



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

**Home Office
preparedness for
Covid-19 (coronavirus):
domestic abuse
and risks of harm:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Second Report**

**Second Special Report of Session
2019–21**

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Home Affairs Committee

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Second Special Report

On 27 April 2020 the Home Affairs Committee published its Second Report of Session 2019–21, [Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home](#) (HC 321). The Government's response was received on 16 July 2020 and is appended to this report.

In the Government's Response the Committee's recommendations are shown in **bold** type, and the Government's responses are shown in plain type.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

1. The Home Office recognised early on that a nationwide lockdown could have detrimental impacts for victims of domestic abuse, this was reinforced by media reports¹ of increases in incidents of domestic abuse during COVID-19 lockdowns in other countries around the world. The priority has therefore been to assess and seek means to mitigate the potential effects of the necessary restrictions put in place to combat COVID-19 for victims of domestic abuse, in particular by ensuring that sources of help and support continue to be available to victims.
2. The Government has published specific advice on gov.uk² for domestic abuse during COVID-19. This information makes clear that isolation instructions do not apply where victims need to leave home to seek help if they are in danger of domestic abuse. The guidance also points to the services available to victims or those concerned about others during the lockdown. Alongside the guidance, in April the Home Secretary launched a domestic abuse campaign, #YouAreNotAlone, to raise general awareness of domestic abuse during COVID-19 and signpost the support and advice available.
3. The Government has taken steps to ensure domestic abuse charities and services can continue to operate in the challenging circumstances caused by the pandemic. The Home Secretary announced £2m in funding to help bolster helplines and web based services and ensure means by which victims could seek help remained available. £1.2m of this has been allocated to service providers to date, helping for example to increase service capacity and to support the move to home working.
4. This is on top of the Treasury's £750m package to support charities, of which £76m has been allocated to Departments to support victims of sexual violence, domestic abuse, modern slavery and vulnerable children and their families. As part of this funding, the Home Office is managing £2m for national and non-local domestic abuse charities providing support to victims of domestic abuse in the community. The fund opened for bids on 22 May, closing on 8 June, and £793,000 has now been allocated to 13 successful applicants. On 6 July we reopened the remaining £1,207,000 of the fund for further bids.

1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51705199>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

5. The Government has also provided £3.2 billion to support local authorities, easing COVID-19 related pressures on all services. This funding includes increasing support for services helping the most vulnerable in society.

6. The Home Affairs Select Committee's report of 27 April 2020 made 24 observations and recommendations for the Home Office to consider. Events have continued to move swiftly, and a significant amount of progress has been made in the period since the report. This response addresses the Committee's recommendations setting out the work undertaken by the Home Office and other Government Departments on this wide-ranging issue.

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

7. The Home Office has worked closely with other Government departments, including the Cabinet Office, to ensure that our messaging on COVID-19 and domestic abuse is clear. On 11 April the Home Secretary launched the #YouAreNotAlone campaign to let victims of domestic abuse know that help remains available and to signpost them to support.

8. We have published domestic abuse specific advice on the COVID-19 gov.uk page,³ which clearly communicates that anyone at risk of domestic abuse can leave their home and go somewhere safe during the lockdown. The domestic abuse "get help" page is also linked to the COVID-19 gov.uk page to signpost victims to support. Our messaging has covered all types of domestic abuse, including "honour"-based abuse, FGM and forced marriage.

9. We have sought to further integrate our information campaign with central Government's messaging by using Cabinet Office COVID-19 media inventory (digital posters outside supermarkets and information sent to COVID-19 testing sites) and working with them to mobilise influencers and celebrity support for the domestic abuse public awareness campaign. Domestic abuse campaign assets were also made available on Public Health England's Coronavirus Resource Centre which hosts resources for all the main COVID-19 campaigns for stakeholders.

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

10. Following consultation with stakeholders, we have published the translation of the campaign materials into 15 priority languages. We are currently preparing to have the latest information on gov.uk translated into these languages. We are also looking to make

3 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

some campaign assets accessible in easy read formats. We have worked with a specialist agency to reach diverse communities and promote the campaign in specialist media outlets and through relevant celebrity and influencer channels. The Home Office led campaign will continue to signpost to services who can provide support and guidance to parents and children impacted by domestic abuse.

