



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home

Second Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 24 April 2020*

Home Affairs Committee

The Home Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Home Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP](#) (*Labour, Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford*) Chair

[Janet Daby MP](#) (*Labour, Lewisham East*)

[Dehenna Davison MP](#) (*Conservative, Bishop Auckland*)

[Stephen Doughty MP](#) (*Labour (Co-op), Cardiff South and Penarth*)

[Ruth Edwards MP](#) (*Conservative, Rushcliffe*)

[Laura Farris MP](#) (*Conservative, Newbury*)

[Simon Fell MP](#) (*Conservative, Barrow and Furness*)

[Adam Holloway MP](#) (*Conservative, Gravesham*)

[Tim Loughton MP](#) (*Conservative, East Worthing and Shoreham*)

[Holly Lynch MP](#) (*Labour, Halifax*)

[Stuart C. McDonald MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2019. This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/copyright.

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/homeaffairscom and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Simon Armitage (Committee Specialist), Melissa Bailey (Committee Assistant), Chloe Cockett (Senior Specialist), Elizabeth Hunt (Clerk), Penny McLean (Committee Specialist), George Perry (Senior Media and Communications Officer), Paul Simpkin (Senior Committee Assistant) and Dominic Stockbridge (Assistant Clerk).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Home Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6856; the Committee's email address is homeaffcom@parliament.uk.

You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsHomeAffs](#).

Contents

Summary	4
1 Domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home	6
The challenges posed by Covid-19	8
The increased risk of domestic abuse	8
The Government response	10
The need for a wider Government domestic abuse strategy	11
National coordination	11
Local coordination	12
Access to help and information	13
The criminal justice system	14
Funding for support services	16
Housing and refuges	18
Specialist services	20
BME and migrant women	20
Insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF)	21
The impact of the crisis on children	22
Making vulnerable children visible	23
Conclusion	25
Conclusions and recommendations	27
Formal minutes	31
Witnesses	32
Published written evidence	33
List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament	36

If you have immediate safeguarding concerns about yourself or someone else, you should contact the Police on 999 or (if you are concerned about a child) the [NSPCC](#) on 0808 800 5000.

If you are in danger and unable to talk on the phone, call 999 and then press 55. This will transfer your call to the relevant police force who will assist you without you having to speak.

If you would like support or advice, the Government has published [information about helplines](#) and websites that may be able to help.

[National Domestic Abuse helpline](#) 0808 2000 247

[Men's advice line](#) 0808 801 0327

[Citizens Advice](#) 03444 111 444

[Samaritans](#) 116 123

[Childline](#) 0800 1111

[Respect](#) phone line for people who want to change and stop being violent 0808 8024040

Summary

The 'stay at home' guidance issued by the Government on 23 March was necessary to protect the NHS and save lives by flattening the curve of coronavirus infection. But for some people home is not a safe place to be.

A global surge in domestic abuse has been reported during the coronavirus pandemic, as those living with domestic violence face greater risks at home during lockdowns, and support services are harder to reach and to provide.

The UK has followed the global pattern of rising domestic abuse risks during the crisis: calls and contacts to helplines have increased markedly and evidence suggests incidents are becoming more complex and serious, with higher levels of physical violence and coercive control.

Counting Dead Women has calculated that there were at least sixteen domestic abuse killings of women and children between 23 March and 12 April.

Rising domestic abuse has devastating impacts on the lives of victims and children who experience abuse in the home and the consequences are long lasting. Action is needed during the Covid 19 crisis—both during lockdowns and after them—to prevent and tackle abuse and to support victims, otherwise families and communities will be dealing with those serious consequences for many years.

We welcome the public information campaign announced by the Government on 11 April, encouraging people to seek help and making clear that help is available, and the additional funding made available to charities, including those tackling domestic abuse and child abuse. And we strongly support the clear commitment of the police to prioritising domestic abuse during the crisis.

Now a full action plan is needed covering support services, housing and the criminal justice system. This cross-Government Covid-19 strategy on domestic abuse needs to cover both the period of lockdown and the period immediately after lockdown when need for support is also likely to be acute. It should be led and coordinated by the Home Secretary and involve relevant Ministers across Government as well as the Domestic Abuse, Victims and Children's Commissioners and frontline providers.

The plan should include access to information and support, outreach and prevention, funding for support services including specialist and BME services, housing support and refuge accommodation, and a strong criminal justice response. The national strategy should be backed up by local action plans produced by all local authorities as part of their emergency Covid-19 planning.

Support services for domestic abuse and vulnerable children need urgent and direct funding support: without it, victims will be put at much greater risk of harm. The Government should provide an emergency funding package ringfenced within the promised £750m fund for charities that recognises the needs of, and is accessible to, both generic providers and small, specialist, targeted services.

New strategies are needed to ensure victims can access support, taking account of the fact that it might be harder to phone from home, or to talk privately to a GP, friend or neighbour while the lockdown is in place. We welcome the progress which has already been made towards a Safe Spaces model to offer help through pharmacies. The Government should sponsor a scheme enabling victims of abuse to contact support services through supermarkets and other retailers too. Local services must be proactive in their outreach during lockdown, including visiting families and households where there have been domestic abuse incidents in the past or where there are vulnerable children.

The Government must ensure that the network of refuges is sustainable for the long term by providing ring-fenced support for the additional costs, and loss of income, incurred by services as a result of coronavirus. And to address the huge and immediate pressure on refuges, clear Government leadership should be brought to the task of securing hotel and hostel accommodation for victims across the country so that anyone needing to leave their home during lockdown because of abuse can be guaranteed a safe place to stay.

Domestic abuse needs to be a priority too for the entire criminal justice system, to ensure that Domestic Violence Prevention Order cases are heard swiftly and that alternative temporary accommodation for perpetrators is provided during lockdown, if that is needed to apply DVPOs and keep victims safe. The Government should ensure that legal aid is granted automatically to domestic abuse victims in respect of any application for protection during the lockdown. The Government has rightly made clear the importance of tackling domestic abuse and supporting families during the Covid-19 crisis. Concerted action is needed to ensure that happens.

1 Domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home

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 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.

Source: [An open letter to the Prime Minister](#) from 22 organisations working to address Violence against Women and Girls, 3 April 2020

Introduction

1. A global surge in domestic abuse has been reported during the coronavirus pandemic, as those living with domestic violence are put at increased risk by lockdown rules. In Hubei province, China, domestic violence reports to police more than tripled in one county during the lockdown in February. In Brazil it has been estimated that cases have risen by 40–50% in consequence of coronavirus isolation requirements, and calls to domestic abuse helplines in Catalonia and Cyprus rose by 20% and 30% respectively in the week after confinement measures were introduced. In Italy activists have reported “an overwhelming emergency” as women who are no longer able to access helplines without being overheard have sought to make contact with support services by text and email.¹

2. The UK has followed this global pattern. While domestic abuse was already a significant concern,² calls and contacts to the national domestic abuse helpline run by the charity Refuge were 49% higher in the week prior to 15 April than the average prior to the pandemic. On 6 April, traffic to the helpline website increased by 700% compared to the previous day.³ Chayn, a website that addresses gender-based violence, said that analysis of online traffic showed that visitors to its website had more than trebled last month compared with the same period last year.⁴ The Men’s Advice Line for male victims of domestic abuse had an increase in calls of 16.6% in the week of 30 March, and a 42% increase in visits to its website and the Respect phone line, which offers help for domestic abuse perpetrators who want to change and stop being violent, had a 26.86% increase in calls in the week of 30 March, while its website received a 125% increase in visits in the same period compared to the week before.⁵

1 [Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence](#), The Guardian, 28 March 2020

2 In the year ending March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse (1.6 million women and 786,000 men). The police recorded 1,316,800 domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes in the same period: 746,219 (57%) of these were crimes, an increase of 24% from the previous year. Of the 366 domestic homicides recorded by the police between April 2016 and March 2018, 270 of the victims were women. (Office for National Statistics, [‘Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2019’](#), 25 November 2019; [Explanatory notes](#) to the Domestic Abuse Bill 2020, paras 11–12)

3 Q218 [All question numbers are from the oral evidence on 15 April 2020; the transcript is published on the Committee website](#)

4 The Guardian, [‘Calls for funds to house domestic violence victims during Covid-19 outbreak’](#), 31 March 2020; BBC News, [‘Coronavirus: Domestic abuse calls up 25% since lockdown, charity says’](#), 6 April 2020; The Guardian, [‘Domestic abuse cases soar as lockdown takes its toll’](#), 4 April 2020; Daily Mail, [‘Priti Patel pledges to help vulnerable people stuck at home with domestic abusers during the lockdown after police chief reveals online child abuse has increased during the coronavirus crisis’](#), 28 March 2020; The Times, [‘Coronavirus: domestic abuse reports rise after people are forced to stay home’](#), 20 March 2020

