

## **Written evidence submitted by Refuge (COR0095)**

### **Introduction**

1. Refuge is the largest specialist provider of gender-based violence services in the country supporting over 6,500 women and children on any given day. Refuge opened the world's first refuge in 1971 in Chiswick, and 49 years later, provides: a national network of 47 refuges, community outreach services, child support services, and acts as independent advocates for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. We also run specialist services for survivors of modern slavery, 'honour'-based violence, and female genital mutilation. Refuge provides the National Domestic Abuse Helpline which receives hundreds of calls a day.
2. Evidence from around the world has shown that violence against women and girls (VAWG) increases following the imposition of lockdown measures introduced to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in the community. Evidence from China showed a three-fold increase in domestic abuse following the introduction of lockdown. France, Italy, Brazil, Cyprus, Spain, and the US have all reported rises in domestic abuse as a result of measures confining families to their homes.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Refuge's own data from the National Domestic Abuse Helpline shows that average calls and contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline for the week commencing 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> April increased by an average of 49% compared to pre-lockdown.
3. Against the backdrop of a growing body of evidence that domestic abuse incidents are increasing, survivors are facing prolonged periods of time where they are trapped with abusers, with no escape for even short periods of time due to lockdown conditions. Survivors are also experiencing enhanced difficulties accessing VAWG support services due to measures introduced to combat the spread of Covid-19. Survivors have far fewer opportunities to disclose abuse to, for example, their GPs or other healthcare professionals, or other public sector workers, given the advice to stay home and the closure of the offices of some public services. This makes it less likely that these survivors will be referred to specialist VAWG support services. Additionally, survivors who are trapped with their abusers at home are likely to find it increasingly difficult to access such services given the high level of surveillance and coercive control many survivors are experiencing. Refuge therefore recommends the following measures are implemented with urgency to ensure survivors of VAWG receive the support they need while the Covid-19 crisis is ongoing:
4. Covid-19 response planning
  - Ensure that the risk of VAWG is factored into the highest levels of Covid-19 response planning, as well as relevant departmental response planning

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<sup>1</sup> Guardian (2020). 'Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence'.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

- Planning should include an immediate crisis response as well as post-crisis planning, where we are anticipating a surge in demand as more survivors are able to contact services
5. Funding for specialist VAWG service providers
- Ensure the specialist VAWG sector receives the funding it needs so that it can meet demand for support services, in part by ensuring that an adequate amount of the £750 million fund announced by the Chancellor will be ring-fenced for specialist VAWG service providers
  - Funding should be used in part to compensate refuge services for any losses experienced as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, including providing block housing benefit payments to protect refuge providers who may have to leave refuge spaces unoccupied and subsequent costs incurred
  - Require local authorities to suspend all competitive tendering for VAWG and women's services to ensure staff can focus on frontline responses
  - Where refuge accommodation is unavailable, funding should enable local authorities to work with specialist VAWG organisations to provide immediate alternative accommodation for survivors safely, in a flexible manner
6. Keeping the network of specialist refuges open and ensuring access to accommodation
- Publish detailed guidance on how refuges can operate safely during the pandemic
  - Extend automatic priority need for homelessness assistance to all survivors of domestic abuse
  - Publish detailed guidance for local authorities on prioritising accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse leaving refuges
  - Ensure that refuges and other VAWG support services have access to Covid-19 testing kits and personal protective equipment
7. Communication and guidance from Government
- Continue to deliver clear public communications on VAWG, including the strong message that VAWG is a crime that will not be tolerated and will be met with a strong criminal justice response, reassuring survivors that the courts will continue to hear applications for protective injunctions and other crucial legal proceedings
  - Publish updated guidance on social distancing and self-isolation for those who experience harm at home and guidance for school leaders and local authorities on safeguarding vulnerable students against abuse during this crisis
  - Publish clear guidance on varying child contact arrangements in cases of domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis
  - The Government should work with NHS England to support GPs to keep lines of communication open and ensure women are alone and safe to speak wherever possible to give survivors as many opportunities as possible to disclose abuse

- Communications should speak to all communities and recognise the additional barriers facing women and children from marginalised groups
8. Protecting and supporting survivors with no recourse to public funds and other vulnerable women
    - End or suspend the no recourse to public funds condition to ensure that no survivor falls out of the basic safety net at this time of national emergency
    - Safeguarding measures for vulnerable women and children should be maintained as far as possible, including regular independent contact with women in institutional care
    - Plan for the early release of all women in prison who are particularly vulnerable to the virus as well as those on remand, nearing the end of their sentence, or have been recalled for administrative breaches of licenses
  