The Home Office should consider development of links between helplines and services, to ensure that every victim gets a timely and safe response. (Paragraph 22)

11. The Home Office's #YouAreNotAlone campaign materials all reference the relevant Gov.uk page providing advice to victims of domestic abuse during COVID-19. The gov.uk page features links to helplines and services, including the National Domestic Abuse Helpline. The Home Office is continuing to work closely with domestic abuse charities and helpline providers to ensure that victims are able to access appropriate support.

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

12. The Home Office has provided £2m in funding to assist the domestic abuse sector, including its technological capability, to date we have allocated £1.2m to the following providers of national helpline and web-based services: Galop, Hestia, Hourglass, Operation Encompass, Refuge, Respect, South West Grid for Learning, Surviving Economic Abuse, Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Women's Aid, Karma Nirvana, Sign Health and the Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse.

13. This is in addition to the Treasury's £750m package to support charities, £360m of which has been allocated through Government departments, with £76m going to victims of sexual violence, domestic abuse, modern slavery and vulnerable children and their families. As part of this funding, on 19 May the Ministry of Justice launched £25m of funds for local domestic abuse and sexual violence charities. £15m of this has been allocated to local domestic abuse services through Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). On 22 May the Home Office launched an additional £2m fund for national and regional domestic abuse charities. The fund closed for bids on 8 June, and £793,000 has now been allocated to 13 successful applicants, with remaining funds re-opened for further applications. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is administering a £10m fund for domestic abuse support in safe accommodation. To date MHCLG has provided nearly £8.7 million funding to domestic abuse safe accommodation providers across all regions of the country. The remaining £1.2m is open for bidders to apply on a rolling 'first comes first served' basis until 20 July. All domestic abuse funding pots have been opened to charities dealing with all types of domestic abuse, including "honour"-based abuse, forced marriage and FGM.

14. The Government has also provided £3.2 billion to support local authorities easing COVID-19 related pressures on all services. This funding includes increasing support for services helping the most vulnerable in society.

15. Many forces are proactively targeting domestic abuse perpetrators. This includes, for example, identifying and putting interventions in place for high risk perpetrators, and establishing dedicated domestic abuse response teams. Arrests and applications for Domestic Violence Protection Orders and Notices continue to be made, supported by the courts which are also prioritising domestic abuse issues. Police forces have also introduced a range of innovative practices to safeguard victims and ensure that they are still able to contact the police if needed during lockdown, including for example by increasing on line reporting and web-based communications sessions with local communities.

Whilst the public information programme is welcome, the Government now needs to go much further and set out a full COVID-19 cross-Government strategy on domestic abuse to cover both the period of lockdown and the period immediately after lockdown, when need for support is also likely to be acute. National leadership and coordination from central Government are important. We agree with the Commissioners that a formal cross-Government working group must be established, tasked with the production and implementation of a co-ordinated cross-Government action plan which is integrated into the wider Government planning through the emergency COBR committee. This group should be led by the Home Secretary and include relevant Ministers across Government as well as the Domestic Abuse, Victims and Children's Commissioners and should operate in consultation with frontline providers. (Paragraph 29)

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

16. Domestic abuse has been a high priority from the outset of the lockdown. There are numerous structures in place to monitor developments. This enables specific issues to be addressed in detail, while maintaining flexibility to deal with a swiftly moving issue.

17. The focus has been to ensure that victims continue to be able to access necessary help and support while perpetrators are tackled. There has been concerted police activity to ensure a proactive approach to identifying and clamping down perpetrators while finding new ways for victims to access help where normal avenues may be more restricted. Domestic abuse cases have been prioritised in the family and criminal courts during this period, and planning is underway for a return to full working to ensure that cases continue to progress through the criminal justice system.

18. Awareness raising and information provision has been a key element in ensuring that victims of domestic abuse know that they can still access help via the police or other support via specialist domestic abuse service providers. Domestic abuse issues are intrinsic also to the work of other Department such as health and education, ensuring new opportunities are taken to refer victims to appropriate support where needed.

19. The provision of additional funding has been critical to ensuring that a full range of domestic abuse services continue to be available to those that need them. The Home Office has provided funding to bolster national helplines and online services in addition to the wider Government funding to provide support across all parts of the domestic abuse charity sector.

20. The work involves regular meetings and liaison across Government Departments, including the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, to ensure coordination of activity and priorities, as well as with the designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and the Victim's Commissioner and organisations supporting victims.

21. As the lockdown restrictions ease, work is focusing on monitoring and preparing for the potential impacts on all services.

