

Leadership Issues in Social Care

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Domestic abuse and COVID-19

As soon as lockdown was announced, domestic abuse charities raised concerns about support for people who may be at greater risk of harm due to the self-isolation measures. This report looks at these measures, the support available and the implications for the long-awaited Domestic Abuse Bill.

When the lockdown was implemented in the middle of March, one of the biggest concerns raised was for the safety of people living with violent or dangerous partners. With the risk of services closing – or at least facing severe cutbacks – and stringent social distancing measures, it was felt that those at risk of harm would become isolated. In turn, with little opportunity to leave the house, experts believed that this would heighten family tensions and increase the possibility of abuse happening.

Although we won't know the full picture until we return to some level of normality, the initial view of what has occurred is not promising and

fits with these early warnings. In the first two weeks of the lockdown, the National Domestic Abuse helpline reported a 25% increase in calls and online requests for help, compared to the weeks before the implementation of the lockdown.¹

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, there have been four domestic killings since the lockdown started, while almost 2,000 domestic abuse calls were made to police in the first three weeks of April.²

As well as spousal abuse, there has also been an increase in reports of child-parent abuse,³ and a 20% rise in calls to the NSPCC regarding

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child abuse.⁴ Isolation is consequently seen as a critical driver for abuse, with universal themes of cramped accommodation, and little opportunity for personal space or time apart.

Alcohol addiction and domestic abuse

While alcohol does not cause domestic abuse, it can play a role in increasing the risk of abuse, particularly where abuse is already a factor in the relationship. Speaking to the University of Northampton's Society for the Study of Addiction, Dr Sarah Fox, Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University acknowledged that while alcohol sales have increased – in part due to the closure of pubs and bars – it is still hard to get a handle on just how much drinking people are doing at home since alcohol consumption figures are often under-reported.⁵

In a previous report for Alcohol Change UK, Dr Fox looked at the issue in greater detail, with special consideration given for what this means during the pandemic. The authors' concerns included:

- Lockdown and self-isolation could increase the risk of physical, sexual and other forms of abuse, particularly when alcohol is already a factor
- The inclusion of off-licenses as an essential business, while other social outlets are closed
- For victims of abuse who are alcohol-dependent, perpetrators may restrict their access to alcohol as a form of control
- Victims may be less able to seek support from alcohol services or may have to access online help, which could prove challenging
- Victims may also be unable to access safe refuge due to the movement restrictions. However, the government has stressed that the household isolation instructions do not apply if people need to leave their home to escape domestic abuse.⁶

In response, the authors are urging members of the public, police and health and social care workers to be vigilant for the signs of domestic abuse to maximise the chances of early identification. Methods to help early identification include:

- Asking people about their safety if domestic abuse is suspected. This should be done in private, in a one-to-one setting, and not in front of family members
- Raise awareness of the Women's Aid 'Silent Solution' system. When somebody calls 999, if the caller is unable to speak to the operator, the call is forwarded to an operating system. If the caller then presses '55', the operator will transfer the call to the police as an emergency. However, this only works on mobile phones and does not allow the police to track your location⁷
- While alcohol use might increase, if supplies run low – either due to low stock in shops or due to being deprived by a partner – then people might go into alcohol withdrawal.

The authors of the paper also backed calls from the World Health Organization to ensure there is adequate financial support for domestic abuse services during the pandemic. They also called on the Treasury to ensure the proper funding is made available to health and social care services supporting individuals impacted by alcohol abuse.

Government support

In a commitment to ensure people at risk of domestic abuse are supported during the pandemic,⁷ the government has set out how, with help from the charity sector and police, they aim to keep services open for people.

In particular, they have provided information for employers, who may now be less able to keep in contact with staff working from home. The guidance says that employers should keep in regular contact with staff, and even consider visiting them if they are concerned and have lost contact with them. Furthermore, if employers feel there is an immediate risk of harm, then they should contact the police.

Employers should also encourage employees to look out for others who may be experiencing domestic abuse and to signpost them to appropriate services.