5 [UK domestic abuse helplines report surge in calls during lockdown](#), The Guardian, 9 April 2020

3. There is evidence that cases are escalating more quickly to become complex and serious, with higher levels of physical violence and coercive control.⁶ The organisation Counting Dead Women has calculated that there were fourteen domestic abuse killings of women and two of children between 23 March and 12 April. Its founder Karen Ingala Smith has written that the number of women killed by men in the three weeks between 23 March and 12 April is the highest it has been for at least 11 years and is double that of a hypothetical average 21 days over the last 10 years; the average she has calculated for the same three week period between 2009 and 2019 is five domestic abuse killings of women.⁷

4. Domestic-abuse related suicide is also a profound concern. Southall Black Sisters told us that, prior to the pandemic, three women a week died by suicide to escape abuse, and that rates were starker for both black and Asian women. AAFDA noted that suicides of children and men because of domestic abuse, which are not as well researched, would be likely to increase the figure further.⁸

5. In 2018 the previous Home Affairs Committee reported that victims of domestic abuse, “and their children and other family members, can endure long-term harm from their experiences. In addition to the immediate trauma and physical harm, domestic abuse contributes to a number of health problems, including depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance misuse, and sexually transmitted diseases. The social and economic consequences of abuse can include homelessness, loss or separation from family and friends, isolation, loss of employment, debt and destitution. Children exposed to domestic abuse are at higher risk of having mental ill health, poor relationships, and physical health as adults.”⁹ So if rising domestic abuse is not tackled, societies across the world will be dealing with the social and emotional consequences of coronavirus for a generation.

6. The vast majority of domestic abuse is experienced by women and perpetrated by men. However, it can affect anyone and may be experienced in heterosexual or LGBTQ+ relationships, and between intimate partners or family members, such as between an adolescent or adult child and their parent¹⁰ or between siblings. A person’s vulnerability to abuse may be increased by factors including age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and economic and/or immigration status.

7. Domestic abuse is not limited to physical violence. It can include repeated patterns of abusive behaviour to maintain power and control in a relationship. The current non-statutory cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse describes domestic abuse as:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. It can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; emotional.¹¹

6 QQ218, 221

7 [Coronavirus doesn't cause men's violence against women](#) Karen Ingala Smith

8 COR0082; COR0046

9 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p6

10 Q204

11 [Explanatory notes](#) to the Domestic Abuse Bill 2020, paras 11–12

We were told that while the official definition of domestic abuse excludes children, they may be direct victims of domestic abuse as well as witnesses, while also being vulnerable to child abuse and neglect.¹² In its previous inquiry on Domestic Abuse, the Committee reported that 950,000 children across the UK are affected by domestic abuse each year, either directly as victims of violence, or indirectly in terms of witnessing violence. Children who have experienced domestic abuse risk suffering a range of long-term negative consequences as a result of their experiences.¹³

8. We issued a call for evidence on domestic abuse, risks of harm within the home and the increased risk of child abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic on 6 April.¹⁴ On 15 April we took oral evidence from: Dame Vera Baird DBE QC, Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England; and from Baljit Banga, Executive Director, Imkaan, Ellie Butt, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Manager for Refuge, Anna Edmundson, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the NSPCC and Lucy Hadley, Campaigns and Policy Manager for Women's Aid. We are very grateful to these witnesses for their powerful evidence, and to the many individuals and organisations who have written to us either formally or informally on this important concern. This report focuses on domestic abuse and some aspects of child abuse in the home. The Committee intends to examine issues related to online child abuse in future evidence sessions.

The challenges posed by Covid-19

The increased risk of domestic abuse

9. The Covid-19 pandemic and the increased risk of domestic abuse that has resulted from it has required Government, the police and support service providers to adapt their response urgently to deal with the emergency. The nature of the pandemic—trapping victims with their abuser during the lockdown—has created particular challenges in respect of ensuring widespread awareness of and access to confidential support, advice and refuge, where this is needed.

10. The evidence we have received suggests that measures to slow the spread of Covid-19 have increased the barriers to reporting abuse incidents. While many services have seen significant increases in demand for advice and support, some charities and support services have reported “worrying” drops in calls for help during the lockdown. Baljit Banga, the Executive Director of Imkaan, told us that the requirement under social distancing guidelines to reduce face to face contact had led to a drop in self-referrals to specialist services from BME women, who often preferred to access services in person or via community routes.¹⁵ In some cases, victims may be unable to call without being overheard by their abuser. The Chief Constable of Gwent Police was reported to have said she feared victims were “were suffering in silence” after seeing a drop in calls to the

12 Q204

13 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p26

14 [Further call for evidence](#), 6 April 2020

15 Q218

force.¹⁶ One service in Hartlepool said that it was “quite concerned that we haven’t seen an increase so far”, believing that some victims may be living in a “pressure cooker” thinking services are closed.¹⁷

11. Many services have responded to the lockdown by increasing the support they provide through helplines, websites and online live chat services, staffed by specially trained domestic abuse advisers.

12. Nicole Jacobs told us that since the ‘stay at home’ guidance was issued

[...] there has been a steady increase in help-seeking through helplines but also virtual webchats, looking at webpages. [...] There have been huge increases on some days, so it is not steady every day. It is about 25% to 29% increases in general, but on some days it is much higher with 120% increases in calls, and it is sometimes higher than that.

What we are hearing from the helplines is complexity, people calling with more complex needs. We are hearing an increase in volume in general, but also real concerns about what options are available. The police this week have started talking about there being an increase in non-crime domestic calls. In other words, there is an increase in callouts but not necessarily resulting in a report or a crime. In some ways, it is early days but I think at least that means people are calling.¹⁸

13. On 3 April 2020, 22 organisations working to address Violence against Women and Girls wrote to the Prime Minister calling for a strategy to protect women and girls during the Covid-19 crisis. It identified four “priorities for urgent action”:

1. ‘Resourcing the specialist support sector’ to meet the increased demand for specialist services at a time when services are facing pressures in the form of additional costs, access to technology, compliance with social distancing measures, access to food and essentials and decreased fundraised income.

2. ‘Crisis response planning and coordination involving VAWG and abuse experts’ to ensure that domestic and sexual violence are put at the highest levels of COVID-19 response planning.

3. ‘Strong public messaging and guidance on VAWG’, including clear statements that violence and abuse will not be tolerated, specific advice for victims and those with concerns about domestic violence and communications aimed at all communities and translated into a range of languages.

4. ‘Equal protection for migrant survivors’ addressing the particular risks faced by women with no recourse to public funds.¹⁹

16 BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: [‘Domestic abuse pandemic likely due to shutdown’](#)’, 30 March 2020

17 BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: [‘Worrying’ drop in calls for domestic violence support](#)’, 1 April 2020

18 Q198

19 [An open letter to the Prime Minister](#) from 22 organisations working to address Violence against Women and Girls, 3 April 2020

The Government response

14. On 11 April, at the daily Government press conference, the Home Secretary announced a package of support for victims of domestic abuse, saying that:

My message to every potential victim is simple: we have not forgotten you and we will not let you down. And my message to every perpetrator is equally simple: you will not get away with your crimes.

15. The Home Secretary announced a new national communications campaign under the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone to reach out to those who are at risk from abuse. At the same press conference, she confirmed that anyone at risk of or experiencing domestic abuse can leave home (in spite of the general ‘stay at home’ guidance) to seek support and refuge.

16. The announcement included the provision of up to £2 million to enhance online support services and helplines for domestic abuse.²⁰ The Government had previously, on 8 April, announced a £750m package of funding for frontline charities across the UK, made up of: £360 million direct from government departments, to support “charities providing vital services and helping vulnerable people through the current crisis” including “victims charities, including domestic abuse, to help with potential increase in demand for charities providing these services”; and £370 million for smaller charities.²¹ On 11 April, the Government encouraged domestic abuse charities to bid for a share of this funding, which is expected to be “up and running in the coming weeks”.²²

17. At the Government press conference, the National Police Chiefs’ Council Chair Martin Hewitt expressed his support for the Government’s campaign:

I particularly want to reinforce the Home Secretary’s message to victims of domestic abuse or controlling behaviour. We will come when you call for help. To abusers, do not think this is a time you can get away with it. We will still arrest, we will still bring people into custody, and we will still prosecute.²³

18. Many police forces, local authorities and individual services have also launched individual public information campaigns.²⁴

19. Witnesses told us that they strongly welcomed the Government’s efforts to raise awareness of domestic abuse and communicate clearly and consistently how to seek help. However Anna Edmundson of the NSPCC said that the Home Office had a “blind spot” about the fact that 1 in 5 children have experience of domestic abuse²⁵ and other witnesses recommended that the awareness campaign be widened.²⁶ Witnesses also told us that further steps are needed to ensure those who need it have access to information and services.