22. The Prime Minister's Hidden Harms Summit on 21 May underlined the importance attached to this issue. The event was an opportunity to focus on some of the key challenges of the current period and to begin to plan for next steps. The actions identified during the Summit will help to shape our future work as the lockdown restrictions begin to lift.

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

23. At the Prime Minister's Hidden Harms Summit on 21 May, we announced that the Government is working closely with domestic abuse organisations and retailers, including the National Pharmacy Association and the British Retail Consortium, on the creation of a codeword for domestic abuse victims to use. The codeword initiative will provide further opportunities for victims of domestic abuse to access support services discreetly, particularly for those with limited access to mobile phones or the internet. The codeword scheme will become increasingly important as lockdown restrictions ease and more retailers open.

24. We have been and continue to be clear in our campaigns, that if someone is in danger, they should call the police immediately. The Home Office and central Government's messaging has clarified that under the previous "stay at home" order, anyone who may be in danger of domestic abuse during the lockdown can and should ignore orders to stay at home if they need to seek refuge. The pre-existing support mechanisms for victims are still available and many have been bolstered by additional funding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

25. The Government is working with local authorities, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association (LGA) to ensure that social workers continue to work with vulnerable children at this time. The Government have supported local authorities with a total of £3.2bn in additional funding, which will support local authorities in meeting additional demands, including on their children's services, at this time.

26. The Secretary of State for Education wrote to all educational establishments and Directors of Children's Services in England to encourage attendance where that is in the child's best interests and to make clear that local authorities, schools and further education providers should continue to keep in touch with vulnerable children who are not attending an educational setting.

27. Health visitors, school nurses and maternity settings will continue to be key contacts between the health system and vulnerable children and families. NHS England and NHS Improvement's community health services prioritisation document and standard operating procedure make clear that these services will continue to perform vital safeguarding functions, virtually or face to face as appropriate. CP-IS (child protection information sharing) which has information on children in need or who are subject to a child protection plan is now being shared with school nurses/health visitors to better support children at heightened risk of abuse during COVID-19 measures.

28. £173,000 has been provided to Operation Encompass which facilitates liaison between police officers and teachers to ensure that children affected by domestic abuse are identified and properly supported when attending school immediately following an incident. The Government has also provided over £3m this year to specialist support services for children as a continuation of the Children Affected by Domestic Abuse (CADA) Fund.

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

29. The Home Office acknowledges that in circumstances where victims of domestic abuse have their access to phones and devices controlled by abusers it can be difficult for them to access support services and that neighbours, friends and employers have an important part to play in raising concerns. The Home Secretary's awareness campaign #YouAreNotAlone and associated guidance on gov.uk⁴ serves to ensure that anyone concerned that someone they know may be experiencing domestic abuse can get support and advice.

Domestic abuse needs to be a priority for the entire criminal justice system. The police, Crown Prosecution Service and Courts need to work together to ensure that Domestic

4 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

Violence Prevention Order cases are heard swiftly. Local authorities need to ensure that their domestic abuse action plans include provision for alternative temporary accommodation for perpetrators if that is needed to apply DVPOs and keep victims safe. (Paragraph 43)

30. The Home Office has worked closely with police forces across the country during the lockdown to ensure that instances of domestic abuse are and continue to be a priority. Police forces are continuing to pursue and arrest perpetrators of domestic abuse, whilst providing essential support to victims.

31. The Family and Criminal Courts are ensuring that domestic abuse cases are amongst the highest priority work being dealt with by the courts. Similarly, Domestic Violence Protection Orders and Non-Molestation orders have been placed in the highest category of work in the magistrates' and family courts, and they continue to be listed for urgent hearings despite the current restrictions. The same is true of other, related protective orders, such as Forced Marriage Protection Orders, Female Genital Mutilation Protection Orders and Stalking Protection Orders.

32. Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service have issued new guidance which ensures that anyone who needs to may apply to a court by e-mail for a domestic abuse injunction order avoiding the need for physically attending court. HMCTS are also working with Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors (FLOWS) to promote their service, which has just introduced an encrypted self-referral app in response to COVID-19.

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

33. The Government has taken steps to ensure that domestic abuse victims are still supported by the legal system during the lockdown. For instance, the Legal Aid Agency is currently exercising flexibility with regard to the evidential requirements in relation to the means test to mitigate the effects caused by lockdown measures. This includes waiving the usual time limit by which applicants are expected to submit the substantive legal aid application with supporting means evidence and allowing practitioners to submit applications with electronic signatures from the client.

