation of refuge properties.

12. The coronavirus pandemic led to increased awareness of the issue of domestic abuse, as more women reached out for help during lockdowns than ever before. This translated into increased public support for Refuge, with more individuals, companies and trusts supporting the charity to continue to deliver its life-changing and life-saving services.

The graph below shows the voluntary income that Refuge raised from April 2016 to March 2023. It shows a gradual increase until 2020/21 when there is a huge increase in income. The income shown in green for this year is directly related to the fundraising we did in relation to the COVID 19 pandemic (approx. £12m).



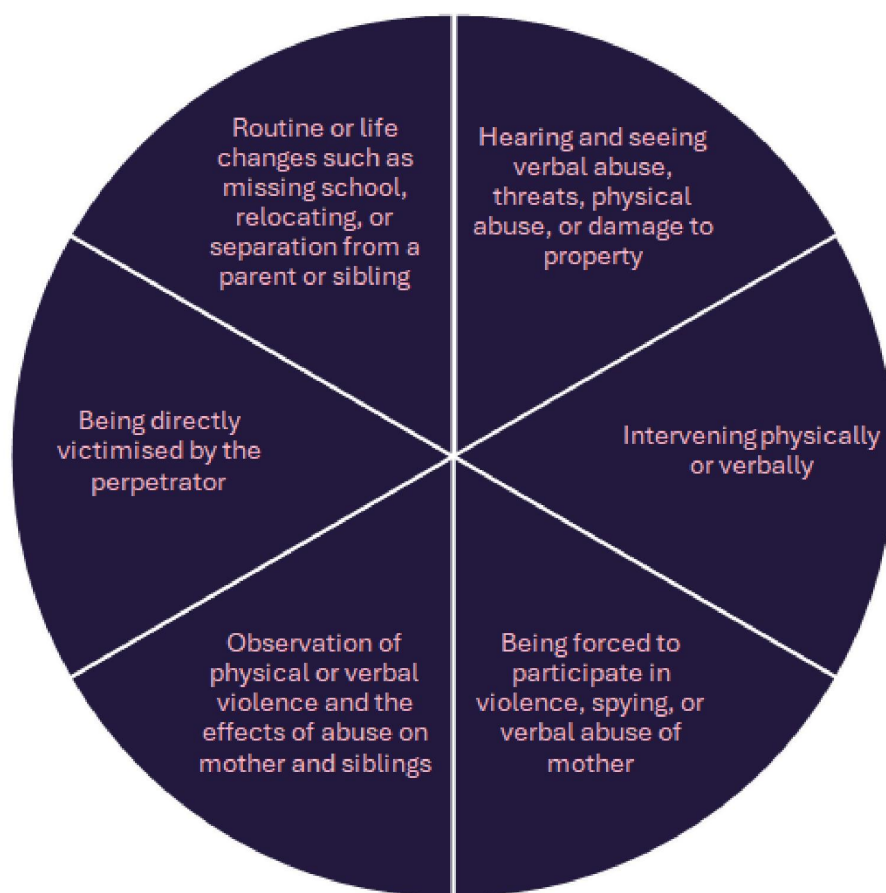
Domestic Abuse

13. The best available data Refuge is aware of comes from the Children’s Commissioner’s 2019 Vulnerability Index, exhibit **DB/M8/08 - INQ000587946**, which estimated that **831,000** children experienced domestic abuse in their homes in the 12 months prior to the study. However, in her April 2025 report on babies and children subject to domestic abuse, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, exhibit **DB/M8/09 - INQ000587947**, highlighted the lack of reliable data, stating that: “Estimates of the number of children affected by domestic abuse vary and are hampered by underreporting. The lack of a prevalence survey and limited official statistics in England and Wales makes assessing the numbers of children affected difficult. This undermines the case for prioritising the prevention, identification and response to this harm, and the resource allocation needed to do so.”

14. Domestic abuse has a profound and lasting impact on children, whether they are witnesses to abuse or direct victims of violence or abuse themselves. According to the NSPCC (2023), 1 in 5 children will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises children as victims in their own right, highlighting the significant harm they can suffer as a result of domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner report, exhibit **DB/M8/09 - INQ000587947** underscores the profound effect domestic abuse has on children. Pregnancy is a particularly high-risk time for domestic abuse, with survivors and their unborn children exposed to abuse before birth. Children are often affected by domestic abuse through witnessing or hearing the emotional and physical abuse of their safe

parent. Some children are directly victimised by the abuser. Below are examples of how domestic abuse can affect children:

- Children living with domestic violence are at risk of physical, sexual, emotional abuse, or neglect by the perpetrator
- They may be harmed if they try to intervene to protect the victim
- Living in an environment marked by fear and controlling behaviour can have detrimental effects on their health, development, and emotional well-being



15. Refuge recognises that all children living with domestic abuse are victims, as highlighted in the Domestic Abuse 2021. Children who live in households where domestic abuse occurs do not simply witness the abuse; they are subjected to it and are directly affected by it. Refuge considers all children in such environments to be victims of abuse, whether they are directly harmed or experience the profound impact of living in an abusive household.