20 [Home Secretary announces support for domestic abuse victims](#), 11 April 2020

21 [Chancellor sets out extra £750 million coronavirus funding for frontline charities](#), 8 April 2020

22 [Home Secretary announces support for domestic abuse victims](#), 11 April 2020

23 [Speech from the NPCC chair Martin Hewitt](#)

24 [Police Oracle, ‘Forces tell domestic abuse victims they will remain a priority’](#), 26 March 2020; [Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, ‘Protecting the vulnerable during the coronavirus lockdown’](#), 1 April 2020; [Derby City Life Links: you are not alone](#); [Swansea council staff join campaign](#); [Carers Leeds You are not alone](#)

25 Q231

26 Q230

20. We strongly welcome the Government’s public information campaign encouraging people to seek help and making clear that help is available. The Home Secretary’s personal leadership of the information campaign is very welcome and has enhanced its visibility and encouraged police forces and others to run similar campaigns. *We encourage the Government to ensure these messages are also integrated into the main Covid-19 information campaigns so that it is made clear to the public that, as the Home Secretary has said, domestic abuse or the risk of abuse constitutes a reasonable excuse to leave home while lockdown measures are in place.*

21. *The messages should be communicated widely and inclusively, in multiple languages and formats including easy read and British Sign Language. The campaign should also include a child facing element and we would welcome further awareness-raising elements on child abuse.*

22. Karma Nirvana noted a risk that significantly increased traffic to the most prominent helplines and online services as a consequence of this important campaign could mean that some vulnerable victims struggle to get through. *The Home Office should consider development of links between helplines and services, to ensure that every victim gets a timely and safe response.*²⁷

23. We welcome the Government’s announcement of additional funding for charities which could potentially benefit organisations that provide support services to tackle domestic abuse and child abuse. We strongly support the clear commitment from Martin Hewitt and police forces that responding to domestic abuse is a high priority during the current crisis. The Government, the police and other organisations have all stressed how vital it is to tackle domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis and we welcome their recognition of the seriousness and importance of this issue.

The need for a wider Government domestic abuse strategy

24. While welcoming the Government’s information campaign, the Commissioners who gave evidence to the Committee called for a wider, coordinated Government strategy to address domestic abuse in the current circumstances. Nicole Jacobs stressed to us that there was an urgent need to plan ahead as well as providing support immediately, as “There will be people who are waiting and trying to survive every day and then will access support as quickly as they can when some of the lockdown is lifted”.²⁸

National coordination

25. Evidence to the Committee drew attention to the absence of “a coordinated and coherent national government-led strategy and action plan” to respond to the specific needs of women and children at risk of abuse²⁹ and to prevent abuse.³⁰ Anna Edmundson described “a bit of a vacuum of co-ordination”, in which departments with different remits

27 COR0054

28 Q199

29 [Letter to Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP from Southall Black Sisters and Compassion in Politics](#), 9 April 2020

30 Q218

around child protection were missing the opportunity to bring those strands together, and to listen to local safeguarding hubs who are co-ordinating the work of the NHS, social services, schools and police.³¹

26. The Commissioners told us that while they spent time each week working with officials in Whitehall, the policy and funding response from Government is hindered where different aspects of a problem engage different departments. For example, Dame Vera Baird said that people seeking refuge did not have any guaranteed funding: while bids for accommodation had to go through MHCLG, bids for other support from domestic abuse charities or for help for children had either to go through the Home Office for domestic abuse or through the Ministry of Justice for victims, and “those kinds of non-matched-together funding bids are poor”.³²

27. Nicole Jacobs advised that a strategic response to such problems could be unlocked more quickly by a formal cross-Government working group tasked with developing a plan and reporting swiftly to Government. Dame Vera Baird supported this call and further added that, if included in this working group, the three Commissioners could provide a “bridge” to the sector, ensuring the proposed Government approach is workable.³³

Local coordination

28. Southall Black Sisters and Compassion in Politics expressed particular concern about a lack of guidance to local authorities. The Government announced a £1.6bn funding package for coronavirus impacts on all local authority service areas, which would include refuge provision; however, it has been reported that £1.3bn of this funding is “earmarked for the impact on adult social care services”.³⁴ The organisations said that it is:

[...] unclear how local authorities are responding, but we are worried that abused women and children remain at risk. [...] At local and regional levels, there has been no coordinated effort taken by local authorities to develop and put into place an immediate and effective action plan to protect abused and vulnerable survivors. Even where some action has been taken, it is inconsistent, ineffective and lacking in economic viability, with councils left to pay commercial rates for accommodation that they have sourced. There appears to be confusion and chaos on the ground.³⁵

29. ***Whilst the public information programme is welcome, the Government now needs to go much further and set out a full Covid-19 cross-Government strategy on domestic abuse to cover both the period of lockdown and the period immediately after lockdown, when need for support is also likely to be acute. National leadership and coordination from central Government are important. We agree with the Commissioners that a formal cross-Government working group must be established, tasked with the production and implementation of a co-ordinated cross-Government action plan which is integrated into the wider Government planning through the emergency COBR committee. This***

31 Q223

32 Q211

33 Q203

34 [£1.6bn coronavirus fund: CCN response](#), County Councils Network, 19 March 2020

35 [Letter to Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP from Southall Black Sisters and Compassion in Politics](#), 9 April 2020

group should be led by the Home Secretary and include relevant Ministers across Government as well as the Domestic Abuse, Victims and Children’s Commissioners and should operate in consultation with frontline providers.

30. The strategy should include steps on ensuring access to information and support; outreach and prevention; funding for support services, including specialist and BAME services; provision of housing and refuge accommodation; and a criminal justice response. This national strategy should be backed up by action plans produced by all local authorities, as part of their emergency Covid-19 planning, to prevent and address domestic abuse during and after the lockdown.

Access to help and information

31. In oral evidence, Ellie Butt told the Committee that the moment of greatest risk for the victim may be when they leave the perpetrator: it is essential that the victim is able and encouraged to contact a specialist organisation for help at this time.³⁶

32. In France, victims of domestic violence are now able to seek help discreetly at pharmacies and at 20 “pop-up counselling centres” around the country that can be accessed while shopping for groceries.³⁷

33. Dame Vera Baird expressed support for the French scheme, saying that many victims who are now unable to seek help while at home will still be expected to shop for food and medicine for the family. She therefore proposed that a national scheme should be established as a matter of urgency, covering both pharmacies and supermarkets, which would enable victims to seek confidential assistance from trained staff by use of a code word, as in the ‘Ask for Angela’ campaign, or through a help button on online retail portals.³⁸

34. Hestia told us that a Safe Spaces model has already been piloted by the UK says NO MORE campaign, and is ready to be rolled out to pharmacies following consultation with the General Pharmaceutical Council.³⁹ Community networks can play an important role in identifying and helping victims. Lucy Hadley said that Women’s Aid had trained nearly 1000 community ambassadors to help spread awareness, as women will often confide in someone they trust.⁴⁰ Baljit Banga told us that deep community outreach was a particular feature of specialist BME services, as BME women are more likely to access support in person or via community routes.⁴¹

35. About 40% of notifications to the police come from neighbours.⁴² On 17 April the Guardian reported that Crimestoppers sent 120 domestic abuse reports to police forces

36 Q236

37 [European countries develop new ways to tackle domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns](#), NBC News, 3 April 2020; [France to put domestic abuse victims in hotels after jump in numbers](#), Reuters, 30 March 2020

38 Q203; Q210

39 COR0020 [All references starting COR are written evidence submissions published on the Committee website.](#)

40 Q236

41 Q236

42 Q210

in the week beginning 6 April.⁴³ This was an increase of 49.3% from the average of 80.4 reports per week across a five-week period in January and February, before the lockdown.⁴⁴ Anna Edmundson told us that “Safeguarding is really everybody’s business”.⁴⁵

36. Witnesses stressed to us the need to act creatively to adapt to the limitations caused by the lockdown. Nicole Jacobs identified retailers, NHS volunteers, neighbours and employers as having the potential to be “eyes and ears” in the community as they were “more likely to be interacting with families” during the crisis.⁴⁶ Lucy Hadley pointed to both NHS volunteers and mutual aid groups being established in communities as “community lifelines” to reach vulnerable families.⁴⁷ Dame Vera Baird suggested that a ‘red button’ for online grocery shoppers could be added at checkout to access help, and that vehicles making announcements in public spaces like parks to urge compliance with social distancing guidelines could also deliver messages about access to support for victims.⁴⁸

37. While lockdown and strict social distancing measures are in place, new strategies are needed to ensure victims can access forms of urgent help and support that take account of the fact that it might be harder to phone from home, or to talk privately to a GP, friend or neighbour. We welcome the progress which has already been made towards a Safe Spaces model to offer help through pharmacies. The Government should sponsor a scheme enabling victims of abuse to contact support services through supermarkets and other retailers too. We agree with witnesses that it is essential to act creatively, both nationally and locally, to find new ways to offer access to support during lockdown and to share, encourage and spread effective initiatives.