34. We are also providing £800,000 funding to the Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors (FLOWS) project, which provides free legal support to victims of domestic abuse who need to apply for an emergency protective order from the courts. The funding will be used to provide a helpline and email service for domestic abuse victims, where they can be referred to a legal aid solicitor to assist them with making their application or can receive advice directly if they are ineligible for legal aid. The funding will also be used by FLOWS to further develop their CourtNav tool, which aims to make it easier for unrepresented victims of domestic abuse to submit their own application to the court.

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

35. Six months is not an unrealistic time-frame since proceedings need only to be commenced and can be adjourned once they are under way. Extending the limit would be unlikely to offer a significant benefit to victims of domestic abuse; the only offence likely to be committed in the context of domestic abuse to which the time limit applies is common assault. This is because it affects only summary offences and does not apply to other assault offences such as actual bodily harm, or to the 2015 offence of controlling or coercive behaviour, which are triable either way. The Ministry of Justice has considered whether the six-month time limit in section 127 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 should be extended for proceedings of that kind but has no plans to do so.

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

36. As previously mentioned (paragraphs 11- 13), the Government has provided a range of funding to help ensure that support services for victims of domestic abuse and their children continue to be available.

37. During the COVID-19 outbreak, NHS mental health services have remained open and have been working around the clock to support people with mental health issues through the pandemic and beyond. For those with severe needs or in crisis, NHS England has instructed all NHS mental health trusts to establish 24/7 mental health crisis lines for urgent NHS mental health support, advice and triage. In March, Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) announced a grant scheme worth £5m for mental health charities to support adults and children and an additional £4.2m to support frontline services, totalling £9.2m worth of COVID-19 response funding. Over the longer term, we will continue to work towards comprehensive expansion of mental health services set out in the NHS Long Term Plan, with additional funding of £2.3 billion a year in real terms by 2023/24.

38. For those who are dependent on drugs and alcohol, drug and alcohol treatment service provision are essential to support them. People who misuse or are dependent on drugs and alcohol may be at increased risk of becoming infected, and infecting others, with COVID-19. They may also be more vulnerable to the impact of infection with the virus, due to underlying conditions. It is important that these services are maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public Health England (PHE) and the DHSC have published COVID-19: Guidance for commissioners and providers of services to people who use drugs and alcohol.⁵

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

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-commissioners-and-providers-of-services-for-people-who-use-drugs-or-alcohol>

39. The Home Office announced £2m of funding to support technological capability such as specialist helplines and websites. We have already allocated £1.2m of this to providers of national helpline and web-based services including services which support people from protected, vulnerable or minority groups. This has included, for example, grants to Sign Health, Karma Nirvana and Galop, which help deaf victims of domestic abuse, victims of “honour”-based abuse, and LGBT+ victims of domestic abuse, respectively. This funding has been further bolstered by the Treasury’s announcement of £750m to support the charity sector. Of this, £360m has been allocated through Government departments, with £76m going to victims of sexual violence, domestic abuse, modern slavery and vulnerable children and their families.

40. The Home Office and the MoJ worked closely together to ensure that domestic abuse charities of all sizes, including those which support minority groups, could apply to one or more of their domestic abuse funds. The prospectuses for both funds made clear that organisations which support minority groups were welcome to apply. Home Office officials are liaising with DCMS colleagues on how these funding streams will support the Tampon Tax fund.

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

41. £76m of the £750m fund for charities was allocated across a number of Government Departments specifically to support victims of sexual violence, domestic abuse, modern slavery and vulnerable children and their families.

42. MHCLG announced on 5 June that it had allocated £8.15M of its £10m fund to 147 providers of safe accommodation services. Since then a further £621,159 has been allocated to 22 organisations and the remaining funds have been reopened for bids on a rolling basis up until 20 July. The Ministry of Justice announced on 26 June that it had allocated £22m of its £25m fund, via police and Crime Commissioners, to 548 local organisations supporting victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence including £15m for local domestic abuse services.

43. The Home Office £2m fund for national and regional organisations supporting victims of domestic abuse closed on 8 June and 13 successful applicants received £793,000. On 6 July we reopened the remaining £1,207,000 of the fund for further bids. Services of all sizes were able to apply for funding, regardless of whether or not they had an existing relationship with the Government. The application processes were designed to be clear and simple, requesting only the information which was necessary to assess intended impacts of the funding and make fair allocations.