16. Prior to the pandemic, research consistently demonstrated that domestic abuse had serious and often long-term impacts on children. A joint 2011 research report by Refuge and the NSPCC, exhibit **DB/M8/01 - INQ000618755**, found that all children living with domestic violence are at risk of poor outcomes, and for some, the consequences can be lifelong. These impacts may include a range of physical, emotional, and behavioural issues, such as low birth weight, low self-esteem, depression, post-traumatic stress reactions, aggression, running away from home and risk-taking behaviour in adolescence. It is important to recognise that children and young people, even those within the same family, may be affected in different ways and to varying degrees. While some children experience significant and lasting harm, research also indicates that a substantial number of maltreated children show no apparent adverse consequences in adulthood.

17. Domestic abuse is widespread, and any woman or child can be victimised. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, more than 1 in 4 women (27%) experience domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime. However, certain groups face a disproportionately higher risk. Young women, disabled people, and people of mixed ethnicity more likely to experience domestic abuse compared to other groups.

18. In England and Wales, women aged 16 to 19 were the most likely age group to be victims of domestic abuse in the year ending March 2023, with 9.0% experiencing domestic abuse in that year. Disabled people are also at significantly greater risk. In the year ending March 2024 9.2% of disabled people aged 16 and over experienced domestic abuse compared to 3.9% of those without a disability. This means disabled people over 16 were more than twice as likely to experience domestic abuse. Among men, 7.0% of disabled men experienced domestic compared to 2.6% of non-disabled men.

19. Ethnicity also influences risk. In the year ending March 2023, in England and Wales 9.2% of women of mixed ethnicity experienced domestic abuse, compared to 6.0% of white women, 3.0% of Asian/Asian British women, and 3.1% of Black/Black British women. Among men, 5.8% of those of mixed ethnicity experienced domestic abuse compared to 3.9% of Black/Black British men, 3.4% of white men and 1.0% of Asian/Asian British men.

Domestic Abuse during the pandemic

20. Refuge regarded an increase and/or intensification of domestic abuse as foreseeable during the pandemic. Lockdown measures and other restrictions on movement and social interaction meant that many survivors were confined to their homes with perpetrators for

extended periods, with fewer opportunities to seek help or access support. Evidence from previous pandemics and major global crises consistently demonstrated that violence against women and girls tends to increase during such times.

21. In addition, emerging data from countries that implemented lockdown measures before the UK showed rising numbers of survivors contacting criminal justice authorities or specialist support services.

22. As a direct service provider, Refuge was also hearing from survivors that restrictions related to COVID-19 were contributing to an intensification of the abuse they were experiencing. In a joint Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector letter to the Prime Minister in April 2020, exhibit **DB/M8/02 - INQ000618758**, Refuge highlighted that evidence from China showed a threefold increase in domestic abuse following the introduction of strict 'lockdown' measures. Similar increases were reported in France, Italy, Brazil, Cyprus, Spain and the United States as a result of measures confining families to their homes. The letter also noted that some UK police forces were reporting a rise in domestic abuse reports. Furthermore, specialist organisations were already seeing perpetrators use infection control measures as tools of coercive and controlling behaviour. In October 2020, Victoria Atkins MP provided a response to the joint Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector letter detailing the actions being undertaken by the Government, this response is exhibit **DB/M8/03 - INQ000176442**.

23. Refuge operates the National Domestic Abuse Helpline (NDAH), a 24-hour, 365-day-a-year service offering support to survivors of domestic abuse. Following the introduction of lockdown measures in the UK, Refuge observed a rapid increase in demand for this service. On 6 April 2020, Refuge issued a press release, exhibit **DB/M8/04 - INQ000618751**, highlighting a 25% rise in calls to the helpline since the start of lockdown. The charity also reported that visits to the helpline website www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk had increased by 150% during the initial stages of the COVID-19 lockdown.

24. Prior to lockdown, the helpline typically received an average of 270 calls and contacts per day. Refuge identified this early spike in both calls and website visits as a significant indicator of increased need and demand. At the time, helpline data served as Refuge's primary source of insight into the impact of the pandemic on survivors and whether levels of abuse were rising.

25. In the 6 April press release, exhibit **DB/M8/05 - INQ000618750**, Refuge emphasised that while isolation itself is not the cause of domestic abuse, it has the potential to intensify pre-existing behaviours in abusive partners. Refuge underlined the importance of survivors having alternative, digital methods to access help, including online forms to request safe and secure contact.