The government has also provided links to useful resources for employers, including the Employers Initiative on [Domestic Abuse](#),⁸ which has several tools to support employers, as well as [Business in the Community](#), which has produced a useful toolkit.⁹

This government page also signposts to many specialist [domestic abuse services](#).⁷

Additionally – and more practically – the government has announced a £76m package of support to victims of domestic abuse, rough sleepers, vulnerable children and victims of modern slavery.¹⁰ Of this, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government received £10million for domestic abuse safe accommodation, ensuring services could continue to operate, as well as providing additional capacity to services where needed.¹¹

At the end of April, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee set out plans for what should happen next. These include:

- A full action plan to be developed, which works across social care, housing and the criminal justice system
- Consideration for support immediately and for when lockdown ends, when the need for help and support could be acute
- Information and outreach support including specialist and BME services to ensure no-one is missed
- Direct and urgent funding support for vulnerable children
- Provision of ring-fenced support for additional costs to services, as well as for loss of income caused by the virus.¹²

Safeguarding against domestic abuse

Like the government, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has published a detailed guide to domestic abuse which takes place during the coronavirus pandemic.¹³

The guide states that, based on evidence gained from previous epidemics, there should be a “twin track” approach to tackling domestic abuse. Firstly, this approach should focus on appropriately supporting organisations so that they can continue to prevent and respond to domestic abuse. Secondly, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) risk-mitigation measures should be integrated into the crisis response from other stakeholders, such as health, education, child protection, and security and justice.

The guide also contains a summary for multi-agency forums working in the current crisis. The recommendations include:

- Agencies should share plans about how they will manage the increase in domestic violence and abuse in the current period
- Each agency should clarify how they intend to engage with families
- Although many agencies may be working remotely, it is vital that information sharing and engaging with families and victims continues regularly. This may need to be done in creative ways to ensure safety and security
- Multi-agency forums should be led by their agency online protocols and agree on a joint approach to determine which virtual platforms are appropriate
- Chairs of multi-agency forums should be skilled in managing virtual meetings. SafeLives recommends using the case structure and sending it to all agency representatives beforehand¹⁴
- Agencies should consider discussing report submissions in smaller groups if virtual meetings become a challenge. However, this should only be used as a last resort, and non-attendees should provide the same level of commitment and creative solutions.

SafeLives has also published a guide for members of the public, highlighting how they can stay safe during the current crisis, and signposting to this resource might be useful for practitioners.¹⁵

While much of its content echoes government guidance, the guide also calls for the creation of a personalised safety plan and use of the [Bright Sky](#) and [Hollie Gazzard](#) apps, to turn mobile phones into personal safety devices.

Response from the LGA

Like the government and SCIE, the Local Government Association has also published a document and resource for councils on domestic abuse help and support during the pandemic.¹⁶

In particular, the LGA points to good practice in Devon and Cornwall, Southwark, St Helens, Sutton and Middlesbrough, where local

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initiatives are showing promise, despite the challenging environment. For example, in Devon and Cornwall, there has been the launch of a new information campaign,¹⁷ while in St Helens the local cabinet has looked to reassure citizens in the face of lockdown restrictions.¹⁸ More examples of good practice relating to the local authority response to COVID-19 can be found on the LGA website.¹⁹

The LGA also makes numerous recommendations for local authorities, including:

- Reaching out to emergency accommodation services, which may require additional support with regards to staffing or accepting new referrals
- Providing crisis funding to safe accommodation services. This follows on from a letter sent by the Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing, Luke Hall MP, to all local authorities, which asked them to work with domestic abuse services in their area
- If people express concern about travelling to a refuge, it might be useful to highlight Women's Aid and Imkaan's 'Refuge to Rail' scheme, which provides access to free train travel and accommodation during COVID-19, once an offer of refuge has been received.²⁰
- Councils are reporting a fall in the number of referrals to children's social care departments since the lockdown began, meaning at-risk young people could be falling through the cracks – particularly where other professionals in a school or healthcare settings might have picked up on abuse. In response, the LGA has called for a robust multi-agency approach, as well as drawing attention to the government guidance on the issue, which will be addressed in more detail later in this article
- Safeguarding Adults Boards are well placed to recognise increasing pressures and can help facilitate robust partnership efforts
- Consistent messaging should be delivered across all agencies. This should stress that, for anyone at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse, help is available and that the police will respond in an emergency. Messaging should also challenge a perpetrator's behaviour, prompting them to seek help and take responsibility for their actions
- All information should be made available in several ways, including British Sign