38. Local authorities, as part of their action plans on domestic abuse, should ensure that local services are pursuing proactive outreach during lockdown, visiting families and households where there have been domestic abuse incidents in the past or where there are vulnerable children.

39. In circumstances where many victims of abuse may have their access to phones and devices controlled by their abuser, neighbours, employers and friends can also play a vital role by recognising the signs of domestic or child abuse, and raising concerns.⁴⁹

The criminal justice system

40. Witnesses pointed to the importance of the criminal justice system in the response to domestic violence. The Government has recently taken welcome steps to make the criminal justice system more accessible to domestic and child abuse victims during the lockdown, by relaxing evidence requirements needed to qualify for legal aid; and by publishing information on how victims can apply for an injunction in the family court if they are unrepresented.⁵⁰ Dame Vera Baird strongly advocated the use of Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), which can prevent a perpetrator from returning to

43 <https://twitter.com/CrimestoppersUK/status/1251138956420280325>

44 [Guardian liveblog](#), 17 April 2020

45 Q222

46 Q197

47 Q230

48 Q201, Q213

49 [Warning signs of domestic abuse](#), Crimestoppers website

50 [Select committees hear evidence on coronavirus response](#), Law Society; [Applying for a domestic violence family law act injunction for unrepresented applicants](#)

a residence and from having contact with the victim for up to 28 days. An advantage of such orders is that it is the perpetrator who leaves, while the victim can remain safe in the home. These orders are sought by the police through the courts and are designed to be processed quickly.⁵¹

41. Nicole Jacobs however told us that the police are currently struggling to operate these orders, since an alternative address must be provided by the perpetrator and court closures are impeding the process.⁵² Some police areas, for example North Yorkshire, are seeking to extend existing provision for temporary accommodation for perpetrators during the coronavirus lockdown.⁵³

42. Nicole Jacobs and Dame Vera Baird also said that legal aid should be granted automatically to domestic abuse victims in respect of any application for protection during the lockdown “since this isolation [...] is being done as it were at our request [...] The courts have to make clear that these people are a priority and there will be hotlines for any help that is needed”.⁵⁴

43. *Domestic abuse needs to be a priority for the entire criminal justice system. The police, Crown Prosecution Service and Courts need to work together to ensure that Domestic Violence Prevention Order cases are heard swiftly. Local authorities need to ensure that their domestic abuse action plans include provision for alternative temporary accommodation for perpetrators if that is needed to apply DVPOs and keep victims safe.*

44. *The Government should ensure that legal aid is granted automatically to domestic abuse victims in respect of any application for protection during the lockdown.*

45. Nicole Jacobs told us that many victims who are currently trapped with their abusers may be unable to report the abuse they have experienced until the lockdown ends.⁵⁵ Some of the common offences that could be committed in a domestic abuse context—for example harassment, common assault and battery—are subject to a time limit of six months for the commencement of proceedings in a magistrate’s court under s127 of the Magistrates’ Courts Act 1980. If victims are unable to report such offences during the lockdown, it is possible that a significant proportion of this six-month limit will have elapsed by the time they are able to report to the police. A delay may also make it more difficult for the police to gather evidence to support the prosecution case. There is however no time limit for prosecuting either-way or indictable offences which would be tried in a Crown court.

46. *We support the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s call for the time limit for proceedings on domestic abuse-related summary offences to be extended following the lockdown. The Government should legislate to extend the time limit set by s127 of the Magistrates’ Courts Act 1980.*

51 Q215

52 Q201

53 [Protecting the vulnerable during the coronavirus lockdown](#), Association of Police and Crime Commissioners blog, 1 April 2020

54 Q201; Q211

55 Q202

Funding for support services

47. Organisations working in the sector have called for an urgent injection of funds to help services address the increased needs for support. They reported that many services including refuges, helplines and community-based services have incurred additional costs as a consequence of the pandemic. These include the costs of:

- supporting a transition to home working in line with Government guidance;
- accessing the technology needed to adapt delivery;
- in some refuges, having to reduce occupancy so that current residents have the space to self-isolate, with the consequence that they have lost rental income for unoccupied beds;
- addressing food insecurity for women and children in refuges who are struggling to access food and essentials, due to food banks closing and low stock of affordable food and household items in shops.

In addition to these increased costs, many organisations have seen a reduction in fundraised income, which is “down across the board”.⁵⁶ The Women’s Aid Federation of England told us that the sector will need at least £48.2 million to cover the costs of local domestic abuse services over the next six months.⁵⁷ Lucy Hadley told us that these costs included “backfilling staff and childcare, remote working and hardship costs for the women and children they are supporting.”⁵⁸

48. On 1 April the Women’s Resources Centre wrote to the Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport to propose that “these urgent needs might be addressed by repurposing the Tampon Tax Fund, taking this opportunity to divert this fund”—which has previously been used to fund pilot projects in the sector, such as the development of partnership working between money advice services and local domestic abuse services⁵⁹—”to specialist women’s charities in the form of unrestricted grants.”⁶⁰

49. Our witnesses confirmed that funding had yet to reach frontline services.⁶¹ Anna Edmundson told us that speed was of the essence in getting the funding to essential services and Lucy Hadley emphasised the importance of ensuring the fair and equitable distribution of the Government’s promised funding for frontline charities (see paragraph 16 above) to small charities.⁶²

50. Dame Vera Baird told us that half the £750m fund would be distributed through central Government departments, while the other half would be distributed through local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners who commission services locally.⁶³ Many small charities which are embedded in local communities, and specialist services—for example, supporting BME women, LGBTQ+, adolescent and/or disabled clients and

56 [An open letter to the Prime Minister](#), from 22 organisations working to address Violence against Women and Girls, 3 April 2020

57 COR0057

58 Q221

59 [Government response](#) to the Committee’s Ninth Report 2017–19 on Domestic Abuse, p12

60 [Letter to DCMS calling for the tampon tax to be repurposed](#), Women’s Resource Centre

61 QQ224–225

62 Q226; Q225

63 Q204

sex workers—are however not commissioned through those official channels and “less well sustained” than their larger counterparts, drawing income from “a whole range of small packages of funding”.⁶⁴ Our witnesses were therefore deeply concerned that these vital services for the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach would be denied access to Government support.⁶⁵

51. Nicole Jacobs questioned whether distribution of the fund through such limited channels would enable this substantial investment to be used to best effect.⁶⁶ She told us that the provision of state funding to the sector through local authorities and PCCs had resulted in a “postcode lottery” even before the pandemic started. She said

This is not a group of services that is equal across the country or funded in a robust way. [...] the main services that we depend on are often vulnerable. They will certainly be losing funding during this time. They will not have an ability to fee-earn. The people who do runs and all sorts of things to fund-raise for them will not be able to do that, so the charities themselves need support.⁶⁷

She noted the importance of giving these organisations certainty about funding, both to maintain their operations now and also to plan for a second surge in requests for help once the lockdown is lifted.⁶⁸

52. Support services for domestic abuse and vulnerable children need urgent and direct funding support: without it, desperate victims will be put at far greater risk of harm. Immediate and targeted assistance is needed to maintain services and to address the wider needs of victims of abuse including refuge, food security, culturally-specific support and services addressing additional needs such as debt, insecure immigration status, mental health needs and drug and alcohol dependency.

53. The Government should provide an emergency funding package that recognises the needs of, and is accessible to, both generic providers and those small, specialist, targeted services which are best equipped to help individuals from protected, vulnerable or minority groups, and people with additional needs. We would encourage the Government to consider whether the Tampon Tax might contribute to this support in the short term.

54. The Government should provide a ring-fenced allocation within the promised £750m fund for charities to cover organisations supporting people at risk of abuse, including children. It should also confirm the arrangements for timely, fair and equitable distribution of this fund. We call on the Government to guarantee that all services will be able to apply for funding, regardless of size and whether or not they have an existing relationship with the Government, a local authority or PCC; that the application process will be simple; and that decisions will be made quickly.