26. As the UK entered the third week of lockdown measures, Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive of national domestic abuse charity Refuge said:

“Since the UK lockdown measures were announced, Refuge has worked round the clock to ensure its life-saving services remain open and accessible to any woman who needs them.” She added: “Ordinarily, the window for women to seek help is extremely limited. During periods of isolation with their perpetrators, this window narrows further. It is critical that women have alternative, digital ways of accessing help. Refuge wants every woman who needs support to know where and how to access it. If it is too difficult to make a call, women can also access support online, filling in a web form, indicating a safe and secure time to be contacted.”

“Isolation is often used as a tool to abuse – and while the current lockdown has the potential to exacerbate abuse - it is not the reason for it. Domestic abuse is a crime and is ultimately rooted in power and control. Violence is a choice a man makes. He alone is responsible for it.”

“Women experiencing domestic abuse are not alone. Refuge is here to support women today, tomorrow, and in the future. I urge any woman who needs help to contact us, and to know that there is support available.”

27. Refuge primarily relied on data from the National Domestic Abuse Helpline in the early stages of the pandemic, as it provided the most immediate and reliable indicator of the pandemic's impact on domestic abuse and the extent to which demand for domestic abuse services was increasing.

28. Refuge monitored reports of the impact of lockdown measures on domestic abuse survivors in countries that had introduced lockdown-style measures earlier than the UK. Consistent reports were emerging from women's organisations working across Asia and Europe, indicating that demand for domestic abuse support services was increasing in many

countries These patterns provided an early warning of the likely effects of lockdown on survivors in the UK and supported Refuge's concerns that similar trends would emerge domestically.

29. Refuge set out its concerns regarding the risks posed by the national lockdown to women and children experiencing domestic abuse in a joint VAWG sector letter to the Prime Minister on 3 April 2020, **DB/M8/02 - INQ000618758**, which stated:

"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 because 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."

In October 2020, Victoria Atkins MP provided a response to the joint Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector letter detailing the actions being undertaken by the Government, this response is exhibit **DB/M8/03 - INQ000176442**.

30. The closure of schools was a significant concern for Refuge in relation to domestic abuse. For many children, school is the safest part of their day – a space where they can temporarily escape an abusive home environment. Educators and school staff are also among the most frequent reporters of child abuse, playing a crucial role in identifying and safeguarding at-risk children. Refuge works closely with schools to ensure early intervention and appropriate support for child survivors of domestic abuse. Its practitioners hold support sessions with children and young people in educational settings. However, with schools closed during lockdown, children's services and frontline practitioners had limited contact with many of the children who would normally receive support. In addition, many children

Refuge worked with had limited or no access to safe technology required for remote support, making it harder for them to access the charity's services safely.

31. Changes to safeguarding practices and child protection systems during the pandemic were a concern for Refuge. As many services moved to remote working, there was little recognition of the specific safety risks that technology posed for survivors of domestic abuse, including children. Safeguarding procedures often did not account for the fact that perpetrators might have access to children's phones and other digital devices. This lack of consideration placed children at greater risk, as it compromised their ability to speak openly with professionals or access support safely.

32. Refuge had concerns about the impact of court closures and delays on survivors of domestic abuse. These disruptions affected survivors' access to timely justice and, anecdotally, contributed to an increase in attrition rates. Many of these issues stemmed from the substantial barriers that survivors already face in navigating the criminal and civil justice systems – barriers which were exacerbated during the pandemic. Some examples of specific challenges identified by Refuge include:

- Difficulties for survivors with limited digital literacy, particularly where hearings were moved online.
- Lack of access to safe digital devices, and the absence of secure and confidential locations from which to participate in remote hearings or give evidence.
- School closures, which left many survivors without childcare when required to attend hearings.
- Problems accessing interpreters and legal advice, particularly as services transitioned to remote delivery.
- Health-related concerns, especially for survivors with additional vulnerabilities, who were required to attend court in person.
- Inability to access support from Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) or other specialists during remote hearings.
- No access to pre-trial visits, which are crucial for preparing survivors to give evidence.
- Increased costs for survivors seeking injunctions and non-molestation orders from solicitors who were not covered by legal aid.

33. Support from statutory partners within the criminal and civil justice system was limited during this period. As a result, significant additional pressure was placed on Refuge staff, who often had to step in to provide safe digital devices, support with digital literacy, secure locations for remote participation, and assistance with childcare arrangements. Court delays also meant that survivors required longer-term support from Refuge, placing further strain on already stretched services.

34. Some Refuge staff noted that the temporary Nightingale courts established in hotel settings were, in many cases, safer and more accessible than permanent courts. These temporary courts offered features such as separate safe entrances and exits, and secure waiting rooms for survivors.