We recommend that priority need for settled accommodation is extended to survivors of domestic abuse. (Paragraph 60)

44. On 2 May the Government announced its intention to give those who are homeless as a result of being a victim of domestic abuse priority need for accommodation secured

by the local authority. This will help to ensure victims do not remain with their abuser for fear of not having a roof over their head. The necessary amendments to Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 are now contained in clause 66 of the Domestic Abuse Bill as amended in Committee.

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

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

45. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) have been liaising closely with Refuge and the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, the office of the designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Women's Aid, and the wider refuge sector as well as other Government Departments, from the start of the lockdown to monitor how demand is changing.

46. MHCLG launched a £10m fund to support Domestic Abuse safe accommodation charitable providers during the crisis, including enabling them to provide additional accommodation to support more victims and their children. 112 bids were received from charitable organisations and on 5 June it was announced that £8.15m funding will be granted to 147 service providers through 103 successful bids from across all regions of England. On 26 June a further 336,610 was announced as being allocated to 12 organisations and on 2 July a further £284,549 was announced for another 10 service providers. The remaining £1.2m will be open for bidders to apply on a rolling 'first comes first served' basis until 20 July. This funding will help keep vital safe accommodation services open, up and running, providing critical support to victims and their children at these unprecedented times. It will re-open 291 bed spaces which are currently closed due to COVID-19, as well as creating 1,210 more bed spaces to support more victims of domestic abuse.

47. Costs for hotels and other temporary accommodation can be met by the £10m MHCLG fund, where refuge charities judge it to be necessary, safe and appropriate. The Government is also providing national co-ordination and support to help local authorities meet demand including enabling them to be able to book additional accommodation through Crown Commercial Services.

48. A new statutory duty on local authorities is now part of the Domestic Abuse Bill currently going through Parliament. This important duty will help to ensure that all

victims, including children, have access to safety and support within safe accommodation. Providing consistency of coverage across the country, backed by appropriate Government funding.

Government funding for support services and refuge accommodation must include specialist provision and must ensure that BME services can continue and expand to meet any increased need. (Paragraph 64)

49. Prioritisation of specialist service providers will ensure those groups, who often face additional barriers in accessing support regardless of COVID-19 and may bear increased vulnerability (e.g. victims with disabilities; older victims; BME; LGBT, etc) are protected.

50. Government recognises the need for victims from minority groups and those with complex needs to be able to access specialist support when they need it and that is why, in allocation of the MHCLG Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Emergency Support Fund, the Government is giving special consideration to services that provide support to particular groups such as, but not limited to, BME, LGBT and victims with disabilities.

51. So far there have been 42 successful bids to the MHCLG £10m fund by services offering specialist support and more applications from specialist providers are welcomed now that the fund has re-opened for bids.

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

52. In addition to the range of funding allocated to specialist domestic abuse and other services, the Government has announced a range of measures to ensure people can stay safe and many of these are available for those with a No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, such as protection for renters from evictions, a mortgage holiday for those who need it, as well as support for those who are vulnerable and need assistance with access to medication and shopping.

53. The assistance given under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self-employed Income Support Scheme are not classed as public funds and, therefore, will be available to those in work or self-employment respectively, including those with NRPF and on zero-hour contracts. Statutory sick pay and some other work-related benefits are also not classed as public funds and so are also available to all.

54. Migrants who have been granted leave under the Family and Human Rights routes can apply to have the NRPF conditions on their stay lifted by making a 'change of conditions' application if there has been a change in their financial circumstances. The application form has been recently digitised to make sure it is accessible for those who need to remain at home, and decisions are made on a case-by-case basis to ensure the details of each applicant's situation are considered. Applications are being dealt with swiftly and compassionately.

55. Local authorities are also able to help. They may provide basic safety net support to those with NRPF, if it is established that there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example, where there are community care needs or family cases where the wellbeing of a child is in question.

56. The Government has provided more than £3.2 billion of additional funding to local authorities in England, and additional funding under the Barnett formula to the devolved administrations, to enable them to respond to COVID-19 pressures across all the services they deliver, including services helping the most vulnerable. No charges apply to testing for coronavirus, even if the result is negative, or to any treatment provided in relation to coronavirus—regardless of someone's immigration status—if the result is positive or up to the point that it is negatively diagnosed.

