



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus), HC 232

Wednesday 15 April 2020, by audio visual conferencing

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 April 2020.

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Janet Daby; Dehenna Davison; Stephen Doughty; Ruth Edwards; Laura Farris; Simon Fell; Tim Loughton; Holly Lynch; Stuart C McDonald.

Questions 197 - 237

Witnesses

I: Dame Vera Baird DBE QC, Victims' Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner.

II: 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.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Vera Baird, Nicole Jacobs and Anne Longfield.

Q197 **Chair:** I welcome everyone to this evidence session of the Home Affairs Select Committee and thank all of the parliamentary staff who have made it possible for us to hold this as a remote meeting and evidence session. Our evidence session today is on what is happening around domestic abuse and child abuse during the coronavirus crisis and also to look at what measures might be needed to support families and tackle abuse in the home.

We are very grateful to the two panels of witnesses we will have before us today. Our first panel is Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Violence Commissioner, and Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner. We hope to be joined by Vera Baird, the Victims' Commissioner, shortly during the evidence session.

I welcome our first witnesses. Could each of you tell us what your assessment is of what is happening at the moment in domestic abuse and child abuse, particularly in the home? My second question is: what is top of your list in the measures that you want to see happen now?



Nicole Jacobs: I chair a weekly call with all of our national helplines and the services for domestic abuse and I am joined on that call by officials from Government Departments. The obvious thing to say about domestic abuse and the Covid epidemic is what a deadly combination it really is. If you think about domestic abuse and the motivation to have power and control over your family and overlay the lockdown circumstances on that, you would easily surmise the increased risk for the individual.

My greatest concern is about making sure that people who are subject to domestic abuse, adults and children, understand that there is help available. There has been a great deal of work within specialist services and the police and other critical services to adapt what they are doing so that they respond to domestic abuse. First and foremost, before I think about my top list of things to do, is partly to make sure that people out there who are subject to domestic abuse understand that there is help available. Even in the best of times, sometimes that is not the case. Supporting our helplines, making sure we have resilience, services, charities, refuge spaces and thinking about the breadth of ways that we can increase our ability to access and be able to offer support in a way that we have not before are really important.

We have much more limited circumstances in ways to get to families. Whether that is through retailers, our NHS volunteers, neighbours, employers, we need to think creatively and quickly about how to allow the types of people who are more likely to be interacting with families to be our eyes and ears, to understand that domestic abuse is a key concern during this time and they know what help is available.

Q198 **Chair:** Do you have an assessment of what is happening at the moment? We have heard reports of calls to helplines going up but we have also heard from some police forces who have said they have not had an increase in calls to the police. What is your assessment of what is happening?

Nicole Jacobs: That Monday call is not the only call but it gives us a sense of the week. As the weeks have progressed—we are now in our fourth week of having this regular summary—you are right, and you have seen it reported in the media fairly accurately, there has been a steady increase in help-seeking through helplines but also virtual webchats, looking at webpages. You will hear from the next panel much more specifically about that. 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



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but I think at least that means people are calling. That was not so much the case a couple of weeks ago, so we are seeing a slight change in pattern there.

You are right to note that the police are not seeing a huge spike, but all of the police—this is from our national police leads, Louisa Rolfe, Cressida Dick—are concerned about that because they agree and understand that domestic abuse will be on the increase during this time.

Q199 Chair: So that I am clear, the top of your list of things that need to be done was information for people who might be suffering?

Nicole Jacobs: I have a few things. One thing to make clear—and not to grandstand about this—is that this is a sector that was suffering from a postcode lottery pre-pandemic. This is not a group of services that is equal across the country or funded in a robust way. We need the public awareness and we need people who are subject to domestic abuse to really understand that we are out here and we are planning for them and that they can access support. That is first and foremost, but sitting beside that and of equal importance is just to appreciate that 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.

Over the weekend, you will have seen a £2 million announcement to support our helplines, which is absolutely needed. The helplines will be incurring increased costs from diverting their calls, upping their technology and all sorts of things they are doing to keep running. But the greater concern that I have right now is how we will use the money announced by the Chancellor to best effect for this crisis. Unlike some other issues, we know that domestic abuse and violence against women and girls are particularly important during this time. I appreciate it was just announced on Wednesday but we need to see a clear view of how charities will quickly access these funds. Important to me is not using our traditional channels or existing channels, meaning not to be overly dependent on channelling funds through the local authority or the PCC, because that is how we have our postcode lottery in the first place.

There are many small charities and specific charities that serve disabled women or BAME populations or specific groups that will not necessarily be able to access existing channels for support. We need to allow those charities to be able to quickly and very simply bid in and get the funds they need to sustain what they are doing, but also to plan for the inevitable surge that we will have. 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. Those are really key priorities right now.

Q200 Chair: Thank you. Anne Longfield?



Anne Longfield: The huge change in children's lives, of course, is that schools have been closed for most children apart from children of key workers and vulnerable children. That has been a huge change over the last few weeks and a lot of children who would be picked up and noticed by schools when things are going wrong become invisible. I have been reassured, pleased, relieved that schools have continued to offer places for vulnerable children, those with social workers—there are many who are vulnerable and do not have those places—but anecdotally reports are that the numbers of children who are coming into school in that category are lower than was expected.

At the same time, you have families who are without the support that they might otherwise have: children's centres are largely closed, support around the school, parenting and the like. The range of services that would have been there in normal times to support families is largely not there in the same way, and also the places where professionals are able to pick up and notice—and half the referrals to social services come from schools—are no longer operating in the same way.

I think there has been a great response by local authorities and others locally in most areas. People are motivated, they are changing and reconfiguring their services virtually overnight, and many are doing great things and reaching out to families in need. But the risks are bigger than that, and the solution is bigger than a fantastic set of staff teams and even a fantastic local authority. We know that there are babies and under-fives who are particularly at risk, and also teenagers who are at risk in a different way as they start to struggle with lockdown and what that means and the vulnerability that they would see.

Half the referrals to social services involve domestic abuse. We know that two-thirds of the women in hostels will have children with them, and we know that children suffer as victims of domestic abuse alongside adults in their households. We also know that around 800,000 children have experienced domestic abuse in the last year, so these are significant numbers.

Q201 **Simon Fell:** Following up on that, what do you think we should be doing to mitigate the risks for people during this pandemic?

Anne Longfield: There are a lot of activities emerging with a view to persuade the vulnerable children who have a place in school. There is also a need for that definition of who is vulnerable to be relatively flexibly looked at locally, so it is not just those with a social worker because we know that there will be as many, if not more, who do not have a social worker. We know the police chiefs are very worried about that group. Getting those vulnerable children into school means there is a line of sight, there is a structure in their lives and there is safety there, but that is not a task without challenge because families do not like the idea of stigma and, of course, are worried about the infection itself. That is a task in itself, identifying who those vulnerable children are and where they are. It was a huge effort even before Covid-19 but it is very



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important during Covid-19. The DfE is working on a national and local dashboard, and we have been developing one and helping them with that too.

Then it is a systematic and far-reaching response to mean that once you have identified those kids, you are reaching out to those families, making contact, keeping contact, visiting when needs be, but certainly a system of contact. The whole of the child protection system, which relies so heavily on judgment and visits, has had to be remade in about a month and that means that most of it is now done through the screen, which brings its own challenges, as you can imagine. I think it is seeing that robust ambition to visit, to be able to keep in touch and really know those families and be alongside them during this crisis.

Nicole Jacobs: I have talked about the funding. I have talked about how we allow for people who are our eyes and ears and who are in a position to help to really be communicated to directly—neighbours, employers—about the things you can do to help in this situation, during this time in particular, and allowing them to be supported to do that. There are a lot of obstacles and challenges for people in domestic abuse to access help—for example, if you are a migrant woman and have no recourse to public funds—and we need to alleviate some of these obstacles to support and routes to support. Legal aid is another. We need to allow for legal aid right now to be accessible to all victims of domestic abuse. Priority need for housing is another.

A lot of things are in the way of getting support for people who are in a crisis. A great example would be our get-out order, the domestic violence protection orders that the police would like to use but sometimes have challenges to using them because they do not have an appropriate address for the perpetrator to go to or they may have difficulty getting into court because of court closures. I know some of those things are being prioritised.

All of that could get unlocked a lot more quickly if we had a cross-governmental working group. Vera Baird, who we hope is joining us soon, Anne Longfield and I sit on various groups throughout the week in various Government Departments but until now we have not had a cross-governmental working group. Probably the best thing we have is the Monday call where I have people from our specialist sector and all Government Departments. In order to unlock all of those things I have listed as progress, we can do it but we would do it a lot more quickly if we had a cross-governmental working group and plan that could report into Government on progress in quick time.

Q202 **Simon Fell:** There is quite rightly a focus on victims but I wonder about the perpetrators too. What should we be doing to help them and, therefore, protect the people in their households?

Chair: Just to interrupt for a second before we bring the witnesses back in, I welcome Dame Vera Baird who has joined us. She is the Victims'



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Commissioner. Vera, once the other witnesses have answered Simon's question, I will come back to you for some opening thoughts. Back to you, Simon.

Simon Fell: Nicole, why don't you pick up?