35. Refuge did not conclude that the overall incidence of domestic abuse increased during the first national lockdown. However, it did observe a significant rise in the number of survivors seeking support through the National Domestic Abuse Helpline as well as friends, family members and neighbours calling because they were concerned about survivors locked down with perpetrators. This increase in demand began shortly after the imposition of lockdown measures in March 2020. Refuge monitored contact volumes and digital engagement closely, and this data served as an early indicator of the lockdown's impact on survivors' help-seeking behaviours.

36. Refuge primarily relied on data from the National Domestic Abuse Helpline to assess whether demand for domestic abuse support services was increasing during the first lockdown. Refuge published a Covid-19 National Domestic Abuse Report, exhibit **DB/M8/06 - INQ000176436**, which provided the following statistics:

- Activity on the helpline rose significantly during the first national lockdown. Between April and June of 2020, the average number of calls and contacts logged per month was 65% higher than in the preceding three months.
- Visits to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline website increased from approximately 10,500 per month in the first three months of 2020 to an average of 73,595 per month between April 2020 and February 2021 – a sevenfold increase.

37. Refuge also worked closely with other organisations across the VAWG sector to share information and insight about the needs of survivors and the pressures on frontline services during the pandemic.

38. It is important to note that Refuge did not claim or conclude that the overall prevalence of domestic abuse increased during the pandemic. Rather, its statements and concerns were focused on the increased demand for support and the barriers faced by survivors in accessing help.

39. The first lockdown significantly impacted the ability of women and children to seek help for domestic abuse. Survivors experienced heightened isolation and were often confined with perpetrators who remained at home for extended periods, making it much harder to access help safely. Opportunities to reach out via telephone or digital platforms were limited due to the constant presence of the perpetrator. Safe access to physical locations – such as GP surgeries and schools – where disclosures might otherwise occur was also severely restricted.

40. Many statutory services, including housing, children services, adult social care, and health services, moved entirely to remote working and online services. This shift made contact with professionals and access to support extremely difficult or, in some cases, impossible. Survivors who were unable to reach housing services were left homeless or remained at significant risk alongside their perpetrator. While some hotels remained open during lockdown, they required payment and were therefore not a viable option for survivors fleeing domestic abuse who were unable to access refuges and had no access to money or financial support.

41. In some areas, the threshold for safeguarding referrals increased significantly during the lockdown, making assessment difficult and further limiting support for children and vulnerable adults experiencing domestic abuse. Refuge staff reported that survivors sometimes told them the National Domestic Abuse Helpline was the only service they had been able to reach.

42. Survivors also faced multiple challenges in accessing refuges for safe accommodation. These included making discreet contact with services and safely planning to flee while the perpetrator remained at home. Health concerns around COVID-19 made some survivors reluctant to enter shared accommodation. In other cases, refuges were closed to new referrals due to a COVID outbreak which required all residents to isolate. Survivors with underlying health conditions were sometimes declined entry to communal refuges due to being at high risk. While Refuge worked to support such survivors into self-contained, safe refuge accommodation, demand for these spaces far outstripped supply. Lockdown measures also contributed to a lack of available 'move-on' accommodation, creating a

bottleneck in refuge spaces and preventing new admissions for survivors who needed to flee.

43. Financial insecurity further limited survivors' ability to leave abusive situations or remain safely separated. Many lost jobs or were furloughed, increasing dependence on their perpetrator. Those working in informal or cash-in-hand jobs, or survivors with no recourse to public funds, were unable to access furlough schemes or other financial support.

44. A key element of Refuge's service delivery; co-location of staff with statutory and voluntary sector partners, was also paused during lockdown. This significantly impacted the accessibility of services, particularly for marginalised groups, including migrants and survivors with limited English. Interpreters were also harder to find, further reducing support for these groups.

45. School closures presented another major barrier. Many children affected by domestic abuse were not eligible for in-person school attendance during the first lockdown, despite their vulnerability. With children confined at home, survivors found it increasingly difficult to shield them from the abuse. Refuge received anecdotal reports of children witnessing more abuse, intervening, and in some cases being physically harmed.

46. Survivors who have left abusive partners often continue to face controlling behaviour through child contact arrangements. During the lockdown, some perpetrators exploited COVID-19 restrictions as a pretext not to return children after scheduled contact, placing further emotional strain on survivors.

47. During the lockdown, Refuge made extensive use of use of technology to help overcome the barriers women and children faced in seeking support. To ensure survivors had safe access to devices, Refuge allocated a significant budget to providing burner phones and smart devices. In recognition that it was not always safe to send devices directly to survivors' home addresses, arrangements were made to deliver them to trusted third parties – such as children's services, schools, or family members – who could then pass them on to the survivor when it was safe to do so. In some cases, this meant there was a delay of a few days before the survivor could safely access the device, depending on when they could leave the property without raising the perpetrator's suspicions. To manage these risks, Refuge staff used code words to determine when it was safe to speak with survivors and when perpetrators were present. During lockdown, there was a notable increase in the use of stalker ware by abusers to monitor and record survivors' online activity. As a result, Refuge prioritised providing survivors with safe devices before continuing to offer any support.