64 Q204

65 Q221; Q228

66 Q199

67 Q199

68 Q199

Housing and refuges

55. While it is legal for victims and their families to leave home in order to escape abuse, they will need somewhere to go.⁶⁹ The crisis has presented a number of acute challenges to women's refuges, which in England have 30% less than the recommended number of bed spaces, and which prior to the pandemic were already struggling to meet demand. A research project in 2017 found that one in six refuges had closed down since 2010,⁷⁰ and 64% per cent of referrals to refuges were declined in 2018–19.⁷¹

56. There has been an increase in calls to refuges but requirements for shielding and social distancing have resulted in staff shortages and reduced refuge capacity. Hestia told us that approximately 25% of their staff were shielding or in self-isolation.⁷² Some refuges are full and any refuge which is housing someone with Covid-19 would have to turn new applicants away.⁷³ Baljit Banga told us that she was aware of two refuges which had had to quarantine entirely for fourteen days: this was a difficulty for which other refuges would need to plan.⁷⁴ Refuges needed emergency resources to ensure women could access phones, educational materials provided for their children online, food and amenities, as well as support for back office costs and, urgently, access to PPE.⁷⁵

57. In the Government press conference on 11 April the Home Secretary said

I'm clear about this—perpetrators should be the ones who have to leave the family home, not the supposed loved ones whom they torment and abuse.

Our priority is to get abusers out, but, sadly, this is not always possible.

So where a victim, and their children, do need to leave, we will ensure they have a safe place to go.

That's why we are looking at alternative accommodation to best support the work of refuges and ensure that there are enough places for those in need at this difficult time.⁷⁶

58. Dame Vera Baird subsequently expressed disappointment that the Government had not acted more swiftly to secure additional refuge accommodation, contrasting the delay with the £3.2 million support which had been announced to enable local authorities to accommodate rough sleepers during the pandemic.⁷⁷ She noted also that there is a lack of move-on accommodation, which frees up space in refuges and is critical for the smooth operation of the system.⁷⁸

59. A potential solution has been offered by Southall Black Sisters, working with Compassion in Politics. Following agreement by the government in France to accommodate domestic abuse victims in hotels, these organisations approached hotels and hostels in the

69 Q230

70 COR0029 p3

71 Q220

72 COR0020

73 Q207

74 Q218

75 Q207

76 [Home Secretary outlines support for domestic abuse victims](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-outlines-support-for-domestic-abuse-victims), www.gov.uk, 11 April 2020

77 Q203; [£3.2 million emergency support for rough sleepers during coronavirus outbreak](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/3-2-million-emergency-support-for-rough-sleepers-during-coronavirus-outbreak), 17 March 2020

78 Q203

UK to ask if they would accommodate victims at heavily subsidised rates, to cover their running costs. Having received an “overwhelmingly positive” response from providers, these organisations wrote to the Chancellor of Exchequer on 9 April asking the Government to make “an immediate commitment to underwrite the costs of hotels and hostels willing to offer accommodation to women and children who experience abuse, including migrant women subject to ‘no recourse to public funds’ and without leave to remain”. They noted that women accessing such accommodation would need specialist support, which would also require funding.⁷⁹ Dame Vera Baird told us that Swansea University had separately offered its spare accommodation to the local PCC as refuge space.⁸⁰ On 19 April, the Guardian reported that the Government had not been in touch with hotels to discuss this offer; an MCHLG spokesperson was reported to have said that the Government was “looking carefully at all safe and appropriate accommodation options which could provide support”.⁸¹ Hestia emphasised that if victims were to be moved into hotels there would need to be an “exit plan” in place to ensure they could move on at the right time.⁸²

60. Nicole Jacobs recommended also that domestic abuse victims should be granted priority for housing support.⁸³ Her recommendation was supported by Crisis, who wrote to us explaining that:

Currently, unless a person experiencing domestic violence can prove they are “significantly more vulnerable than an ordinary person would be if they became homeless” then they would not be defined as being in priority need and eligible for an offer of settled housing.

Providing evidence to demonstrate vulnerability can be traumatic and near impossible for people who have experienced domestic abuse. There are accounts of survivors being told to return home to a dangerous situation, or to the place of violence, to retrieve ID or evidence to prove they are homeless due to domestic abuse [...] Given lockdown measures currently in place during the COVID-19 crisis, it is near impossible for survivors to gather this type of evidence, leaving them at further risk of homelessness or further abuse [...]

Survivors should be [...] given automatic priority need for housing, without having to be subject to further legal tests to determine that they are more vulnerable than an “ordinary person facing homelessness.” Someone surviving domestic abuse is by definition vulnerable and should be able to access safe and secure housing.

Crisis suggested that, while local authorities would still require some proof that an individual’s homelessness had been caused by domestic abuse, the burden of proof could be lowered, for example by seeking references from a domestic abuse service. They noted that this lower burden of proof would be similar to that operating in Wales and would also be similar to that operated for legal aid.⁸⁴ ***We recommend that priority need for settled accommodation is extended to survivors of domestic abuse.***

79 [Letter to Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP from SBS and Compassion in Politics](#), 9 April 2020

80 Q203

81 [Hotels say offer of refuge for domestic abuse victims has been snubbed](#), the Guardian, 19 April 2020

82 COR0020

83 Q201

84 COR0029

61. We welcome the Government's commitment on 11 April to look at alternative accommodation to support refuges. There is huge pressure on refuges in the meantime and, while referrals are still being accepted, requests for accommodation for women and children at risk of harm are rising. This cannot wait.

62. *The Government must prioritise working with local authorities, providers and other stakeholders to increase the availability of refuge and move-on accommodation. Clear Government leadership should be brought to the task of securing hotel and hostel accommodation for victims in all parts of the country, as national coordination is needed to meet the scale and urgency of the challenge, and so that anyone needing to leave their home during lockdown because of abuse can be guaranteed a safe place to stay. The Government must also ensure that the existing network of refuges remains sustainable for the long term by providing ring-fenced support for the additional costs, and loss of income, incurred by these services as a result of coronavirus.*

Specialist services

BME and migrant women

63. Our predecessors in 2018 heard that some BME women are more vulnerable to culturally-specific types of abuse such as honour-based violence or FGM. These types of abuse may involve the collusion of wider family members. Such women therefore may find it particularly difficult to seek help, both because of close-knit family and communities and because of language difficulties.⁸⁵ The specialist services described to us by Baljit Banga represent a vital lifeline reaching deep into these communities and helping women to overcome these additional barriers. This is clearly recognised within the sector: we were told that mainstream providers of domestic abuse support services will often pass on referrals of BME women to these specialist services because of their higher levels of expertise on intersectional and culturally-specific vulnerabilities.⁸⁶ We were also told that since the lockdown began these services have seen an increase in referrals of BME women from statutory services and from the police.⁸⁷

64. However, witnesses to the previous Committee's inquiry told the Committee that these services had been reduced by around 45% in the previous five years.⁸⁸ Small organisations which in normal times work in the community and face to face may lack access to the technology which would allow them to adapt to providing support online⁸⁹ and Baljit Banga told us that the previous cutbacks meant valuable services were already extremely fragile before the pandemic began; this should be taken into account when considering the allocation of support.⁹⁰ ***Government funding for support services and refuge accommodation must include specialist provision and must ensure that BME services can continue and expand to meet any increased need.***

85 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p25

86 Q218

87 Q218

88 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p25

89 [An open letter to the Prime Minister](#) from 22 organisations working to address Violence against Women and Girls, 3 April 2020

90 Q236

Insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

65. Our predecessors were told in 2018 by Southall Black Sisters that women who have an insecure immigration status are particularly vulnerable. They reported that “immigration status is a potent weapon of coercive control in the hands of perpetrators, who exploit women’s fears of deportation, destitution and imprisonment, to continue their abuse and prevent women from exiting abuse”. In particular, they identified the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status, which means that many migrant women of insecure immigration status are not entitled to state financial assistance, as a barrier to women seeking help.⁹¹

66. A letter to the Home Secretary organised by the Latin American Women’s Rights Service and Amnesty International UK and signed by more than 20 BME specialist frontline services, migrant and human rights organisations in the UK raised concerns over the plight of migrant women and those with an insecure immigration status during the pandemic:

Many women with insecure immigration status do not have access to public funds so are often blocked from accessing safety and the support they need—four in five are, for instance, turned away from refuges. They are reluctant to go to the doctor or hospital if they are worried about their health, because they are scared they will be reported to immigration enforcement. At the same time, migrant women are prevented from reporting domestic abuse to the police or other statutory services since perpetrators use immigration status as a tool of coercive control threatening them with detention, deportation, destitution or separation from their children.⁹²

67. In 2018 our predecessors expressed particular concern about the sharing by the police of abuse victims’ details with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration control. They recommended that “insecure immigration status must not bar victims of abuse from protection and access to justice”.⁹³ The Joint Committee on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill in 2019 pursued these concerns and was told by the Government that

On the issue of an information-sharing firewall, we indicated in our July 2019 response to the [Joint] Committee that we had concerns that a statutory bar on the police sharing information about victims of domestic abuse with Immigration Enforcement could be detrimental to vulnerable victims. As the national policing lead on domestic abuse, Deputy Chief Constable Louisa Rolfe, explained in her evidence to the Committee, many police officers worked with Immigration Enforcement to help resolve a victim’s uncertainty about their immigration status and so remove the perpetrator’s ability to control and manipulate them because of their status.