Nicole Jacobs: There is a lot of effort in focusing on the behaviour of perpetrators, which needs to continue. One of the critical ones is our national helpline. We have an organisation called Respect that is funded and runs a national helpline for people who are worried about their own behaviour. That helpline has promoted targeted materials and guidance during Covid, which we should all be promoting and making sure people know about. It is one hope for people who are getting frustrated at home, who are reachable and may need support and guidance specifically for that.

For perpetrators of domestic abuse, it is a range and it will always be a range. We need to strengthen the ability for the police to enforce orders, to hold perpetrators to account with things like those get-out orders, the DVPOs. Some police areas are actively planning and trying to locate housing, so that when they need those orders, they have that ready and it is not an obstacle.

There is a whole range of things that we need to do. Another thing I would highlight that I have heard police colleagues talk about is the need to extend the time by which people could report crimes. There will be people who are experiencing abuse right now who are not able to call the police because it would not be safe for them, but they may want to report a crime later. We need to allow for some extension to what the normal timescales would be for that kind of thing.

Anne Longfield: I agree with everything that Nicole said. In addition is very clear messaging that domestic abuse or child abuse is a crime and that it is something that will be treated with the utmost seriousness. To have the police continue to make this a priority in their messaging and their actions is really important. I think also, going back to another point, having people in touch with the house and the family is a way to get those early warning signs. That has to be as real as possible during this time of lockdown.

Q203 **Chair:** I welcome Vera Baird to the evidence session. We are really pleased to see you and that the technology is now sorted. Vera, what is your assessment of what is happening at the moment in the level of abuse taking place or what is happening in services? Secondly, what is the top of your list of what you think needs to be done now to support victims?

Dame Vera Baird: To save lives in this pandemic we are ordering some people to stay locked up for a long time with people who will damage them, and they know that. That has been staring the Government in the face. Let me say straight away that the announcement of funding for charities is welcome, although we don't know how much will come to help



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victims of domestic abuse and sexual abuse. The promotion by the Home Secretary at the weekend is very welcome, but I think it has been quite late in the day.

I would guess that during my absence struggling with my iPad you have heard from my colleagues about the evidence abroad, from almost every country where this pandemic has happened. There was a great article in *The Guardian* about it on 28 March, saying where lockdown has caused an increase in domestic abuse and sexual abuse, particularly of children and online. We have police campaigns every Christmas to counter domestic abuse, which we know will increase by just those few days compelling people to be together for a long time. It was imperative from the start that since this was part and parcel of telling people to lock down there should have been a strategy of prevent, protect, pursue and so on, which is what one usually does when there is an anticipated level of crime increase.

Clearly Nicole and I work quite closely together, but I have a call every Monday at 11 am with the victims' service suppliers who are funded by the PCCs. I have a selection of those and they phone other people and tell me what is happening in their region as well as in their own area. There is definitely, as you will have seen from the Refuge statistics, an increase generally in domestic abuse calls. There is a far bigger increase in online contact, and I know that Refuge's webpage had something like a 700% increase in visits recently, which suggests that people are looking at where there might be help. This could possibly be the victims themselves or it could equally possibly be a neighbour. We now know that about 40% of notifications to the police about domestic abuse come through neighbours.

There is a bit of variety. In the south-west, the calls to Avon and Somerset showed a decline in reports of domestic abuse. In the north-east there was a spike over the last weekend. In West Yorkshire in one part, Kirklees, complaints of it to the police are up and in others they are not. In London there has been a spike of about 7%, not a great one. I am lucky enough to have all the Welsh ones filtering through one PCC to tell me what is happening in the principality and in Wales, domestic abuse complaints are down. But nobody ever has doubted that domestic abuse and child abuse have escalated and so the worry is, where it is not being reported, is that because it is just difficult, impossible to do it on a telephone, for instance, when your perpetrator is sitting beside you, in the next room or never far away?

I know that the organisations have tried to move online as quickly as they can and the take-up on live chat and those things has become bigger. We urgently need to adapt to that inability to report and, in particular, have one place. Over the years we have learnt clever tactics. We have Operation Encompass at schools, because if you are a coercively controlled person you are usually still allowed to take your children to school and that means that a school is a place where you might be able



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to speak to somebody about it. Now the equivalent, of course, is the supermarket. You may be a very controlled person but the likelihood is you are sent out to buy the food and also you can go to pharmacies. We urgently need to copy the French model that has been introduced in the last couple of weeks and properly funded by President Macron, which is to have emergency provision available in supermarkets and pharmacies.

Probably, Chair, you have come across something called Ask for Angela in the past, which is an emergency sort of codeword. When people are in a bar and they are worried about the person they are with, they can go to a bar and say, "Is Angela in?" and the bar person is trained to understand that codeword and it means, "Take me away and get me a taxi home". You could have a very similar system, easily training local workers in supermarkets to just respond. We fill the places with posters of Priti Patel's new campaign as well. If people are able to come in and talk about what is happening, fine, but maybe that is not so straightforward and you would not know what to say to a cashier. An option is to have a codeword so that you say, "Ask Vera" and the person says, "That means this to me". They need to have a quick card that says, "Do you want me to call the police?" "Yes." "I will do it. Come in here." If the answer is no, "Do you want me instead to call Women's Aid?" "Yes." "Come in here." We need to be flexible because people are locked in and this is one channel of escape.

The other thing that is very problematic is accommodation—you asked me for my top two. I can talk a bit, as I am sure Nicole and Anne have, about how the sector is coping but certainly almost all the refuges are full and when they are not, there are problems about somebody who is infected, so it cannot be opened up more widely. It is not easy to find accommodation. The homeless have been given a good arrangement—£3.2 million to get homeless people into hotel accommodation. For people who have been released from prison, care leavers, there is always a dearth of move-on accommodation, but here it is critical and if we cannot move people on, we cannot rescue people into refuges. The Home Secretary said it is lawful to leave if you need to leave, and of course it is an exception to not going away from your home, but you do need to have somewhere to go.

An emergency package from the Government to fund accommodation would be most welcome. Yesterday on my call, Swansea University had contacted the South Wales police and crime commissioner to offer a scheme of their spare accommodation, now that students are not there, for victims of domestic abuse if they can come out and some arrangement be made to facilitate that. That seems to me an excellent idea. Clearly the PCC will take it up. If that can be done in Swansea—and by the next call on Monday I am expecting there to be some progress—it can be done elsewhere. There are resources that can be made available. The sector itself has written to hotel chains, backed by Nicole and myself, Marriott in particular, to ask if they will give rooms and they have come back with some questions and some difficulties, but this requires



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Government intervention to organise it and to give assurances to the hotel chains, as does the help in supermarkets require the Government to intervene with the British Retail Consortium. The sector can do a little bit, individual PCCs can do a little bit, but it needs the power of the Government for these two very important aspects of how we try to rescue people.

I have said little about children and I am sure that Anne, who I know well, has said a lot about children, but it is perfectly obvious that since a very large proportion of abuse of children happens at home when parties are at home and cannot get out, it will increase. I think that is everyone's expectation. Kids cannot go to school. I understand that social services without PPE are not being allowed access to difficult homes, where of course they will say, "No, you're not coming in because of social isolating". We need equally a strategy there.

The perpetrator helpline, which your colleague just asked about, has seen an increase in men who are perpetrating in particular coming to say, "Now my behaviour is concentrated and I can see what it is" and that must be a very good thing. They were asked to pull together a package for some funding a couple of weeks ago and as far as I am aware that has not happened because they too have been thinned out by staff catching the virus or being in isolation. They need more support and they need it urgently. We need to support perpetrator programmes in the community urgently. By analogy, with funding the helplines you have to fund all the services that go around it and you do with the perpetrator end as well.

We suggest that there has been not a strategic approach. What is needed is a better strategic approach that embraces all the relevant ministerial responsibilities, the key Departments in a subgroup of the Cabinet Office Committee. That requires the addition of these three commissioners who can help to bridge with the sector and ensure that any schemes that the Government can bring in, of the kinds I have just exemplified, fit the sector so that the sector can deal with them and take the matter forward. I think that strategic matter is very urgent.

Q204 Stuart C McDonald: I have two questions; the first is more specific, the second a broader one. I will start with Nicole Jacobs and then ask Anne Longfield and then Dame Vera. You already mentioned a little bit about migrant women, and in particular women with insecure immigration status. We have heard evidence or received evidence of about four in five women with insecure immigration status being turned away from refuges and also facing bias in seeking medical assistance. You have mentioned no recourse to public funds. Are you calling for that to be suspended? You have mentioned legal aid and priority housing needs. There are also issues of NHS charging and data sharing that you might want to comment on. That is specific issues about migrant women in particular and what we can do to protect them.

The second broader question is simply: are there other groups who may



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be particularly vulnerable for whom we need to be thinking about a specific response?

Nicole Jacobs: I would call for the no recourse rules to be alleviated altogether, Covid or no Covid. There is no reason why someone who is experiencing domestic abuse should not be able to access base support. That is something I have been campaigning for prior to this. 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. We are just seeing it more acutely now and it is something that we should do something about, I absolutely agree with you. I know that it has been made clear that, regardless of any kind of immigration status, NHS charging for Covid-related issues is relieved.