48. In 2022, Refuge launched a formal tech lending scheme, through which more than 500 new tablets were distributed to women and children across its services, with a particular focus on children in refuges. Even prior to this scheme, Refuge provided laptops and tablets to children in refuges to support continued access to online learning and help them stay connected to their education.

49. Refuge did not conclude that the overall prevalence of domestic abuse increased during the first lockdown. However, the charity observed a significant rise in the number of survivors seeking support through the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, which it operates

50. In 2021, Refuge published a report survivors' experiences during the pandemic. It stated: "The Helpline team received many calls from women who were being terrorised in their own homes, women who were afraid to seek treatment for their injuries in case they overburden hospital staff, women whose court cases had been delayed, women making plans to flee the home, and women with no home to go to. Women contacted us having been subjected to horrific abuse. Covid-19 did not impact the types of abuse disclosed to us; the ways in which men abuse women remain stubbornly constant."

51. Refuge also provided evidence to the Home Affairs Committee during its inquiry into COVID-19 preparedness, exhibit **DB/MB/07 - INQ000176439**. In that submission, Refuge explained: "While the evidence suggests that more survivors are reaching out for support and protection, the picture is complex. For example, we know that the lockdown is not itself a cause of domestic abuse – domestic abuse is rooted in power and control, stemming from gender inequality, hence why we see women making up the majority of victims and survivors of domestic abuse globally. While we know that abusers already systematically isolate survivors, during the lockdown this may be exacerbated as perpetrators take advantage of social distancing measures and the advice to stay home, using the crisis as a tool of abuse.

"Additionally, while Refuge's data demonstrates an increase in survivors seeking support, Refuge remains concerned that many women may find it more challenging to seek support during periods of protracted isolation. The true number of survivors experiencing domestic abuse will be far higher than those contacting the police, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, and other VAWG support services."

52. Refuge does not hold or have access to evidence that would enable it to draw conclusions about whether children's exposure to domestic abuse increased, or how their experience of domestic abuse may have changed, during the first lockdown.

53. In its 2021 report on the experience of survivors during the pandemic, exhibit **DB/M8/06 - INQ000176436**, Refuge stated: "Covid-19 did not impact the types of abuse disclosed to us; the ways in which men abuse women remain stubbornly constant.¹³" The organisation did not observe a change in the types of abuse to which women and children were subjected during the lockdown. However, the restrictions imposed as part of lockdown measures may have intensified the impact of that abuse, particularly by increasing survivors' isolation and reducing their access to support.

54. Refuge does not hold or have access to evidence that would enable it to comment on whether rates of alcohol consumption increased during the first lockdown, or whether any other external factors may have contributed to changes in the prevalence or nature of domestic abuse during that period. However, Refuge notes that one of the most common misconceptions about domestic abuse is that it is caused by alcohol. While excessive alcohol consumption is frequently present in abusive situations, it is not the root cause. Domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviour rooted in a perpetrator's desire for power and control over another person, and it can occur with or without the presence of alcohol or other external stressors.

55. In June 2020, Refuge successfully applied to the 'Covid-19 Emergency Support for National Services' fund to support the accessibility and capacity of its 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline. This funding was used to: improve the helpline website; train additional helpline staff and volunteers to operate the newly launched online live chat service; develop accessible video content; design and distribute promotional posters; and increase the number of 'digital shifts' during which staff responded to live chats and webforms.

56. Refuge welcomed the launch of the #youarenotalone campaign on 11 April. However, the charity did not consider the campaign – whether taken alone or alongside other steps taken by the government at the time – to be sufficient to address the risks faced by adult and child survivors of domestic abuse during the first lockdown. Refuge's overall assessment was that domestic abuse survivors were treated as an afterthought in terms of planning and policymaking during the pandemic. While the government did respond to some of the VAWG sector's calls for action – such as introducing a public awareness campaign – these measures were largely reactive. They aimed to mitigate the negative effects of earlier policy decisions that had overlooked the specific needs and risks faced by survivors. The needs of

women and children experiencing domestic abuse were not meaningfully incorporated into the policy-making process from the outset.

57. In May 2020, Refuge successfully applied for funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) £10 million package to support the most vulnerable in society experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic. The funding enabled Refuge to continue operating – particularly its safe accommodation services – keep bed spaces open and support more survivors in accessing life-saving refuge accommodation. It meant that, during the pandemic, women were still able to enter and exit these services as usual, at a time when many other safe accommodation services had closed.