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

57. The Government recognises the devastating impact domestic abuse can have on children. There were already a number of provisions in the Government's Domestic Abuse Bill which directly or indirectly support child victims of domestic abuse. For example, one of the key functions of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner will be to encourage good practice in the identification of children affected by domestic abuse and the provision of protection and support to people – including children – affected by domestic abuse. The Commissioner will be required, under the terms of their appointment, to have a thematic lead within their office to represent the interests of children. And the statutory guidance that will accompany the definition in the Domestic Abuse Bill will also address the impact of domestic abuse on children.

58. However, following debates during the passage of the Bill the Government has sought to strengthen the definition and has proposed an amendment to the legislation to provide that a child who is related to the person being abused, or the perpetrator, who sees, hears, or experiences the effects of, domestic abuse, is also to be regarded as a victim of domestic abuse.

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

59. It is a top priority to ensure through the pandemic and beyond the safety and protection of vulnerable children and young people and the maintenance of the services which support them. Social workers continue to support families, NHS mental health services remain open and the Government is increasing awareness of support available through gov.uk and its' social media campaign #YouAreNotAlone.

60. The Government has announced £750m funding to support frontline charities during the pandemic—including those supporting vulnerable children—so they can continue delivering services.

61. In addition, the Government have provided up to £8m from the Adoption Support Fund to offer emergency support, including online counselling, to adoptive families and have provided £1.6m to NSPCC to support Childline and expand and promote the adult helpline. This means children have someone to call and more adults will be able to raise concerns and seek advice about the safety and wellbeing of any child that they're worried about.

62. More than £7m will fund See, Hear, Respond, a new service which will provide targeted help to vulnerable children, young people and their families affected by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the measures put in place to stop its spread. The partnership of charities, led by Barnardo's, will work alongside local authorities, schools and colleges, police forces, healthcare professionals and other vital services involved in protecting these children.

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

63. Ensuring that vulnerable children are properly safeguarded and have their welfare promoted remains a top priority.

64. The Government is working with local authorities, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association (LGA) to ensure that social workers continue to work with vulnerable children at this time. The Government has supported local authorities with a total of £3.2bn in additional funding, which will support local authorities in meeting additional demands, including on their children's services, at this time.

65. We know that attending education settings is an important protective factor for children receiving support from a social worker. That is why we have made clear that vulnerable children and young people who have a social worker are expected to attend educational provision, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk. Throughout the COVID-19 period, we have been closely tracking the attendance of vulnerable children who are attending schools or other educational settings and have been working to ensure as many of these children and young people are supported to attend where it is in their best interests to do so. To support vulnerable children stay in touch with the services they need, the Government has also committed to provide laptops and tablets for children with social workers and care leavers.

66. The Government is working with the social work regulator Social Work England and the LGA to ensure social workers are able to return to frontline practice to help out

where they are most needed. We have launched the Social Work Together campaign to match social workers to local vacancies and are holding regular calls with Principal Social Workers and Practice Leaders from across the country to ensure we are sighted on the issues faced on the ground and to identify and spread best practice. We are also working closely with local authorities to ensure workforce capacity is sufficient to cope with any potential spike in referrals. This includes helping to match the 1,000 social workers that have registered their interest in providing support with employers.

67. The Department for Education has provided guidance for children's social care and education settings about the limited circumstances in which the use of PPE is recommended and is continuing to support relevant settings access the PPE they need.

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

68. Tackling domestic abuse was a priority for the government before the pandemic and remains so. Our Domestic Abuse Bill has now completed its Commons stages and passed to the Lords for further consideration. The Bill will ensure that victims receive the help they need and perpetrators are brought to justice.

69. The Home Office is continuing to work closely with police and the criminal justice system to understand the impact of COVID-19 on victims during the lockdown, as restrictions are eased and in the longer terms, in order to effectively respond to the effects of the pandemic on domestic abuse victims. We are also in regular discussions with the designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner in order to ensure that victims of domestic abuse will and continue to receive the support they need during the pandemic and beyond.

Conclusion

70. The Government is committed to combatting the abhorrent crime of domestic abuse in all its forms and protecting victims. We recognised the impact COVID-19 could have on victims of domestic abuse, in particular the order to stay at home in the initial weeks of the lockdown. We responded by providing clear messaging through official channels to reassure victims that support remained available to them. We have taken swift action to respond to the added pressures placed on service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensured that support remains readily accessible for victims. Whilst the additional funding we have provided will bolster many of the vital services that victims of domestic abuse rely on, we acknowledge that there is more to do. It is for this reason that the Government is continuing to progress the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill. The Bill will serve to better protect victims and bring perpetrators to justice.