But unlocking a lot of those challenges is about ensuring that we support the kinds of charities and services that really reach out and form trusted relationships with migrant women or migrant people so that they understand what these changes are, that you can call the police, that you can access help. That requires much more word of mouth and translation services. I was talking earlier about the funding needing to be flexible and making sure that we get, from the Chancellor's very welcome announcement, the funding to charities who are expert in this area, who can address that well and who are in a position where they have the networks. That is very important.

The other thing I would say about migrant women or women with no recourse is their longstanding worries about information being passed to the police. 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 regardless. Again, getting the message out on that is really important and using the partnerships of charities is particularly important.

On additional vulnerabilities, some of the things that have come out—again I would say these are longstanding issues but they are come across in the calls week to week during this time of the lockdown—are related to the additional barriers for disabled women. Those are charities that are often not getting the kind of funding that they need and they would cover a wider geographical spread. Giving money to the local authority or a PCC may not get to the very few charities we have that serve disabled women such as deaf women and women with physical disabilities. The kinds of complexity about that that come out on the calls are, for example, what would you do if you were a disabled woman now who needed to leave your house? What kind of care package would you anticipate you could get very quickly? I think we all know that the answer to that would be very low. It would be unlikely, and so we need to be able to talk directly to experts within these charities to relieve the barriers that are currently happening there.



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I want to point out some of the things I have heard about from our LGBT helpline and Galop has talked about the increase in complexity of their calls. You overlay homophobia, people may be self-isolating with family members who are not necessarily supportive of them, and there are increases there.

One quite big increase in a lot of the helpline calls across the board is in adolescent-to-parent violence. Again, this is a longstanding issue where we know from DHRs, for example, that a fourth of our domestic homicide reviews are adult children who have killed a parent. I am not saying that is the same as adolescent-to-parent violence but my point is that we do not have a lot of services that are specialist in that area. During this time, we need to be able to seek advice from and support the very few charities that do that, so that we can address much more quickly what is needed for some of those additional vulnerabilities.

Those are the ones that I can think of right now. I am sure others will chime in with different issues.

Anne Longfield: I will start by reaffirming, as Nicole has just reaffirmed, the fact that these services were under stress and stretched previously but also that the majority of these children were almost invisible in the past pre-Covid. In work that my office has done over the last few years, we identified that only one in eight of familial child sexual abuse experiences were of children who were known to the authorities, which means that most of that is hidden. When you look at the 800,000 children who have experienced domestic abuse in the last year, only 150 of those will have a social worker. There is something here about children being invisible in normal times. I would argue strongly that that is something we need to fix for the future, absolutely, but it is under extreme pressure now as this emergency becomes very apparent.

For the families with no recourse to public funds, clearly, as Nicole said, there are additional pressures there and desperate reports where I can see solutions being found that at least start to offer some sign of hope. It is often around schools that are almost now acting as community hubs. They individually know those families. They are reaching out to the families and supporting them with food and other essentials in their lives. I would, as Nicole would, support an end to the regulations and restrictions around those families.

I think it is important to remember the number of families that will be relying on Universal Credit now that were not previously. We know from police chiefs reporting back that when there is an increase in reporting of domestic abuse, financial hardship is one of the issues. With near on 1 million people signing on to Universal Credit now who were not signed on before, clearly there are pressures there. Poverty needs to be added to the so-called toxic trio of issues around vulnerable families' lives—domestic abuse, severe mental health conditions and addiction—as a real factor here.



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There is a whole range of issues more broadly outside the home. There are groups of teenagers that I would say are at risk from criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. That clearly needs a different approach but nonetheless it is a very vulnerable group.

Dame Vera Baird: There is a report called “Sowing the Seeds”, which makes links between domestic abuse in the home and the impact that can have on a child and their subsequent sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation. These issues are very damaging and we are setting ourselves up for a long heritage from the events of this pandemic. What is very important, as Anne has just been saying, is that children are perceived as victims of domestic abuse as well as when they are themselves sexually abused. They are now regarded very much as witnesses and that if they were not in the room or were not literally there, they are not being damaged by it. That radically needs to change very quickly and it needs to be recognised now.

I am very worried indeed about the smaller charities dealing with the kind of people that my colleagues have just referred to, in particular BME charities and men’s charities—which of course are smaller because fewer men are subject to domestic abuse, but they do need, nonetheless, to be mentioned—LGBT, those for disabled people. I am particularly worried about them because of the way that the package of funding is going to be allocated following the Chancellor’s announcement. It is in two tiers. One is going to be distributed through the Departments of State, that is the Government’s £370 million. There are problems about that going through individual Departments and the lack of cross-Government links. On the local charities, the Ministry of Justice, which is dealing with this, has sent a note to PCCs asking them to identify charities that need help from this fund that they already commission.

Many of the charities of the kinds that I have spoken of—smaller charities, specialist charities—are absolutely critical, as Nicole has described, to their vulnerable client groups who will not come out anywhere else but with these specialist charities. These are often one-town-only places and they are often not funded by the PCC but funded by a whole range of small packages of funding. If one just uses that route, we will miss an enormous number of charities that need to be given help urgently now because clearly those small specialist charities are more vulnerable themselves and less well sustained than the large charities are.

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.



There is one more thing to add, which is the particularly vulnerable group—and forgive me, because I came late I don't know if anyone has mentioned it—of sex workers, who are very disadvantaged generally, as we know. They obviously have the difficulty that if they are street sex workers they are likely to fall foul of police very readily and indeed their work is going to be extremely hard, but they are likely to suffer greater cruelty, greater exploitation, greater abuse in this extraordinarily tense time. They are at higher risk, and we urgently need the police and charities that support them to be properly funded and properly alerted and properly supported to make sure that they too, a small group but an important one, can be made safe.

Q205 Tim Loughton: I should first declare an interest as I chair a safeguarding board for the OFG Children's Group.

On child protection, Commissioner, you said, quite rightly, that the whole child protection system has effectively had to be redesigned in the space of a month or so, that obviously social work for child protection is not a science, and that it very much relies on the training, the gut instinct, the experience of a social worker usually going into a domestic environment to get a sense of what is really going on. That, of course, is not happening at the moment. What is happening? Have social workers, to the best of your knowledge, been given new training in alternative ways of trying to detect and deal with child protection issues, given that they cannot use conventional measures?

Anne Longfield: There are three Commissioners here. I thought you meant me by the subject.

Tim Loughton: I have always known you as the Commissioner, Anne.

Anne Longfield: You are absolutely right. So much of this is about relationships, so much of this is about the feel of visiting, so much of this about the signs from the household and the like. Now, I think most social workers are absolutely trying their best to get and replace that through a screen. Certainly all the local authorities that I have spoken to have now begun at the very least, and some are succeeding very well, in grading the seriousness of vulnerability of children and they will have different responses to different levels of risk. For instance, for those that we are very worried about there will normally be home visits and there will be more regular contact.

Of course, what social workers will say is that it is quite difficult to pick up those signs but also quite easy to hide the signs through a screen. Social workers will ask to be shown around the house via the screen, even look in the fridge, and many are doing that, so they are not holding back here, but still it is very difficult to get that sense, and also they do not have ability to be able to move a conversation on to something else and look around.

That does not mean that I think it is a hopeless case. It is something that needs to be continued. Nonetheless I would say we need face to face



contact, which is why I am so concerned that more children come into school where there is that line of sight, but also that social workers are able to go and visit. Some of the difficulty is around PPE, some of it is about having enough people and I would like to see a back-up of people who are DBS checked but possibly furloughed from elsewhere. Also, as Nicole and Vera said, now is the time strategic coming together and local collaboration between local charities, social services and schools. You know as well as I do that there have always been gaps where everyone does aspects and specialisms, and funding for those charities and the packaging of support are really important.

Home-Start, for instance, has some very good ideas. Home-Start will get access to homes that others will not, but they need funding behind them to do that.

Q206 Tim Loughton: I am sensing that nobody has really issued protocols, be it social worker organisations, social agencies, the Association of Directors of Childrens Services and others, for dealing with those families that are obstructing that sort of access. If we were in normal times and a social worker made a visit and was not allowed in the premises, there are ways of scaling up to get access. If a social worker is not able to access through a screen—and there may not be a screen available, there may be all sorts of excuses about, “Oh, my screen doesn’t work”—then where do you go because the next step is not then knocking on the door with an enforcement officer of whatever level?

Linked with that—and we have heard a lot about schools and, Anne, you mentioned the clear link with schools as the early warning sign, because that is where children spend more of their time if they are of school age than with any other professional—are you aware that schools are checking up on those vulnerable children who are not coming to school now because they are not key workers’ children, and are there procedures in place to make sure that they are looking out for them as well?

Anne Longfield: There is guidance on contact with families in crisis, those that are outside school. The guidance from the DfE is a first stage; important as it was to get that out it needs to continue to develop. There are some gaps in it. There are concerns that actually this allows too much freedom rather than being very specific about protocols. Locally, there will be protocols and, again, local councils have responded swiftly on that, but they are in emergency mode at the moment. People have had to move fast to get new procedures, new ways of working into place. The difference will come, of course, when this is the new normal for the next month or the next two months or the next three months, whatever that is. It needs to go deeper and it needs to ensure that any element of particular confusion or non-clarification is absolutely clear, and there is a role for that locally, there is a role for that from professional groups but also from Government within that.