Language, Easy Read and accessible formats for blind and partially sighted people. Information can also be shared in many different places, including:

- Through community and voluntary sector groups
- Via local radio stations
- Publicising at local bus stops, supermarkets or in local newspapers
- Putting up posters or leaving leaflets at food banks
- Publicising at pharmacies, GP surgeries, hospitals, sexual health clinics and sexual assault referral centres
- Using public notice boards in parks and outside council offices
- Publicising the information at housing and homeless services, welfare and other public health services
- Raise awareness of the Home Office' #YouAreNotAlone public awareness campaign
- Raise awareness of the Respect campaign #NoExcuseforAbuse, which targets perpetrators
- Keep track of which services are still open and available for use.

Domestic abuse leaflets should not be posted to households directly, as this could alert the perpetrator.

Children, domestic abuse and coronavirus

In April 2020, the Children's Commissioner published a briefing called *Children, domestic abuse and coronavirus*.²¹

The report is pertinent because it acknowledges the power self-isolation and self-distancing measures give to perpetrators of domestic abuse, coupled with fewer opportunities for abuse to be uncovered, or for victims to seek help.

In response to the risk posed to children, the Home Office has announced £3.1 million will go to specialist services to help young people directly and indirectly affected by domestic abuse. This can include one-to-one and group counselling sessions. The new fund will be split between local authorities, children's charities and Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales.^{16,22}

COVID-19 and the Domestic Abuse Bill

On 3rd March 2020, the government released more details about the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill. Two weeks later, however, and with the world entering into lockdown, it once again put the future of the Bill – previously delayed due to prorogation and then the general election – up in the air.

However, no doubt aware of the continuing delay, a second reading was squeezed into Parliament at the end of April, meaning we now have far greater understanding around the direction of travel, with the government setting out several aims. These include:²³

- Creating a statutory definition of domestic abuse, which will emphasise that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, coercive or controlling, and can also be in the form of economic abuse
- Establishing a Domestic Abuse Commissioner, who will stand up for victims and survivors, raise public awareness, monitor the response of local authorities, the justice system and other statutory agencies, and hold them to account in tackling domestic abuse
- Creating a new Domestic Abuse Protection Notice and Domestic Abuse Protection Order
- Placing a duty on local authorities in England to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation
- Prohibiting perpetrators of abuse from cross-examining their victims in person in the family courts in England and Wales
- Creating a statutory presumption that victims of domestic abuse are eligible for special measures in the criminal courts (for example, being able to give evidence via a video link)
- Enabling domestic abuse offenders to be subject to polygraph testing as a condition of their licence following their release from custody
- Placing the guidance supporting the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme ("Clare's law") on a statutory footing
- Ensuring that where a local authority, for reasons connected with domestic abuse,

grants a new secure tenancy to a social tenant who had or has a secure lifetime or assured tenancy (other than an assured shorthold tenancy) this must be a secure lifetime tenancy

- Extending the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the criminal courts in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to further violent and sexual offences.

Non-statutory commitments in the Bill include:

- Introducing regulations and guidance on Relationship Education, Relationship and Sex Education, and Health Education
- Investing in domestic abuse training for responding agencies and professionals
- Developing national guidance for police on serial and repeat perpetrators
- Improving awareness and understanding of coercive control
- Continue to develop means to collect, report and track domestic abuse data.

The government estimates that such measures would cost between £128-£146 million per year, but modelling suggests that only a small reduction – 0.2% – in the prevalence of domestic abuse would be needed for the benefits to outweigh the costs.

Conclusion

There's no doubt that the coronavirus – and subsequent social distancing measures – have increased the risks of domestic abuse. This challenging environment can then be exacerbated by other factors, such as alcohol dependency. When combined, that makes for an enormously challenging environment for social care departments, police and other stakeholders.

Yet, plans are being put in place centrally, and more locally, that point towards good practice, and learning is being shared so that other authorities can follow these models of success. The longer the lockdown continues, the harder it will be to manage the situation in its current guise, so a relaxation of COVID-19 measures would undoubtedly prove beneficial – but this will be a weighted decision by the government, and one which would require careful consideration. Whatever happens next, the implications will be enormous for those at risk of abuse.

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