58. Refuge services supported by the funding include:

- **Children's Educational Resources:** Provision of laptops, tablets, and books to facilitate home schooling and create a stable learning environment for children in refuges.
- **Reducing barriers to support:** Addressing increased challenges faced by women with No Recourse to Public Funds, those furloughed, and women in employment unable to afford high rents, by offering flexible support tailored to individual needs.
- **Cleaning and PPE Fund:** Ensuring the safety of front-line staff through the provision of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies.
- **Staff Welfare:** Enhancing staff support through increased supervision and access to one-to-one and group psychologist support sessions.
- **Housing Advocate:** Creation of a new role to assist 130 referrals, many of whom faced barriers to moving on from refuge accommodation, and to build staff capacity in advocating for housing options.
- **Move On Fund:** Assistance to 165 clients with financial support for rental deposits, purchasing furniture and white goods, reducing rent arrears, and covering travel and removal costs.

59. Additionally, in June 2020, Refuge received funding from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), administered via Police and Crime Commissioners, to support local domestic abuse services in various regions, including London, Warwickshire, Cambridgeshire, Derby, Hertfordshire, and Warrington. This funding, which could be backdated to March 2020 to cover costs already incurred, was used to increase frontline capacity through the deployment of Refuge's peripatetic team and agency workers; provide flexible funds for families to cover essentials such as rent deposits, clothing and food; equip staff working remotely; and supply PPE and cleaning materials for refuge staff.

60. In the first quarter of 2020–2021, Refuge received additional emergency helpline funding from the MoJ to expand capacity on the 24/7 National Domestic Abuse Helpline in response to a significant increase in demand.

61. The Hidden Harms Summit was useful in drawing the Prime Minister's attention to the concerns raised by the VAWG sector and in highlighting the need for a more coordinated government response to survivors. It resulted in several welcome recommendations, including a focus on victims and survivors in rebuilding the criminal justice system, the development of a new Victims Funding Strategy, and increased recognition of the need to fund specialist VAWG services. However, while some progress was made – such as the publication of a Victims Funding Strategy – the overall impact of the summit was limited due to the absence of a structure or mechanism to hold the Prime Minister and relevant Secretaries of State accountable for delivering on the commitments made.

62. Refuge noted a 6% increase in referrals to its community-based and refuge services (excluding the National Domestic Abuse Helpline) between 2019/20 and 2020/21. However, it is not possible to directly attribute this increase to the lockdown being lifted.

63. Refuge did not conclude that the lockdowns led to higher rates of domestic abuse, but it observed an increase in the number of survivors reaching out for support. This trend continued during later lockdowns and after subsequent school closures, though it is difficult to definitively link these events to higher rates of abuse. The rise in contact with services reflects the growing demand for support, rather than a clear increase in the prevalence of abuse itself.

64. Refuge observed that COVID-19 was used as a weapon by perpetrators of domestic abuse. Anecdotal evidence indicated that perpetrators refused to practice social distancing, hand washing, or other protective measures, deliberately putting their partners at risk—especially those with underlying health issues. Survivors reported fearing that perpetrators were intentionally trying to infect them with the virus. When survivors sought help from the police, they were often told there was nothing they could do, with some being advised they could not enter or return home. Police were not applying coercive control legislation in these cases.

65. Additionally, there was a noticeable escalation in the severity and frequency of abuse towards women and children. While the risk for survivors of domestic abuse is fluid, in some instances, survivors who were initially assessed as being at standard risk were quickly re-assessed as being at high risk, leading to referrals to MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences) for immediate risk management. Alongside physical injuries, survivors experienced heightened levels of coercive control, with increased challenges

around reproductive rights, including difficulties accessing emergency contraception due to cost. The situation was further exacerbated by survivors facing significant mental health challenges, worsened by isolation and control from their perpetrators.

66. Refuge continued to work collaboratively with local authority commissioners to secure small amounts of additional funding after the first lockdown. This funding was used to support various services, including the provision of laptops to enable children in refuges to continue their online learning, as well as to supply essential PPE and cleaning equipment.'

67. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline was established in 2003 in partnership with Women's Aid, and in 2019, Refuge became the sole provider of the helpline. Prior to the pandemic, Refuge had planned to launch a live chat service to expand access for survivors. However, when the pandemic hit, Refuge recognised that many survivors would need a non-verbal way to seek help. As a result, Refuge fast-tracked the development of the live chat function, which went live by May 2020. This service was developed in partnership with the tech and economic service to ensure survivors could access it safely on a secure device, with safety plans in place to address concerns about device monitoring. In 2021, Refuge expanded its live chat hours to reach more survivors.