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Schools are, in many cases, following up but, as you would imagine, there are schools that do this week in and week out as their bread and butter, they support communities, they have close contact with communities and they have that vital community role. There are other schools that are more distant from their communities, maybe where there are only a few vulnerable children and all those vulnerable children are largely hidden, and that community role will not be what those schools are used to. What they have to do is they have to report to their local council when there is a child who is vulnerable that has not turned up that they had expected. As time goes on and the numbers of children are low, then that becomes much more tenuous.

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.

Q207 Tim Loughton: Finally, can I ask Nicole Jacobs briefly about refuges? Obviously vulnerable women with vulnerable children are accessing those refuges where they can. What are you seeing in terms of social workers being able to get access, again through a screen, for child protection issues, and what health measures are being taken within refuges?

Goodness knows, it is difficult enough to get those victims and get them into a secure place in a refuge and then you have all the considerations around isolation and social distancing and whether they are bringing in infections or joining somebody who has an infection. How on earth do we get all the protective measures that we are desperately trying to get into the rest of the community, including PPE, into refuges as well?

Nicole Jacobs: I am glad you have given me the opportunity to talk about that because high on my list—and I was wishing I had said it earlier—is the need for refuges and domestic abuse workers, similar to social workers, to have access to PPE. I have heard some examples that they have had to pay enormous amounts for their PPE, the PPE they do have, and sometimes they are getting generous donations in order to pay for PPE. It is really variable across all services. There are key workers within refuges so in some ways the protective measures and the support are there. Social workers are often very relieved—I think they would be more worried for people who have not made it to the refuge or have not made it to services—that usually there is quite a good linkage between a refuge service and a social worker because there is a key worker there who knows the family, understands about food. Food is another concern, deliveries to refuges, they are confidential locations. There are all sorts of practicalities in that respect that our frontline workers are working out daily.



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You are about to have a panel with Refuge, Women's Aid and Imkaan who will all be advising their services or their members about the safety and the guidance for Covid in terms of self-isolation. There are some refuges that may have a room but may have Covid within the refuge and so are not able to take someone in. That is where we are seeing what Dame Vera mentioned earlier in terms of the lack of spaces and a concern about needing to have a plan in place for spaces.

I do want to echo a couple of things that the Children's Commissioner mentioned, which is about—

Q208 **Chair:** I am sorry to interrupt you, Nicole. Because this evidence is so important I do want to extend this evidence session, so I do want to apologise to our next panel for keeping them waiting for a bit longer, but we do have to complete this evidence session by 12.15 because there are other Select Committees who need to use the same technology. I will ask that where you simply want to reinforce points that other panellists have made, do please do that in writing afterwards, and if everybody could keep their responses now as sharp and focused as possible on the things that we absolutely need to do now in order to provide support for people.

I will bring in the other questioners and I will give each of the Commissioners a chance at the very end to tell us anything they did not get the chance to mention but think that we really need to do. I am conscious that this is an immensely important subject and we do want to cover as much of it as possible.

Q209 **Janet Daby:** Obviously there are many adults and children who find themselves vulnerable at this time but who are not able to access the usual networks and support systems that are in place for them. Obviously this has already been touched on but what else do you think needs to happen to enable charities and social services to be able reach out to these people that has not been mentioned already and which points would you like to emphasise those points? If we could begin with Anne Longfield.

Anne Longfield: The infrastructure of going to school and meeting other parents, networks and local organisations has largely been stripped away. I go back to my point about having strategic alliances locally with charities working with schools, working with local councils in a joined-up, planned way is really important. I think having local information that is very clear about places to go for health and information is really important and I endorse what Vera said about having those national schemes that will involve supermarkets and pubs and elsewhere about where you can go in an emergency, and having information and places you can go locally. So anticipating the need, anticipating there is a loss here and then moving into a place where it becomes normal to have places you can go for help.

Q210 **Janet Daby:** Dame Vera, would you like to add anything to that?



Dame Vera Baird: To what was said about the need for local networks, for all places to which people can have resort to be very well aware, I probably need to add one thing. The police, of course, are out and about and we all think that they are simply enforcing lockdown and ensuring that there is social distancing. I am very well aware, though, that they are also looking for anything that might be giving them evidence of this kind of private crime. I commend that. I would encourage people who see officers not just to expect to be told to go home but if they do have a cause of concern to speak out. It is the fact now that about 40% of calls about domestic abuse go to the police not from the victim but from a worried bystander of a family or a neighbour or a workplace type. So we need to replicate that with particular watchfulness.

I do have to commend the Home Secretary's campaign to raise awareness about the need to watch for your neighbours and clearly the police are out in the community now, probably more than they have been for quite a while because hard crime, public crime, is reduced. It is key that people watch out for each other, that people do not hesitate. In the same way that we are encouraged for the terrorist issue to say, "Mention it if it does not look right", that is exactly what people should be trying to do wherever they can do that now. The police are ready to respond.

The head of the National Police Chiefs' Council made it clear on Saturday in the press conference that they do have capacity because other crime is reduced and so no one should hesitate. They are, of course, the direct way to get some very speedy action. I hope we can also get the Government to commit to introducing a system of rescue at the places, the sole places, that people who are in difficulties can go to now, which are largely pharmacies and supermarkets. There is no going to your GP. There is an excellent system called IRIS, and GPs have now been trained, quite a lot of them, in order to respond sensibly and properly to complaints about abuse. You cannot go to your GP now and do it, and it is very difficult to make a phone call if the perpetrator is in the next room or standing beside you.

Another possibility, really quickly, is when ordering food, which you can do online, the British Retail Consortium, one member of it has proposed that there should be a red button that could be fitted to all of the ordering access points so that if you are in danger you appear to be just ordering cabbages but actually you can press a button and get some help. That would obviously simply bring the police, but it is another idea.

We have a massive responsibility to ensure we give everything we can give creatively to reach out to a needy public who are in this position.

Q211 Janet Daby: Dame Vera, you have anticipated my question and you have answered it. The second question was what do you feel about the response of the Government, the Home Office and the police and what more do you think can be done? You have obviously touched on that. Would you like to say anything more before I go on to Nicole Jacobs?



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Dame Vera Baird: I think we have mentioned—I am sure my colleagues have mentioned—what we are worried about in terms of the funding packages and how they will work. I have already set out clearly, I hope, the dangers of the lottery aspect of it, that the PCCs will not penetrate far enough unless they are expressly asked to and at the moment they are not being asked to do that.

The other thing is no one has the first idea how much funding can come to charities for domestic abuse or sexual abuse, and the Government really needs to earmark some specific funding so we can understand what is available.

We also urgently need cross-departmental working. For instance, I would emphasise the need, as I am sure my colleagues have, for emergency accommodation moving on from refuges but that has to have with it support, floating support, from domestic abuse charities, help for children. People will have left home without any funding at all, and so while the bids for accommodation will go through MHCLG, any bids for accommodation-related support like floating support will have to go through either 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. It needs to be done cross-departmentally.

I would like to say that the criminal justice system and the family justice system need to do more. It is perfectly clear that since this isolation has to be done, that it is being done as it were at our request, legal aid should be granted to everyone without means testing of any kind in order to get protection, whether it be an injunction, a domestic violence protection order, or an order for children, and the issue of no recourse to public funds for migrants just has to be completely scrapped. The courts have to make clear that these people are a priority and there will be hotlines for any help that is needed directly for legal assistance.

While Mr Loughton was talking about social services, I realised that I wanted to mention that contact between parents is causing stress and tension, as one can imagine. Of course, orders should be fulfilled: if there is a court order, children should be transferred and that is a legitimate reason to go out. If you have a doubt about whether the partner at the other end is socially isolating, or a doubt about whether the child will come back because that partner is worrying about you socially isolating, there is real tension. I understand from my victim services call that that issue is leading to more domestic abuse. We need an urgent easy way to resolve disputes about contact that are obviously brought to a fine point of stress by all of the problems. Those things need to urgently be done by the system.

Nicole Jacobs: So many points have been raised. The only thing that has not been said that I would add that I think would be a very good practical intervention at this stage would be support for the LGA, the Local Government Association, to give guidance—there is guidance from



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Government but I would envision something that could be more helpful and practical in any local area. What is the range of services, the MARAC panels, the kinds of services that need to be happening and need to be ongoing and the proactivity that we were talking about earlier on behalf of children in social care and others? There is some great guidance out there, the role for housing providers, for example, to be checking in on their tenants where there is known domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance has some great guidance online.

There is very good guidance out there for how to function, for the MARAC, the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference panels to still be happening. I think, as Anne said, that there is some good practice but there is also a need for any local area to be reassured, whether you are a counsellor or you are an officer within the council. Are we doing all that we can for the co-ordinated response to this? Are we doing all we can for our specialist services to maintain? They cannot work in an environment that is chaotic so we need to be more proactive in terms of what good looks like, what are areas doing that is really working in respect of domestic abuse? We need to do this in very quick time so that people can be reassured about what they are doing well but what they are missing, in the middle of their planning in so many other ways. That is the only other intervention I would have.