The Government committed to “continue to monitor the implementation of the relevant National Police Chiefs’ Council guidance”, which had been introduced in December 2018.⁹⁴

91 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p25

92 [Letter to the Secretary of State: Step up migrant women campaign](#), 31 March 2020

93 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p34

94 [Further Government Response to the report of the Joint Committee on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill](#), CP 214, March 2020; [Police to stop passing on immigration status of victims](#), The Guardian, 7 December 2018

68. While this guidance has now been in place for over a year, Nicole Jacobs told us that the “longstanding” worry for migrant women remained:

If they were to call the police, the fact that we do not have a firewall means that they will worry, “Will details about my status be passed along to immigration services?” We should make it clear that people can call the police and access support regardless⁹⁵

Similarly, Dame Vera Baird said:

It is long overdue that we crack the issue of no recourse to public funds and the intervention that comes between a police officer and his duty to support complainants of domestic abuse and concerns about immigration status, and that simply must stop in this crisis and hopefully never come back. It is totally wrong that people are helpless in the face of abuse and cannot escape in our country at this time.⁹⁶

69. All three Commissioners told us that there is now an urgent need for the Government to address the additional barriers facing people with no recourse to public funds, which prevent women and children escaping their abusers, and accessing healthcare and refuge.⁹⁷ On 3 April our Chair wrote a joint letter with the Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, Rt Hon. Stephen Timms MP, asking the Government how it would support individuals with NRPF status, and those whose immigration status is insecure.⁹⁸ A response was requested by 14 April, but at the time of agreeing this report the response is still awaited.

70. It is vital that BME and specialist services get the funding they need at this time, and any individual with No Recourse to Public Funds status should, following referral from a domestic abuse service, be entitled to access state support during the coronavirus crisis, regardless of their immigration status. We will look further at issues relating to NRPF status in our future work.

The impact of the crisis on children

71. Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner for England, told us that two thirds of women in refuge have children with them, and around 800,000 children experienced domestic abuse in the past year. She identified four factors which contribute to family vulnerability, which may be exacerbated in different ways by the impacts of coronavirus: domestic abuse; severe mental health needs; addiction and poverty.⁹⁹ Babies and under-fives may be particularly vulnerable, as well as teenagers who begin to struggle with the lockdown and who may be at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation. Other factors including attachment difficulties, and medical conditions such as bowel and bladder problems,¹⁰⁰ may also play a role in child vulnerability.

95 Q204

96 Q204

97 Q204

98 [Letter to Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on no recourse to public funds status](#), 3 April 2020

99 Q204

100 COR0044

72. Anna Edmundson from the NSPCC told us that “children are feeling the impact of this crisis particularly”. Data from Childline indicated that, as well as being concerned about coronavirus, children and young people are very concerned about abuse now that they are unable to leave the house to get support at schools, clubs, friends’ or relatives’ houses. Childline has also heard concerns expressed about other support, such as CAMHS services, being closed, and in the first two weeks since the lockdown started saw an increase of nearly 10% in calls from adults about parental mental health, alcohol or substance misuse.¹⁰¹

73. The previous Committee recommended that “the devastating effect of domestic abuse on children is explicitly recognised in the legislation” on domestic abuse. The Children’s Commissioner reiterated this recommendation, telling the Committee that “Regarding the Domestic Abuse Bill, for me it is absolutely centre stage to recognise that children are victims within this too.”

74. *We agree with the Children’s Commissioner and our other witnesses that children’s direct experience of domestic abuse should be recognised in the definition of domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Bill.*¹⁰²

75. *Children’s support services need to be maintained during the Covid-19 crisis. We welcome the fact that helplines like Childline and other services such as CAMHS services, are still open for children who need help. They too need to be sustained by direct Government funding where there are shortfalls because of falling charitable donations.*

Making vulnerable children visible

76. The social distancing guidelines have had a profound impact on families in need, as the closure of schools and children’s services has meant that “a lot of children who would be picked up and noticed [...] when things are going wrong become invisible”.¹⁰³ The Local Government Association raised concerns that referrals to children’s social care have fallen since ‘stay at home’ guidance was issued. While councils ordinarily receive, on average, almost 1800 referrals per day, anecdotal evidence suggested that referrals had fallen by more than half in some areas.¹⁰⁴ Lancashire Violence Reduction Network reported a 14% reduction in referrals but noted “a shift in the peak times of domestic abuse incidents from pre-Covid 19 times when they were 3–4pm and 7–11pm. The incidents tend now to be reported across a wider timeframe, from anytime between 11am to 11pm”. This raised concerns that children are being exposed to abuse for a longer period each day, increasing their trauma.¹⁰⁵

77. Anne Longfield told us that the lack of visibility of child victims of abuse and neglect is an enduring problem for the child protection system and has become an emergency because of the pandemic. Research carried out by her office into the hidden extent of child abuse had highlighted that of the 800,000 children who experienced domestic abuse in the last year, only 150 had a social worker.¹⁰⁶

101 Q222

102 Home Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Domestic Abuse](#), HC 1015, 22 October 2018, p26; QQ204, 216, 231

103 Q200; Q204

104 COR0037

105 COR0041

106 Q204

78. While schools have remained open for vulnerable children, initial indications suggest the number of children who would be considered vulnerable to abuse who are attending school is lower than expected.¹⁰⁷ There are several reasons why this might be happening: the child's vulnerability may not be readily apparent; the family may be reluctant to send the child to school as a "vulnerable" child for fear of stigma; they may be concerned about increased risk of infection.

79. Anne Longfield told us that the requirement to reconfigure the child protection system rapidly, to maintain contact with families under social distancing, was challenging but that there was a "robust ambition" to "know those families and be alongside them" at this time.¹⁰⁸ Local authorities had begun to assess levels of risk, and home visits would take place in the most concerning cases. In other cases, however, social workers would seek to maintain contact via a screen: while they did not "hold back" in household checks conducted this way, it was not a wholly effective substitute for face to face contact.¹⁰⁹ Anna Edmundson urged "strong, robust, local safeguarding" which could have deep conversations, share information and understand the risk to each vulnerable child.¹¹⁰

80. Operation Encompass emphasised that local authorities should share information with the police about vulnerable children who are currently attending school, so that the police can pass information to the safeguarding lead about any incidents of abuse which have occurred.¹¹¹ The Local Government Association, however, raised concern about the importance of staff involved in safeguarding having access to PPE. They reported an incident where a social worker went into a home to remove a young child at risk without any PPE and was spat at by the parents, who claimed to have Covid-19.¹¹²

81. The Children's Commissioner said

The emergency phase has got to a place where there is the makings of a system. Now as it becomes the new normal, there has to be a tightening up of the protocols and guidance and there has to be a greater emphasis on those children having to come back into school rather than if they so wish, unless there is a dialogue and a discussion with a social worker that opts them out. The expectation is clear that they do come in, but putting added pressure and making that a requirement is something that I think needs to come next.¹¹³

On 3 April the Government issued guidance for local authorities on children's social care. This stated that the Government expects local authorities and social workers to make judgements about visiting which balance considerations about risks to children and young people, risks to families and risks to the workforce. It noted that social workers and their managers are best placed to make professional judgements in each case about the form of contact needed to ensure a child or young person's safety, and that contact should be "sufficient to reassure the social worker that the child is not currently at risk of harm." Where face to face work was deemed necessary, the guidance indicated that

107 Q200

108 Q201

109 Q205

110 Q233

111 COR0021

112 COR0037

113 Q206

practitioners should take account of Public Health England (PHE) advice, including use of PPE if Covid-19 was suspected or confirmed. Where there was a likelihood of serious harm, practitioners were directed to follow immediate protection procedures.¹¹⁴

82. Domestic violence and child abuse remain closely linked. In order to safeguard the most vulnerable children, face to face contact remains the most effective approach. The coronavirus crisis has created new challenges in doing that and therefore we would urge local authorities, schools, police and other professionals involved in child welfare to work collaboratively, to find smarter ways to enable face to face contact to happen and to make sure these children remain firmly on their radar. We are concerned about the numbers of vulnerable children who would be eligible for school places who have not taken up places. Contact should be made to assess whether additional support is needed at home and whether vulnerable children not in school are safe at home. Funding, additional staff and PPE should be supplied to these services to facilitate swift progress with home visits.¹¹⁵ Leadership is also required from Government to continue the development and clarification of guidance for local authorities and social services on contact with families in crisis outside school.