68. The biggest challenge faced by Refuge was transitioning the entire helpline team to remote working. Despite this, Refuge was able to maintain uninterrupted service for survivors. The organisation also saw an increase in funding, which allowed it to expand the team by adding more staff and volunteers. In June 2021, Refuge implemented a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter service to further enhance accessibility.

69. During the period 01/04/20 to 31/03/21, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline provided 49,758 support sessions. This included support for 11 victims of domestic abuse who were under the age of 16, and 2,012 victims aged 16 – 25.

70. During the same period, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline received 4,526 calls from professionals and 5,561 calls from third parties, including family members and friends of individuals being subjected to abuse.

71. During the same period there were 10,524 contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline where the caller disclosed that children or young people were living in the household. However, this is likely to be an under-representation, as callers are not required to share this information and can remain anonymous.

Interaction with the UK government during the pandemic

72. Refuge's principal government contact during the pandemic was Victoria Atkins MP, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Safeguarding.

73. In terms of contact with officials, Refuge's primary points of contact across the three government departments it most commonly works with were:

Home Office – **Name Redacted**

Department for Communities and Local Government (as was) – **Name Redacted**

Ministry of Justice – Catherine Hinwood

74. A full list of meetings with ministers during the specified period is unfortunately not available. However, Refuge had contact with the Home Secretary, the Minister for Safeguarding, the Minister for Victims and Witnesses, and Minister for Homelessness during this time.

75. Refuge also engaged regularly with civil servants, both through direct meetings with individuals and through groups created to aid consultation with third sector organisations during the pandemic. Notably, these included the Ministry of Justice 'Silver Command' Victims and Witnesses Group and the Home Office's VAWG Stakeholders Group.

76. The UK government did not consult with Refuge in advance of announcing the first and subsequent lockdowns or in advance of the decision to close schools.

77. Refuge was able to raise concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the child supported in its services through regular contact with officials from the Home Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and Ministry of Justice. However, despite making specific recommendations for the Department of Education in the joint VAWG sector letter to the Prime Minister in April 2020, **DB/M8/02 - INQ000618758**, Refuge had very limited engagement with Department for Education officials throughout the pandemic and was not involved in any meetings with senior politicians on the impact of the pandemic on young people. In October 2020, Victoria Atkins MP provided a response to the joint Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector letter detailing the actions being undertaken by the Government, this response is exhibit **DB/M8/03 - INQ000176442**.

78. The main issues that Refuge sought to raise with the government during the pandemic where:

- The need for domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG to be considered in pandemic-related policymaking, due to heightened risks for survivors confined or 'locked down' with their abusers
- The urgent requirement for emergency funding for specialist VAWG services to adapt service delivery and meet rising demand
- The importance of exempting survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG from stay-at-home restrictions when fleeing abuse, and of clearly communicating these exemptions
- The need for widespread public awareness campaigns about available help and support for survivors during the pandemic
- Recognition of VAWG frontline staff as designated key workers, ensuring their children could continue to attend school
- The prioritisation of survivors' needs in the re-establishment of the criminal justice system
- A call to remove the 'no recourse to public funds' eligibility to ensure migrant survivors were not left destitute and without access to support
- The importance of safeguarding survivors' privacy and safety when developing the Test and Trace system
- The need to restore critical government services on which survivors rely, such as the Child Maintenance system

79. While the UK government did act on some policy recommendations made by Refuge and other VAWG sector organisations – including launching a public awareness campaign to clarify that survivors of domestic abuse could leave their homes, providing emergency funding for the VAWG sector, and designating refuge and other VAWG workers as key workers, these responses were generally slow and fragmented. Despite repeated calls from Refuge and others in the VAWG sector, there was no co-ordinated cross-government activity to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on survivors or to prevent abuse.

Areas where survivors of VAWG were not adequately considered include:

- Emerging evidence from countries that went into lockdown before the UK showed increases of domestic abuse reports and underscored the need for enhanced survivor support. Despite this, there was no engagement with the VAWG sector to inform policy development. There was also no action taken to ensure that VAWG services could remain operational or respond to the anticipated increased demand. While the government understandably had to act at speed and could not

be expected to undertake lengthy consultations, there appeared to be no engagement or planning to address the risks faced by survivors of domestic abuse, including any engagement with the Government's own Domestic Abuse Commissioner