While I can, I would like to follow up on what Dame Vera said about sex workers. There is a great briefing done by the End Violence Against Women coalition that speaks to the wider range of violence against women and girls and the issues related to Covid. I know we cannot cover all of that but I would just encourage members to have a look at that briefing paper.

Q212 Dehenna Davison: This is a question about communications and messaging. For example, we know under the guidance people are able to leave the home if they need to seek out support, so a question that is two-fold.

First, have we been communicating that message clearly enough? Secondly it seems we really need a strategy for people who are having their communication devices controlled by their potential abusers. On that vein, what strategy would you put in place? I will come to Nicole first.

Nicole Jacobs: I would say that the campaign launched at the weekend, "At home doesn't mean at risk", the hand with the heart, I think that communicates to people who can see it—obviously which is your point—we are here for you, there is support available. We need to get behind that campaign so that people can see that there is help available, whether it is visually, you know, people have put rainbows on their windows, they can put their handprint—we need to just see that campaign come alive. We have been asking for that type of campaign for years and years, so I am really pleased about it.



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I do not think it is as simple as any one thing. So many of us have talked about differing examples, and that is not because there is not a co-ordinated approach, it is just that with domestic abuse and with this unique problem we have to recognise that for some people it will be the housing officer checking on them or a neighbour or a friend checking on them and may be the use of a code word. For some people, it will be the online shop. We have to just think of these opportunities, for instance the NHS volunteers who might be delivering prescriptions or parcels. We need this kind of a thread running through anything that we are doing to make sure that we are making the most of each and every opportunity. That is not easy. I appreciate that is not easy, which is why I think so many have talked about this idea of a co-ordinated approach across Government. For example, the Department for Health and Social Care on one of the calls that I chaired talked about commissioning Mind for more mental health related support. A thread of domestic abuse needs to be incorporated into that support, in that helpline. Are people picking that up?

What I mean is that we have to just look across and be smart about what is already happening, where we can, not necessarily take over wholly, but have a thread of work related to domestic abuse so that we are making the most of all of these opportunities. Certainly the idea of a code word or a helpline, which Dame Vera has really described very well, that would need to be couched within a co-ordinated response. My understanding about the national campaign is that each week there will be certain stages of it. It was launched on the weekend and I fully expect that Government have listened to some of our input about what needs to happen to make that comprehensive and joined up.

Q213 Dehenna Davison: Thank you. Dame Vera, is there anything you would like to add on this?

Dame Vera Baird: It is a good question, if I may say so. It is very key that the messages go out both at national level, which they have started to do and Nicole has picked up on that, and from the police. I think in the first weeks people thought that the services would probably close down in parallel with the shops and the police were too busy sending people home. That needs to be made very clear at national level and locally.

I second what Nicole said about the ways that you can contact people who are being kept away from contact and then allowed to walk the dog—say good morning to everybody you pass who is walking a dog in case it is a critical moment when they can speak.

I saw something the other day that gave me an idea. I was in a park and there was a vehicle going around making an announcement, “You should only be here for exercise. If you are here for any other reason, please go home”. Those are happening quite a lot. You could add messages on to that to say, “If you have a problem,”—however it is expressed—“call this number. Do this, speak to this person. There is a man in the hut here



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who will help you". It seems to me we have to be creative, nationally and locally.

Q214 **Dehenna Davison:** Thank you, and quickly to Anne as well?

Anne Longfield: Regarding messages and national messages, clearly there have been some very positive ones over the last week and messages on all sorts of fronts during the emergency. This is a time that national messaging has never seen before but it is something that we know, as Dame Vera just said, could have a real impact here. Those messages I would say need to move on and deepen. I would like to see them involving child abuse as well as domestic violence, but I think that also requires local implementation, which means that professionals wherever they are, however they are accessing communities, are reaffirming the national message. Again, that message is that communities at this point need to be looking out for one another.

Q215 **Laura Farris:** I want to ask a couple of questions about the adequacy of the police response. You may or may not know this but I want to ask if you were—I think all of you have described a slightly uneven pattern of reporting of domestic abuse, and that seems to have prompted a concern that it is being underreported, not that it is not happening. Are you aware of the ratios of arrests and charging decisions that have accompanied any of that data? For example, have you seen a higher correlation than usual of say a perpetrator being remanded in custody immediately or perhaps fewer arrests? I know that the Ministry of Justice has released some prisoners who were nearing the end of their sentences earlier, and I just wonder whether you had any data that informed your view of the police response that, for example, very serious incidents were being reported or that the police were not reacting as much as normal. If you do not have that data, please don't worry, you don't have to force an answer, I just was interested in the question. Dame Vera, perhaps first to you.

Dame Vera Baird: The National Police Chiefs' Council has made clear that they expect the spike to charities to come first and the reporting spike to come later and so, as you say, there are places where reports have even gone down but it is clear—and I do not have anything about arrests—that the CPS have announced that domestic abuse cases are a priority, and though, of course, the courts are in difficulties dealing with all cases, they put them pretty near top of the list and they put more guidance out yesterday about how they propose to deal with them, which will feed into how the police deal with it.

What is really urgent is for domestic violence protection orders to come into their own now. The police use them sometimes. Now it is obvious—and the Home Secretary said it herself—that the best solution, if domestic abuse is happening, is to put the perpetrator out and leave the family where it is. That is exactly what the domestic violence protection order can do. It has to be applied for by the police, and it is very quick. I am hoping that that is being very much promoted as the tool of choice within the police to get a speedy solution. I certainly know that it is in



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Northumbria where I used to be the police and crime commissioner because I have some particular views there but no data, I am afraid.

Q216 Laura Farris: Before I move on to Anne and Nicole, I might just put my very last question because I think that ends the session. It was to be this, and you can choose whether you want to answer the first bit or this. Has anything arisen from the lockdown that has led you to think of something that should go into the Domestic Abuse Bill, which is due to have its Second Reading quite soon? Not something that was already in your mind before the Covid-19 crisis but is there anything specific that has arisen and that you now think needs to go into that Bill?

Nicole Jacobs: First, I have a quick point about policing before I get into the Bill. This is about the idea that the police are talking about this week of having an increase in non-crime domestics. Normally that would raise my eyebrow a bit because what you would want to see is more arresting and charging, or reports translating into that. Now I am not sure I would view it in the same way. If neighbours are calling, as Dame Vera has mentioned, and people are reaching out to the police, the one thing we have not said about the police yet that I think is really important, and I know that Louisa Rolfe and colleagues are working on this, is just for the police to understand the opportunity they have at that moment. Whether there is an arrest or not, they have an opportunity to communicate really key things about support services, key messages to people within the family at that point, no matter if they are arresting or if people are asking them or encouraging them to arrest or not.

That role of the frontline officer, we have to appreciate—and I am really happy to see it—that the calls are happening no matter who is making them and that they are able to have that point of intervention.

I am really pleased that you mentioned the DA Bill. Going back to what I said quite early in the session, absolutely the things that I would have been arguing that need to be included in the DA Bill are front and centre and evident in this crisis. They are the postcode lottery we have for services and the fact that there needs to be an expansion of the statutory duty proposed in the Bill beyond housing related services. If you think about the kinds of things that we are talking about and our reliance on these services, why wouldn't we, in the Domestic Abuse Bill, make sure that the funding into the future will always be much more secure? We could achieve that in the Bill. I think that there are things related to no recourse, migrant women, those are the things we were saying prior to the Bill but have become so much clearer in this process in terms of what we need and how urgently we would need it.

I do have quite a long laundry list about the Bill and hope to come back to you another time and talk about that, but I will just allow a bit of time for others.

Anne Longfield: In relation to the police response, we have been pleased that this has been seen as a priority. There are strong reports



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back from both the Police and Crime Commissioner's group but also from the Police Chiefs that this is something that is high on their priority list but also understanding this, which is something that is very helpful. It reaffirms the importance of the multi-agency responses locally and also the multi-agency risk conferences, that those are absolutely seen to be vital.

There are some ambitions from the MoJ and the criminal justice system about getting complaints through to prosecution and also clearly the early release scheme intends to exclude anyone that has a history of domestic violence. That is something that clearly will need to be continued to be monitored.

Regarding the Domestic Abuse Bill, for me it is absolutely centre stage to recognise that children are victims within this too, and to reaffirm the importance not just of the funding itself, but how the funding is used and how that funding can put in place the cohesive community response that those children, those families and those victims need, both at that stage and in the future, plus a really important focus on housing.

Q217 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I need to bring this panel to a close. Thank you very much, all of you, for your evidence. Wave at me now if there is something urgent that you did not say but otherwise I would ask you to pass on any other information to us in written evidence. Dame Vera Baird, very briefly.

Dame Vera Baird: One very quick point to make is that Counting Dead Women has reached a total of 16 domestic abuse killings in the last three weeks. We usually say there are two a week. That looks to me like five a week. That is the size of this crisis.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is very sobering and powerful evidence to us.

I thank the first panel. We will now have a few technical changes while we move to our second panel.

That final evidence that we had from Dame Vera Baird shows just how important this issue is and we are grateful to our second panel for joining us as well. The reason that we, in the Home Affairs Select Committee, have wanted to hold this evidence session is because we too are struck that while we are all rightly supporting the Government approach to save lives and for people to stay at home, what we also know is that for some people home is just not safe.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baljit Banga, Ellie Butt, Anna Edmundson, and Lucy Hadley.