Conclusion

So much of this crisis is showing us some of the vulnerabilities and the cracks in our system where people fall through the net and have been for many years.

Source: Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Q204

83. The “stay at home” guidance issued on 23 March was necessary to protect the NHS and save lives by flattening the curve of coronavirus infection. But for some people home is not a safe place to be, and that is why the Covid-19 social distancing measures need to be accompanied by a plan to support victims of abuse in the home. The Government has rightly made clear the importance of tackling domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis—we now need the next practical steps to make that happen. ***Without strong action to tackle domestic abuse and support victims during the Covid-19 pandemic, society will be dealing with the devastating consequences for a generation.***

84. While the Home Secretary has expressed the Government’s commitment to support victims through the lockdown, a full action plan covering support services, housing and the criminal justice system with cross-Government coordination is now urgently needed, and all local authorities need to ensure there are strong local action plans as part of their emergency Covid-19 planning. We agree with the Commissioners that there is an urgent need to establish a formal cross-Government working group, tasked with production of a co-ordinated and coherent action plan responding to the rise in domestic abuse during the pandemic. This group must work in consultation with frontline providers, including the Commissioners.

85. It is essential that the risks of harm to victims of domestic and child abuse during this period are properly addressed. We have been encouraged to learn that while there are urgent needs for support within the sector, there is a widespread and enormous level of commitment from charities, social services, schools, the NHS, police and others to transform services and be available to people and families in crisis. The Government can

¹¹⁴ [Covid-19 guidance for local authorities on children’s social care](#)

¹¹⁵ Q205; Q233; COR0037

and must rapidly pull together a plan, to co-ordinate the policy response from different Government departments and provide the resources needed to prevent abuse and protect the vulnerable.

86. The Government must provide emergency ring-fenced funding for helplines, refuges and specialist support services to avoid a domestic abuse emergency and to ensure that victims aren't let down. Substantial emergency funding is needed now to stabilise critical helplines; maintain specialist services for BME women and others with complex or intersecting needs; facilitate the movement of victims through refuge into move-on accommodation; and to address the most fundamental needs of families in refuge for food and amenities.

87. Organisations addressing domestic and child abuse and violence against women and girls provide confidential, sometimes lifesaving, support. However, they themselves often survive on goodwill and small parcels of funding. It is sadly likely that the long-term impact of the pandemic on the economy and society will have a long-lasting impact on demand for their services. For this reason the Government should follow up the immediate injection of funding with a longer-term guarantee of support, taking account of the sector's need to plan for a second surge in demand when the lockdown is lifted.

88. Witnesses to this short inquiry have offered a number of creative solutions to the current concerns, which could provide long term benefits. The Government has worked hard and constructively to develop the Domestic Abuse bill which was re-introduced to Parliament on 3 March 2020. We hope that, looking beyond the immediate pressures of this period, the Government will work with the sector and use this opportunity to focus on and to re-establish these vital services for the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

Domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home

1. We strongly welcome the Government's public information campaign encouraging people to seek help and making clear that help is available. The Home Secretary's personal leadership of the information campaign is very welcome and has enhanced its visibility and encouraged police forces and others to run similar campaigns. *We encourage the Government to ensure these messages are also integrated into the main Covid-19 information campaigns so that it is made clear to the public that, as the Home Secretary has said, domestic abuse or the risk of abuse constitutes a reasonable excuse to leave home while lockdown measures are in place.* (Paragraph 20)
2. *The messages should be communicated widely and inclusively, in multiple languages and formats including easy read and British Sign Language. The campaign should also include a child facing element and we would welcome further awareness-raising elements on child abuse.* (Paragraph 21)
3. *The Home Office should consider development of links between helplines and services, to ensure that every victim gets a timely and safe response.* (Paragraph 22)
4. We welcome the Government's announcement of additional funding for charities which could potentially benefit organisations that provide support services to tackle domestic abuse and child abuse. We strongly support the clear commitment from Martin Hewitt and police forces that responding to domestic abuse is a high priority during the current crisis. The Government, the police and other organisations have all stressed how vital it is to tackle domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis and we welcome their recognition of the seriousness and importance of this issue. (Paragraph 23)
5. *Whilst the public information programme is welcome, the Government now needs to go much further and set out a full Covid-19 cross-Government strategy on domestic abuse to cover both the period of lockdown and the period immediately after lockdown, when need for support is also likely to be acute. National leadership and coordination from central Government are important. We agree with the Commissioners that a formal cross-Government working group must be established, tasked with the production and implementation of a co-ordinated cross-Government action plan which is integrated into the wider Government planning through the emergency COBR committee. This group should be led by the Home Secretary and include relevant Ministers across Government as well as the Domestic Abuse, Victims and Children's Commissioners and should operate in consultation with frontline providers.* (Paragraph 29)
6. *The strategy should include steps on ensuring access to information and support; outreach and prevention; funding for support services, including specialist and BAME services; provision of housing and refuge accommodation; and a criminal justice response. This national strategy should be backed up by action plans produced by all local authorities, as part of their emergency Covid-19 planning, to prevent and address domestic abuse during and after the lockdown.* (Paragraph 30)

7. *While lockdown and strict social distancing measures are in place, new strategies are needed to ensure victims can access forms of urgent help and support that take account of the fact that it might be harder to phone from home, or to talk privately to a GP, friend or neighbour. We welcome the progress which has already been made towards a Safe Spaces model to offer help through pharmacies. The Government should sponsor a scheme enabling victims of abuse to contact support services through supermarkets and other retailers too. We agree with witnesses that it is essential to act creatively, both nationally and locally, to find new ways to offer access to support during lockdown and to share, encourage and spread effective initiatives. (Paragraph 37)*
8. *Local authorities, as part of their action plans on domestic abuse, should ensure that local services are pursuing proactive outreach during lockdown, visiting families and households where there have been domestic abuse incidents in the past or where there are vulnerable children. (Paragraph 38)*
9. *In circumstances where many victims of abuse may have their access to phones and devices controlled by their abuser, neighbours, employers and friends can also play a vital role by recognising the signs of domestic or child abuse, and raising concerns. (Paragraph 39)*
10. *Domestic abuse needs to be a priority for the entire criminal justice system. The police, Crown Prosecution Service and Courts need to work together to ensure that Domestic Violence Prevention Order cases are heard swiftly. Local authorities need to ensure that their domestic abuse action plans include provision for alternative temporary accommodation for perpetrators if that is needed to apply DVPOs and keep victims safe. (Paragraph 43)*
11. *The Government should ensure that legal aid is granted automatically to domestic abuse victims in respect of any application for protection during the lockdown. (Paragraph 44)*
12. *We support the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's call for the time limit for proceedings on domestic abuse-related summary offences to be extended following the lockdown. The Government should legislate to extend the time limit set by s127 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980. (Paragraph 46)*
13. *Support services for domestic abuse and vulnerable children need urgent and direct funding support: without it, desperate victims will be put at far greater risk of harm. Immediate and targeted assistance is needed to maintain services and to address the wider needs of victims of abuse including refuge, food security, culturally-specific support and services addressing additional needs such as debt, insecure immigration status, mental health needs and drug and alcohol dependency. (Paragraph 52)*
14. *The Government should provide an emergency funding package that recognises the needs of, and is accessible to, both generic providers and those small, specialist, targeted services which are best equipped to help individuals from protected, vulnerable or minority groups, and people with additional needs. We would encourage the Government to consider whether the Tampon Tax might contribute to this support in the short term. (Paragraph 53)*