- Although it was essential that survivors understood they could leave home to seek help, government communication on this point – and on the fact that police would continue to respond to domestic abuse calls – did not occur until a press conference on 11 April 2020. While this announcement was welcome, Refuge maintained it should have taken place much sooner. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline received calls from survivors who feared they would be arrested for leaving abusive homes, highlighting the need for earlier and clear messaging. Refuge workers and other domestic abuse support staff were not initially included on the list of designated key workers and were only added after significant lobbying from the VAWG sector
- Emergency funding for the VAWG sector took over four months to become available and was distributed via four separate, complex funding streams. This delay meant that funds were slow to reach frontline services and particularly disadvantaged smaller organisations that lacked the capacity to manage multiple applications. Decisions to reduce or suspend public services as part of the pandemic response failed to account for the effect on domestic abuse survivors. For example, the scaling back of the Child Maintenance Service – a vital service for many survivors– allowed perpetrators to stop payments without checks or consequences, continuing economic abuse and pushing many survivors and children into poverty. Repeated concerns raised by Refuge and other organisations appear to have gone unaddressed by the Department for Work and Pensions.
 - The 'No Recourse to Public Funds' status remained in place despite the heightened vulnerability and risks faced by survivors with this status during the COVID-19 pandemic
 - There was a lack of engagement with VAWG sector organisations during the development of the Test and Trace system. Refuge operates a specialist technology-facilitated domestic abuse service and tried to engage with the developers to embed safeguards for survivors of technology-facilitated domestic abuse, but its attempts were unsuccessful

80. In the event of a future pandemic or civil emergency, Refuge recommends the following improvements to government communication and engagement:

- There is significant evidence that pandemics and other disasters disproportionately affect women, particularly victims and survivors of VAWG. Therefore, their needs must be considered in all decision-making
- While lengthy consultations with multiple organisations may not be feasible during emergencies, the government should, at the very least, involve its appointed Domestic Abuse Commissioner in policymaking
- Domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG span multiple government departments. Rather than waiting for organisations to lobby on behalf of their beneficiaries, the Government should proactively co-ordinate communication with relevant organisations. –In future, the Government should bring together key departments and agencies to establish a cross-departmental VAWG working group. This group should be tasked with gathering information from service providers about the impact of the pandemic or emergency on survivors and the effectiveness of measures taken in response, to enable a more co-ordinated and informed government response

Lessons Learned – what went well

81. Refuge acted quickly to adapt the support provided to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Staff in community-based services and on the National Domestic Abuse Helpline were provided with laptops and mobile phones to enable remote working and continued support for survivors. Technology assessments were carried out to facilitate safe access for staff to platforms like WhatsApp. Refuges with large numbers of women and children isolated in clusters based on shared access to kitchens and bathrooms. Refuge staff also procured food, toiletries, test kits, and other essential supplies for women in refuge accommodation, particularly those required to isolate.

82. Several initiatives helped Refuge to continue supporting survivors effectively during the pandemic. These included:

- The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime MOPAC-funded Reducing Barriers to Support Fund supported survivors in accessing safe accommodation by covering the cost of emergency hotels, food, transport, phones/SIM cards and PPE.
- Local authorities and community partners provided PPE, test kits and food supplies. Frontline staff received protective equipment, including screens and shields, and operated on a rota basis from offices, allowing them to support survivors safely.

- Community groups and local authorities donated emergency goods such as food, toiletries, clothing, laptops, dongles (to support remote schooling), and children's activity boxes. However, access to these donations varied significantly by region, creating a 'postcode lottery' in terms of support.
- The joint Rail to Refuge initiative between Women's Aid and Rail Delivery Group enabled survivors to travel safely to refuge accommodation free of charge.
- Public awareness campaigns helped ensure that survivors were aware they could legally leave home to escape abuse, including to travel to a refuge.
- The designation of domestic abuse specialists as key workers ensured staff had access to childcare and education provision for their children and enabled them to continue travelling to work.
- Following the first lockdown, school provision was extended to include vulnerable children, including those receiving support from children's social care. This provided children with more safety and security, as well as access to school meals.
- The increase in Universal Credit payments provided vital financial support to survivors, particularly in offsetting the higher costs of living or fleeing abuse during the pandemic.
- The temporary removal of restrictions on migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds was crucial in enabling access to accommodation, significantly improving the safety of these survivors during the crisis.
- Refuge clients and staff being prioritised for COVID-19 vaccinations, helping to reduce health risks in frontline service delivery.

Lessons Learned – areas for improvement

83. Refuge echoes the recommendation made by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner; that sustainable ring-fenced funding for specialist domestic abuse services is key to protecting children and young people. Refuge also calls for specialist domestic abuse training for all teachers, social workers, and health care professionals to help them identify the signs of domestic abuse and respond appropriately.

84. During the pandemic, Refuge observed a rise in online abuse targeting children and young people. While the Online Safety Act has helped establish clear responsibilities for tech companies in moderating harmful content, Refuge believes there is still a need for the government to strengthen efforts in online safety education – particularly education that addresses gender-based abuse. Early intervention through education is critical in

safeguarding children and young people and in helping them to recognise and respond to abuse.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed

Personal Data

Dated: 17/07/25