Q218 **Chair:** I now welcome our second panel to join us. We have Anna Edmundson from the NSPCC, we have Lucy Hadley from Women's Aid, we have Baljit Banga from Imkaan and we have Ellie Butt from Refuge.

Welcome to this evidence session. Could I ask each of you, just as an



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opening question, what evidence are you seeing about what is happening at the moment as briefly as possible and, secondly, what is the top of your list in terms of the things you would like the Government to do? If I could start with Ellie Butt.

Ellie Butt: At Refuge we run a national domestic abuse helpline, which is a Freephone 24/7 service, and we are already seeing on that helpline quite an increase in calls and contacts each day. The data for the week just gone was 49% higher than our average pre-Covid-19 crisis, that is for calls and contacts.

When you look at the helpline website specifically, which contains a wide variety of information for survivors and crucially a webform for women to contact the helpline online, that has seen an average increase of 417%. We have seen really big increases to that service. We know that for many women the helpline is their first port of call.

Of course we cannot discount the Government's campaign that was launched on Saturday and all the welcome media attention there has been on this issue in the past few weeks for increasing awareness of that helpline. That will certainly be a factor as well. But there are some very worrying signs about an increased level of need, which of course is not surprising because of all the points the previous panel made about the risk to survivors of domestic abuse in these lockdown conditions.

Also, sadly, we know that while more people are reaching out and getting in touch with the helpline there will be a lot of people that cannot because their window of opportunity to do so might have been small before and is now non-existent and it is just not safe enough for them to make that approach. So while we have seen that increase, we are anticipating that there will be much greater increases in the future perhaps when restrictions start to be lifted.

We have seen much smaller increases in non-helpline services. All of our refuge services are still open. Some have had to keep some places empty at various points as women or children in those services have Covid-19 symptoms, but they are all open. Really key there is making sure that move-on accommodation is available but also getting those messages out that refuges are still open and though we have not many spaces, there are few and we are still accepting referrals. It is important to make that clear.

My top ask for Government is funding, which is enormously important. Charities including Refuge—I am sure my colleagues on the panel agree—have been really affected by this crisis in terms of loss of fundraising, and increased costs of mobile services to operate remotely. Issues around housing benefits for refuges are really key. Refuges are very poorly, unsustainably funded services anyway and are very reliant on housing benefits. When we have to leave spaces empty because women and children are ill and we need to make sure that we keep everyone in our services safe, that is a real financial risk. The funding from Government



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that was announced could not be more welcome and our absolute priority is that there is a sufficient portion of that funding ring-fenced for violence against women and girls' services and that the funding is administered in a most straightforward quick way to get it directly to charities that need it.

We also echo calls for a co-ordinated Government response to not only understand what survivors need and make sure the machinery of government and the charity sector works together to get that there, but also to seek every opportunity to prevent abuse during this crisis. We all know what the risks are. We have seen the emerging evidence from other countries that domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls is likely to increase. We need to do everything we can to prevent it, not reflect afterwards on what more we could have done. We need to be doing that now. There are some pockets of good work, but now we need to co-ordinate that work to make sure the risks to women and girls and what they need is being taken into account at the very highest level of decision-making.

Baljit Banga: I represent Imkaan, which is a second-tier organisation supporting BME women's organisations across England, Scotland and Wales. One of the things I want to talk about is not just the gender inequality in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on our services, but also racial inequalities that have been occurring during this time and that have been exacerbated rather than alleviated.

In addition to the two pandemics—Covid-19 and violence against women and girls—we are also dealing with racial inequality and injustice. BME organisations have highlighted this in their feedback to us. Since the start of the crisis, we have been engaging in dialogue with our member organisations and we have also been conducting a survey, gathering data, since the beginning of the crisis. What I am going to do is report back on the data that we have gathered.

We have seen an increase in referrals to BME organisations. Our members have said that there has been an increase in referrals as they have moved to the online services. The referrals sources have come from generic organisations, from statutory services, including health, and from the police. But some of the emerging pattern is worth highlighting. There has been a decrease in self-referrals generally because some aspects of the provision, mostly the face to face provision, has been reshaped.

The reason why this is important is that BME women are more likely to access specialist support services via self-referral or from community-based routes. The figure is usually 60% to 70% in self-referrals, so later I will address those referrals from statutory services and referrals from police for BME women, which is actually increasing. This is unusual because these agencies are the least likely to refer to specialist BME organisations.



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The data also shows that perpetrators are using Covid-19 to deliberately target and inflict violence on women. A pattern is emerging of a heightened state of escalation of abuse, and this means that violence is escalating in severity with higher levels of physical violence being reported. Other forms of violence, such as coercive control, are also evident in the data.

For the data that we have analysed so far, we are finding two things happening simultaneously when it comes to refuge provision. First, there is the suppression of need, which means that BME women are unable to leave the violent home to the safety of a refuge because they are trapped. Nonetheless, the need is there and they do need the support. Second, some women have been able to call refuge organisations to find out about refuge spaces—in the north of England we have seen a 30% to 50% increase in calls that are made to the refuges—only to find that there are no spaces available.

So far we have no voids in BME refuges and this is likely to continue during the crisis period. Women in refuges cannot be resettled or moved on to independent housing during this time, due to the lack of housing availability and also because they are facing significant financial pressures and living in income poverty due to the slowdown of the benefit system and other challenges that the benefit system is producing. What this means is that BME women's refuges will continue to operate to support women housed in them, but there will be significant challenges in the way that they will be able to meet this need.

We have also had two refuges in London that have had to go into quarantine for 14 days because residents have shown symptoms of coronavirus. This could very much continue in other refuges as the crisis deepens, so it is something else that we need to plan around.

We have also seen from our data a rise in homelessness as homeless women are being evicted from temporary accommodation, bed and breakfasts, and also generic hostels. BME organisations are more likely to support women that experience the most barriers, and by tracking referral routes to services, mainstream generic domestic violence organisations and statutory agencies are now more likely to pass on referrals to BME providers rather than supporting the women themselves. This has been reported by a number of our members across the country. This is because of the specialist knowledge and expertise that exists in these organisations to address all forms of violence against women and girls under an intersectional approach.

The Covid-19 crisis has enabled organisations on the one hand to understand the specialism that BME organisations can offer. However, it does put additional pressures on BME organisations who are operating with very little resource and actually have not had any additional resources invested in these organisations since the start of the crisis.



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An important ask—because we are seeing so many referrals come to BME organisations—that we would make is that it is important to remember that while under-funded, under-represented and under-resourced, it is these same organisations that were on the frontline of supporting women before the crisis happened, during this crisis and hopefully to be around after this crisis. So we are asking Government to provide emergency funding to refuges, in particular to the black and minoritised women’s refuges, and that this funding be designated and ring-fenced.

We are also asking for additional funding to smaller organisations. These are local groups who work very closely in communities, who work with the most vulnerable groups of people and to support these organisations through the financial crisis that is created by the pandemic.

We have mentioned previously in various statements that have been put out that emergency resources are needed to support organisations to deal with things like digital exclusion and inequalities within the BME sector, emergency financial resources to meet current need, such as food and other amenities for women who are in refuges, support to organisations to cover costs for clinical supervision that have arisen as a result of the crisis, cost to support infrastructure and back-office expenditure as these costs continue to exist for organisations, even though we are working under lockdown measures.

Q219 **Chair:** May I ask for further details of what the funding is needed for in written evidence? That would be immensely helpful.

Baljit Banga: Yes, that is fine.

Q220 **Chair:** Lucy Hadley?

Lucy Hadley: I am speaking from Women’s Aid Federation of England. We are a national network of 180 member services in England, and we have sister federations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

As the other witnesses have identified, we and our members are concerned about the increased harm to women and children during this time, that this was predictable and that we need a clear Government strategy on preventing and protecting survivors during this time.

As for what we are hearing from women accessing our member services and our direct services—which include a live-chat, instant messenger service, which has seen a 41% increase in demand since mid-March—we are seeing four main trends. The first, as others have identified, is of these escalating cases becoming more complex and serious. Second, is perpetrators using Covid-19 as part of their abuse or failing to take necessary precautions to stop the spread of the virus. That has been identified by WHO as a tactic that abusers are likely to use. The third trend, which Dame Vera mentioned, is safe child contact, and that was one of the survivors’ primary concerns before the pandemic. Again, we are seeing perpetrators using child-contact arrangements or breaching contact arrangements for Covid-19 purposes. The final one is either being



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unable to escape as planned or being unsure or restricted around the options for leaving.

It was really good—as others have said—to see the Government awareness campaign at the weekend and the clear messages that you can leave, but we feel that this took too long and we have major questions around how women and children can access it safely during this time.

It is important to recognise that demand massively outstripped supply for refuges and other community-based services before the pandemic; 64% of referrals to refuges were declined in 2018-19 and we are 30% below the recommended number of bed spaces in England. As Baljit has identified, that has had severe impacts on the most marginalised, disadvantaged women in our society.