15. *The Government should provide a ring-fenced allocation within the promised £750m fund for charities to cover organisations supporting people at risk of abuse, including children. It should also confirm the arrangements for timely, fair and equitable distribution of this fund. We call on the Government to guarantee that all services will be able to apply for funding, regardless of size and whether or not they have an existing relationship with the Government, a local authority or PCC; that the application process will be simple; and that decisions will be made quickly. (Paragraph 54)*
16. *We recommend that priority need for settled accommodation is extended to survivors of domestic abuse. (Paragraph 60)*
17. *We welcome the Government's commitment on 11 April to look at alternative accommodation to support refuges. There is huge pressure on refuges in the meantime and, while referrals are still being accepted, requests for accommodation for women and children at risk of harm are rising. This cannot wait. (Paragraph 61)*
18. *The Government must prioritise working with local authorities, providers and other stakeholders to increase the availability of refuge and move-on accommodation. Clear Government leadership should be brought to the task of securing hotel and hostel accommodation for victims in all parts of the country, as national coordination is needed to meet the scale and urgency of the challenge, and so that anyone needing to leave their home during lockdown because of abuse can be guaranteed a safe place to stay. The Government must also ensure that the existing network of refuges remains sustainable for the long term by providing ring-fenced support for the additional costs, and loss of income, incurred by these services as a result of coronavirus. (Paragraph 62)*
19. *Government funding for support services and refuge accommodation must include specialist provision and must ensure that BME services can continue and expand to meet any increased need. (Paragraph 64)*
20. *It is vital that BME and specialist services get the funding they need at this time, and any individual with No Recourse to Public Funds status should, following referral from a domestic abuse service, be entitled to access state support during the coronavirus crisis, regardless of their immigration status. We will look further at issues relating to NRPF status in our future work. (Paragraph 70)*
21. *We agree with the Children's Commissioner and our other witnesses that children's direct experience of domestic abuse should be recognised in the definition of domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse Bill. (Paragraph 74)*
22. *Children's support services need to be maintained during the Covid-19 crisis. We welcome the fact that helplines like Childline and other services such as CAMHS services, are still open for children who need help. They too need to be sustained by direct Government funding where there are shortfalls because of falling charitable donations. (Paragraph 75)*
23. *Domestic violence and child abuse remain closely linked. In order to safeguard the most vulnerable children, face to face contact remains the most effective approach. The coronavirus crisis has created new challenges in doing that and therefore we would urge local authorities, schools, police and other professionals involved in child welfare to work collaboratively, to find smarter ways to enable face to face contact to happen*

and to make sure these children remain firmly on their radar. We are concerned about the numbers of vulnerable children who would be eligible for school places who have not taken up places. Contact should be made to assess whether additional support is needed at home and whether vulnerable children not in school are safe at home. Funding, additional staff and PPE should be supplied to these services to facilitate swift progress with home visits. Leadership is also required from Government to continue the development and clarification of guidance for local authorities and social services on contact with families in crisis outside school. (Paragraph 82)

24. *Without strong action to tackle domestic abuse and support victims during the Covid-19 pandemic, society will be dealing with the devastating consequences for a generation. (Paragraph 83)*

Formal minutes

Friday 24 April 2020

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper, in the Chair

Dehenna Davison	Tim Loughton
Laura Farris	Holly Lynch
Adam Holloway	Stuart C McDonald

Draft Report (*Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 88 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 29 April at 10.00 am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 18 March 2020

Lucy Moreton , Corporate Officer, Immigration Services Union	Q1–23
DCC Paul Netherton , National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Civil Contingencies, and Deputy Chief Constable, Devon and Cornwall Police, ACC Owen Weatherill , Strategic Lead, National Police Co-ordination Centre	Q24–59
Emma Moore , Chief Operating Officer, UK Border Force and Angela Perfect , COVID-19 Incident Gold Commander, UK Border Force	Q60–109

Monday 6 April 2020

Sergeant Simon Kempton , National Lead for Covid-19, Police Federation of England and Wales, and Chief Superintendent Paul Griffiths , President, Police Superintendents' Association	Q110–144
Chief Constable Lisa Winward , North Yorkshire Police, Chief Constable Garry Forsyth , Bedfordshire Police, Chief Constable Peter Goodman , Derbyshire Police, and Chief Constable John Robins , West Yorkshire Police.	Q145–196

Wednesday 15 April 2020

Dame Vera Baird DBE QC , Victims' Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs , Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Anne Longfield OBE , Children's Commissioner	Q197–217
Baljit Banga , Executive Director, Imkaan, Ellie Butt , Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Refuge, Anna Edmundson , Head of Policy and Public Affairs, NSPCC, Lucy Hadley , Campaigns and Policy Manager, Women's Aid	Q218–237

Tuesday 21 April 2020

Adrian Berry , Chair, Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, and Colin Yeo , Founder, Free Movement	Q238–282
Andy Hewett , Head of Advocacy, Refugee Council, Chai Patel , Legal Policy Director, Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, and Bella Sankey , Director, Detention Action	Q283–314

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website

- 1 Action for Children (COR0073)
- 2 Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse (COR0046)
- 3 All Wales Policing Team (COR0089)
- 4 Amnesty International UK and Migrant Voice (COR008)
- 5 Anonymous (COR0001)
- 6 Anonymous (COR0106)
- 7 Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (COR0098)
- 8 Asylum Matters, Detention Action, Doctors of the World UK, Freedom From Torture, The No Accommodation Network, Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council, UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (COR0016)
- 9 Bail for Immigration Detainees (COR0019)
- 10 Barnardo's (COR0104)
- 11 Bladder & Bowel UK (COR0030)
- 12 British Medical Association (COR0005)
- 13 British Red Cross (COR0108)
- 14 Children's Society (COR0045)
- 15 Connor Davidson (COR0048)
- 16 Criminal Justice Alliance (COR0076)
- 17 Crisis (COR003)
- 18 Crisis (COR0029)
- 19 Crown Prosecution Service (COR0099)
- 20 Doctors of the World UK (COR0017)
- 21 Dogs Trust (COR0064)
- 22 Dr Pickles and Professor Coker (COR0036)
- 23 Drive (COR0074)
- 24 Dyfed-Powys PCC and CC (COR0090)
- 25 End Violence Against Women Coalition (COR0063)
- 26 Fire Brigades Union (COR0062)
- 27 Freed Voices (COR0051)
- 28 Fulfilling Lives South East (COR0072)
- 29 G4S (COR0043)
- 30 GEOGroup (COR0033)
- 31 Greater Manchester Combined Authority (COR0093)
- 32 Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (COR0058)
- 33 Helen Goodman (COR0086)

- 34 Henry Jackson Society (COR0018)
- 35 Hestia (COR0020)
- 36 Homeless Link (COR0012)
- 37 Hourglass (COR0075)
- 38 Human Trafficking Foundation (COR0009)
- 39 Humberside Police (COR0102)
- 40 Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (COR0040)
- 41 Immigration Services Union (COR0107)
- 42 Independent Office for Police Conduct COR0103
- 43 Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (COR0011)
- 44 Jesuit Refugee Service UK (COR0070)
- 45 Professor Kane and Professor Bandyopadhyay (COR0031)
- 46 Karma Nirvana (COR0054)
- 47 Kim McGuinness (COR0065)
- 48 Lancashire Violence Reduction Network (COR0041)
- 49 Law Society (COR0094)
- 50 Local Government Association (COR0037)
- 51 Medical Justice (COR0013)
- 52 Mental Health Foundation (COR0091)
- 53 Mitie (COR0034)
- 54 Muslim Women's Network (COR0088)
- 55 National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (COR0109)
- 56 No Recourse to Public Funds Network, Islington Council (COR0081)
- 57 Northumbria Law School (COR0049)
- 58 Operation Encompass (COR0021)
- 59 Paediatric Continence Forum (COR0044)
- 60 Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex (COR0087)
- 61 Police and Crime Commissioner for Sussex (COR0083)
- 62 Police and Crime Commissioner for West Midlands (COR0060)
- 63 Professor Roach and Dr Cartwright (COR0038)
- 64 Professor Siddhartha Bandyopadhyay; Professor Caroline Bradbury-Jones; Dr. Joht Chandan; Professor Eddie Kane; Dr. Krish Nirantharakumar; Professor Julie Taylor (COR0052)
- 65 Refuge (COR0095)
- 66 Refugee Women Connect COR0014
- 67 Respect (COR0067)
- 68 Safe Passage (COR0097)
- 69 Safer Places (COR0080)
- 70 SafeLives (COR0105)

- 71 Serco (COR0032)
- 72 Shelter (COR0069)
- 73 Southall Black Sisters (COR0082)
- 74 Surviving Economic Abuse (COR0039)
- 75 Thames Valley (COR0027)
- 76 the3million (COR0010)
- 77 the 3 million (COR0050)
- 78 The ManKind Initiative (COR0096)
- 79 The UN Refugee Agency (COR0015)
- 80 Transform Justice (COR0022)
- 81 UK Border Force (COR006)
- 82 UK Border Force (COR007)
- 83 UNISON (COR0047)
- 84 Welsh Women's Aid (COR0100)
- 85 Women for Refugee Women (COR0025)
- 86 Women's Aid Federation of England (COR0057)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2019–21

First Special Report	Serious Youth Violence: Government Response to the Committee's Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–2019	HC 57
First Report	Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Policing	HC 232