As for what we have heard from services about the impacts on their continuing to operate, we are seeing—added to the funding crisis they were already facing—a real storm of challenges in terms of staff shortages and reduced capacity to support women and children; practical difficulties in moving to remote working; real concerns around how to ensure that refuges can continue to deliver the spaces they have with the complexities around self-isolation; lack of access to PPE that have already been identified—only 30% of refugees responding to our survey had sufficient access to PPE; and fears about loss of income, as Ellie has pointed out already.

Of the service providers responding to our survey, 85% have said they have had to reduce or cancel one or more of their services and over one-third of refuge providers had had to do so.

We are seeing a lot fewer vacancies on our daily vacancy monitoring of refuge services, as you would expect. Others have identified the reasons for that—staff shortages, not being able to accept new referrals, the difficulties of self-isolation and shared accommodation, and simply there being no move-on accommodation for the women and children resident there, or just that the refuge service itself is full, as Baljit highlighted.

Q221 Chair: What was your top ask, Lucy?

Lucy Hadley: I would say, as everyone else has pointed out, that co-ordinated Government leadership is absolutely crucial. It crosses so many different Departments, the range of issues we are identifying, the emergency funding and this being simple, fair and easy to access. We are calling for at least £48.1 million for local domestic abuse services just to cover costs over the next six months—backfilling staff and childcare, remote working and hardship costs for the women and children they are supporting.

As you heard from the previous panel, we are worried about how the different pots of Government funding are going to be delivered fairly to



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services, if they are funnelled through local authorities and PCCs, particularly for the smaller services that are not commissioned. I would echo Baljit's point around ring-fenced funding for services led by and for BME women and migrant women. We need a strategy on accommodation and tackling those practical challenges in refuge spaces, PPE and so on.

Q222 **Chair:** We will come on to those in a second, sorry to interrupt you. Anna Edmundson?

Anna Edmundson: Thanks very much, Chair. As you acknowledged in your introduction, we know that sadly not all children are safe in their own homes and now hundreds of thousands of children are currently living in homes where there are real risks of abuse, of neglect, which could harm both their physical and their mental health, and we know that this impact is being intensified under lockdown. As the Children's Commissioner highlighted, school closures have meant that increasing numbers of children will be less visible during this time and that is something that is deeply concerning for us.

During this crisis, so far what the NSPCC has been focused on is making sure that we are still here for children. In the last few weeks we have transformed the way that our key national service operates. Childline, which is obviously for children, and our helpline, which is for adults who are concerned about abuse or neglect of children, are there. We have moved rapidly to remote working and prioritised that frontline work, so that there are opportunities for people to reach out where they can.

At a local level, our colleagues at service centres are also adapting to working remotely with children and providing, wherever possible and where it is safe to do so, services to children and families to make sure that that lifeline of support is not removed during this particularly difficult time. We are also supporting local authority partners with some of our frontline staff, if they are not able to continue some of that work and are able to shift in that way.

What is clear from the types of calls we are getting to both Childline and helpline is that children are feeling the impact of this crisis particularly. Childline has been delivering a rising number of counselling sessions to young people who are concerned about coronavirus.

Some of the themes emerging from that—and we are releasing these figures later this week, so I will just give you a bit of a preview of some of the headlines—you will not be surprised to hear that abuse is a key concern for children. Children who are experiencing abuse or neglect at home are now unable to leave the house. They are unable to get support from the places that they usually go to to feel safe, such as schools but also clubs, friends' houses or relatives' houses.

There are also worries being expressed about other support not being there, for example, CAMHS support. This is obviously something that is deeply worrying for us and I would echo some of the other witnesses'



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calls to make sure that it is really clear that these services are still, wherever possible, available and funded so that children can reach out if they need to.

With the helpline, we have seen an increase in calls relating to parental domestic abuse and concerns raised by other adults about that. In the first two full weeks since lockdown started, the number of contacts that we have received on parental mental health, alcohol or substance abuse, has increased by nearly 10%. Obviously that is concerning.

One of the other priorities that we have been focused on is that it must be clear that, while it is important that there are avenues for individuals and individual children to reach out for support, safeguarding is really everybody's business and it is now even more important—as some of the other witnesses have flagged—that everybody is able to spot the signs of abuse, know where they can go to get support and make sure that the community is taking any opportunity to make sure that we can shine a bit of a light on what is happening for children so that they are not stuck behind closed doors.

Q223 **Chair:** Your top ask, Anna?

Anna Edmundson: Our top ask is a bit similar to what other colleagues have mentioned. We have seen that there are lots of good intentions, there is lots of hard work happening across Whitehall, lots of issuing of guidance, but unfortunately there is a bit of a vacuum of co-ordination, in that different Departments, with different remits around child protection, are leading on slightly different issues and that is leading to the missed opportunity to make sure that those strands of work are being brought together.

As well as making sure that is happening at national level, what we also want to see is that the real frontline of child protection, local safeguarding hubs who are doing the work of co-ordinating police, social services, NHS and schools, who are evolving rapidly developing good practice, that that practice is feeding up to a national level and it is not just a top-down approach.

Q224 **Stephen Doughty:** You all paint a fairly bleak, unsurprisingly bleak, picture, particularly with regard to demand and the pressures on your organisations and indeed the wider sectors that you work in. Can you tell me—a very simple answer—have you received any of the Government funding, for example, what was announced in the charities and voluntary sector package, and what is your understanding of other organisations you work with and whether they have received any of that additional funding yet? Maybe start with Ellie.

Ellie Butt: No, not yet. My understanding is that none of that money has reached charities yet, that the detail of how that fund will be administered is still being worked out at central Government level. I believe different Government Departments are currently bidding for



shares of that fund, and they will then work on the guidance. So, no, Refuge hasn't and as far as I am aware no other organisations have either but I will leave that to my colleagues to confirm.

Q225 **Stephen Doughty:** Okay. Lucy?

Lucy Hadley: The same as Ellie. No, it has not reached frontline services yet and we are not exactly clear how on who it is going to—as we have talked about earlier—as well as the amount of funding. We are asking for at least £48.1 million for local services and additional money for the expansion of our live-chat service. There are questions about the way it is distributed fairly and equitably to the smaller services, which are not commissioned and do not have good relationships with local authorities or police and crime commissioners.

Q226 **Stephen Doughty:** Anna?

Anna Edmundson: Similar to other colleagues, we are waiting to see some of the details. We have been having other conversations with other Government Departments about support for some of our essential services, like Childline and helpline. Obviously speed is of the essence here, so—

Q227 **Stephen Doughty:** You have not accessed any of the funding yet?

Anna Edmundson: None of the funding that was announced on Wednesday last week, no.

Q228 **Stephen Doughty:** Baljit, what about yourself and some of the organisations you work with? I was particularly struck by what Vera Baird said in the previous session about the particular issues regarding BME organisations and some of the more specialist organisations not getting access to this funding. Could you comment on that?

Baljit Banga: First, we have not received any funding whatsoever, so the answer to the first part of the question is, no, absolutely none.

In response to the second part, we are very concerned about how these funds will be administered because the majority of the BME organisations are not commissioned by local authorities. If funding is managed through existing frameworks, it will not get to BME organisations, so there is a concern about equitable allocation of funds.

Q229 **Stephen Doughty:** Vera Baird specifically said that she understood that, for example, the Ministry of Justice had simply emailed the police and crime commissioners asking for them to identify organisations. I am assuming in some areas in the country that might go well for organisations where there are good relationships, but in others they would miss out. Would that be correct?

Baljit Banga: That is absolutely correct, yes.

Q230 **Stephen Doughty:** Can I ask all of you about the wider issue of messaging, in terms of both the messages that are being put out by the



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Government and in terms of what is being communicated to vulnerable women and girls and young people at risk of abuse more generally? I know that South Wales Police—the commissioner and, indeed, the police generally—have added to their stay-at-home advice to stay at home except where that is effectively not safe to do so, that you can leave your home for your own safety or health. Is that similar message being communicated across the UK or is there a risk that people are interpreting the guidance as being that they have to stay at home and face abuse?

Lucy Hadley: It is great that we have started to see that messaging being delivered in a clear and consistent way. There is obviously a massive question about what next. You can reach out for help and you can leave, but what if there is no space? What is our strategy behind the communication message? That is a massive question that we have talked about a lot.

In addition, it is about ensuring that we are reaching all survivors in all communities, as you say, that we are making those communications as inclusive as we can. The Home Secretary's announcement had no BSL—British sign language—translation alongside it. That is really important, as is translation into different languages. Understanding that not everyone recognises the term “domestic abuse” or is going to identify with that, we need to ensure that we are reaching different communities that are affected by the different forms of violence against women and girls in different ways, and ensuring that we are speaking to all groups.

We have been doing a lot of work within the violence against women and girls sector to pull together safety and support messaging for both survivors and communities. We hope that the Home Office will expand on its campaign with what we have developed based on our expertise in the sector, and also pay for it to be translated into different languages and into British sign language as well and make it accessible and easy to access for the most marginalised women.

It is also important, as you have heard, that we are using the community lifelines that are already available—the mutual aid groups, the NHS volunteers—that we ensure that they get consistent safeguarding messaging about domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls. Because we know they are reaching potentially vulnerable families, it is important that they are getting the right communications as well.

Q231 **Stephen Doughty:** Anna, can you explain the situation: do you think children and young people are getting the right messages and knowing how to keep themselves safe in this situation? I am also thinking particularly about some of the groups, for example, which were mentioned in the earlier panel, young LGBT people perhaps living in a family where their sexuality or gender identity is not respected or potentially put at risk? What is your understanding of the situation so far?



Anna Edmundson: To answer that question directly first, in terms of Childline it is obviously a priority for us to make sure that those children who are particularly at risk are able to access support and know that they can reach out.

With regard to the Government response, on domestic abuse I echo what Vera Baird said, which is that, while the campaign is welcome, it is noticeable that unfortunately there is a blind spot in this part of the Home Office in recognising that children themselves are victims. One in five children will experience domestic abuse. They do not just witness it. They are deeply affected by it, and it is noticeable that, as far as we can see, in the campaign this weekend there is not any child-friendly or child-facing element about it at the moment. That is something that we would particularly like to see.

More positively in relation to online abuse—which we have not had a chance to touch on but we know is likely to spike and is a key concern for colleagues in the police—the Home Office is doing some very positive work reaching out to tech platforms, to child protection charities like ourselves as well, to think about very creative and innovative ways to make sure there is safety messaging across a range of platforms, so that children, and young people in particular, know that they can reach out for support. That is the kind of thing that we want to see more of.

Q232 **Holly Lynch:** Just coming back on that point with the NSPCC in particular, if I can, Anna, we have not really covered the risks of increased online abuse. I am very mindful that organisations will be looking to engage with children who are at risk from abuse in the home using online means and perhaps over the phone. Are we doing enough to make sure that children are protected from those seeking to exploit them using online methods, and grooming in particular?

Anna Edmundson: Yes, it is a key concern for us, as you would expect, because at the moment there is a threefold risk, as we see it. We know that platforms have reduced moderation capabilities at the moment because companies such as Facebook and Google have reduced human moderation. They have suspended the use of third-party moderators and clearly they will have significant numbers of staff who may be self-isolating. This is combined with a time when there is increased demand with lots of children at home, and we know from non-coronavirus times that online abuse tends to peak when children are at home for longer periods. That is obviously incredibly concerning.

We know from the latest data from Europol and also from the National Crime Agency, that many abusers are thinking that this current crisis presents an opportunity, so it is incredibly important that this risk is acknowledged.

We know that the National Crime Agency and the Home Office are looking at this, but there is also an onus on the tech platforms themselves to adapt. Government and social services, as we talked about, have had to



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adapt overnight to coronavirus. Particularly at a time when we are relying on technology, it is even more important that some of the work that has gone into, for example, the online harms Bill to move towards a duty of care and regulatory model, is not paused.

What we are seeing from certain platforms—including somewhat ironically Zoom, which we are obviously using today—and also the growth of new apps and so on, is that safety has to be designed in from the outset and that tech platforms do have a responsibility to make sure that, if we are going to be relying on tech more in the future, they are safe for all their users, most particularly children.

Q233 Holly Lynch: Thank you for that. I appreciate that we are short of time but perhaps, Anna, if I could ask you again: we heard from the Children's Commissioner that Government have facilitated children who are vulnerable still attending school, but where take up of that has not been as expected, do you think it would be appropriate now to start looking at mandating that those children in vulnerable families are attending school over this period?

Anna Edmundson: The important thing is to make sure that the conversations are happening between schools, social workers and families, because the category of vulnerable children who are eligible to go to school—as Anne Longfield quite rightly described—is a very broad category and there will be children in there who are safe at home and it is appropriate for them to be there. For example, children who are in stable foster placements or children who are in homes where there might be other underlying health concerns or risks to other family members, which means that school is not an appropriate place.

The key thing is that you cannot take a blanket approach to this. We need to know what the numbers are and what the take-up is so that we understand where there might be an issue. The key is to understand the reasons why children are not in school. The way you do that is—as I said at the outset—through strong, robust, local safeguarding and child protection arrangements that are able to go into deep conversations, share information, and understand: is there a risk here? Do we follow this up, or is this a child where it is safe for them to be at home?

Q234 Ruth Edwards: My first questions are for Anna. I am interested in exploring the aspect of online abuse. I met—virtually, of course—with the Internet Watch Foundation a couple of weeks ago. The Foundation told me it had seen a large increase in the reporting of online sexual abuse content, because obviously more people are online, and a big increase in the amount of self-generated content that children are being manipulated into making. Have you, as the NSPCC, seen this increase as well, and how do think we can best get the message across to children and empower parents to have conversations with their children in order to keep them safe.



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Anna Edmundson: We have not seen a spike yet, but we are very concerned about this happening and we are in regular contact with colleagues both at the NCA and the NPCC to keep abreast of this situation. We are sharing information about what we are finding out from our helplines and so on.

In fact, next week we are publishing some research that looks at the kinds of children who might be vulnerable to grooming, who use social media frequently, and what that means for the propensity to be able to share images or to share content with adults. So it is something that we are concerned about.

We have been working in partnership with O2 and we have resources on our website under the Net Aware partnership, which offers advice to parents about the kinds of conversations and how to make sure that they are talking to children about what they are doing online and enabling that kind of conversation, how to do things, like set up parental controls, as well as advice on individual apps. So we would absolutely encourage people to look at that.

As for what the Home Office could be doing about this, it has made an impressive early start and really led the conversations between platforms, international partners and also child protection charities. We would like to see the Home Office push some of the tech platforms a bit further to make sure that information that those platforms are currently reporting into the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the US is disclosed and shared regularly and on a timely basis with law enforcement and authorities here in the UK, so that we have a real-time assessment of the impact of this crisis and can identify any moderation issues that need attention and address them.

There are steps that parents can take but the onus really needs to be on tech firms, but also the Government to help them to understand that they do have a duty here and that there are things they can do, as part of their response to coronavirus, that makes sure that children are as safe as possible online.

Q235 **Ruth Edwards:** There has been quite a lot of Government messaging directed at parents about making sure they know what their children are doing. It is not safe for them to be out with other children at the moment. Do you think the messaging about staying safe online in the home has been strong enough?

Anna Edmundson: We certainly know that the Home Office is aware of this and that it is actively planning campaigns about it which I understand are likely to come to fruition in the very near future. We have been pleased to see that and we would like to see more about it.

Q236 **Ruth Edwards:** A final question from me to the other witnesses. One of the few good things that has come out of the current crisis is the very strong community volunteer networks that have been built up. Do you



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see any opportunity for using those kinds of community networks in the future for helping to identify and help victims of domestic abuse more broadly? Perhaps if we start with Lucy Hadley.

Lucy Hadley: Yes, we have long known, and research has shown, that communities can either be gate openers or gate closers for the survivors of domestic abuse, and that women are often likely to tell friends, family, someone they trust, about the abuse they are experiencing, so it is a really important means of ensuring survivors can access support.

At Women's Aid we have been leading a community response called Ask Me for over four years now. We have nearly 1,000 community ambassadors trained across the UK. They have received 12 hours of in-depth training on domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. They can provide a safe response, raise awareness within their communities and tackle some of the barriers that victims face to coming forward. We want to see far more focus on interventions like that and ensuring that we can build on the expertise we have within the sector to train up communities, in various different ways, to be able to provide that good, safe response. That is the scheme you spoke about earlier with the code words, but it also goes further than that to ensure that we have people that really understand domestic abuse providing safety.

Baljit Banga: Just quickly, that deep community outreach was something that was always done by BME organisations. It is actually a very good trademark of BME women's organisations to be able to work deep in communities, reach out to women who have very little access or have no access to services, and ensure safe pathways to support.

It is a good way, but one of the things that I want to highlight there is that that kind of funding, which was community-based outreach funding, disappeared a very long time ago. A lot of that work has been affected by the lack of resources and, if community and volunteer networks are the way to go or being considered now, the resourcing implications of that would also have to be considered.

Ellie Butt: I echo what my colleagues have said about the important role of communities and particularly neighbours. I think it is really important as part of these awareness campaigns that we talk about the importance of calling for help if you are worried about one of your neighbours or friends or colleagues or relations. That is really important.

On the Refuge website we have information about what to do if you are worried about somebody.

The only small concern I would echo is to be mindful of how dangerous leaving a perpetrator of domestic abuse can be. We know that that is the time of highest risk for women, so it is absolutely important that specialist organisations are contacted to support women, who are thinking of leaving, about how to do that safely and to make sure that they have that support, neighbours and all these networks in terms of



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letting people what help is out there and calling if they are worried someone is being harmed.

Q237 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Can I thank all of our witnesses? We have literally just run out of time on the technology that we have. We are hugely grateful to all of our witnesses for the evidence today, both sobering and powerful evidence that you have given us. Please do send us any further information that we were not able to cover today.

To anybody else who has been following the session and who has further evidence for us on domestic abuse or child abuse during the coronavirus crisis, please do send it to the Select Committee as well, because we are very keen to be able to respond with some recommendations as a result of this evidence.

Finally, I would also say to anybody who needs any kind of support or help, please do not hesitate to contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247 or, of course, anybody who is in any danger at any time do follow the police advice and ring 999 and you can always press 55 if you cannot speak on the phone, because we are very keen to support the Government and the police message that there is help available for people who need it at the moment.

Thank you very much to everyone for this evidence session. We are very grateful for your time.