  9. Relieving poverty and maintaining financial independence
    - End or suspend the minimum five-week delay for the first Universal Credit payment and remove the requirement for survivors to repay any benefit advances
    - End or suspend the benefit cap
    - End or suspend the two-child limit on child-related benefits

### **Prevalence of VAWG during the Coronavirus crisis**

10. Evidence from around the world suggests that violence against women and girls, domestic abuse in particular, is increasing during the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>2</sup> Calls and contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline run by Refuge have also increased:
  - Calls and contacts to Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline increased by an average of 49% for the week commencing 6<sup>th</sup> April compared to the average weekly calls and contacts prior to lockdown
  - Visits to Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline website increased by 417% during the week commencing 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020, compared to the last week in February, prior to the introduction of lockdown
  - Following significant media coverage of Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> April, calls and contacts logged increased by 120% compared to the previous day
  - Traffic to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline website increased by 700% on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> April compared to the previous day
  
11. It has also been reported that at least 10 women and children were killed by men they knew since lockdown began on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, with a further six women killed by men that are suspected domestic homicides.<sup>3</sup> Typically, an

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<sup>2</sup> UK Aid (2020). 'Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls'. <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

average of two women a week are killed by their current or former partners in England and Wales. Therefore initial reports suggest that such killings are on the rise.

12. While the evidence suggests that more survivors are reaching out for support and protection, the picture is complex. For example, we know that the lockdown is not itself a cause of domestic abuse – domestic abuse is rooted in power and control, stemming from gender inequality, hence why we see women making up the majority of victims and survivors of domestic abuse globally. While we know that abusers already systematically isolate survivors, during the lockdown this may be exacerbated as perpetrators take advantage of social distancing measures and the advice to stay home, using the crisis as a tool of abuse. Additionally, while Refuge’s data demonstrates an increase in survivors seeking support, Refuge remains concerned that many women may find it more challenging to seek support during periods of protracted isolation. The true number of survivors experiencing domestic abuse will be far higher than those contacting the police, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, and other VAWG support services. It is possible that there may be a surge in demand for specialist services once lockdown measures are relaxed.

### **13. Representation of VAWG specialists in the highest levels of response planning**

14. The evidence in this submission highlights some of the unintended, but predictable, consequences of the measures implemented to combat Covid-19 for survivors of VAWG. For example, the lockdown, while justified in the interest of public health, is having a profound impact on survivors of domestic abuse. Evidence from across the globe suggests that incidents of domestic abuse are increasing while lockdown conditions are in force.<sup>4</sup> While the lockdown is not itself a cause of violence against women and girls, it can exacerbate existing abusive behaviours. Refuge is particularly concerned that the implications of various lockdown exit strategies are not evaluating the impact on survivors of VAWG and the specialist services that support them. For example, we are concerned that once lockdown measures are relaxed, this may prompt an increase in demand for our services, which has not yet been planned for by the Government, with appropriate safeguards and resourcing in place. Despite this, Refuge is unaware of any coordinated Government strategy to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls during this crisis, led at the senior level.

15. Refuge recommends that a coordinated Government strategy is developed in collaboration with the specialist VAWG sector, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Victims Commissioner, and implemented as a matter of urgency. Given the significant impact the Covid-19 response is having and will continue to have on survivors of VAWG and the specialist sector that supports

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<sup>3</sup> Guardian (2020). Fiona Dwyer: ‘£2m for coronavirus domestic abuse victims? It’s pitiful’.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/14/fiona-dwyer-2m-for-coronavirus-domestic-abuse-victims-its-pitiful>

<sup>4</sup> UK Aid (2020). ‘Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls’.  
<http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

them, Refuge recommends that the Victims' Commissioner and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner are invited to attend relevant COBRA meetings and advise the Government on preventing VAWG and ensuring services are available. We recommend that the Victim and Domestic Abuse Commissioners and representatives from the specialist VAWG sector are involved in all relevant departmental planning and response meetings. Refuge identifies the following Government departments for priority involvement in planning: the Treasury, the Home Office, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Education, and the Cabinet Office.

### **The impact of coronavirus on survivors of VAWG**

#### Covid-19 as a tool of abuse

16. Perpetrators of domestic abuse are using Covid-19 and the public protection measures taken to stop its spread as a tool of abuse and coercion. Refuge has heard from survivors whose abusive partners are ignoring social distancing rules and telling them that they are deliberately trying to infect them with the virus. Others are being threatened with homelessness by perpetrators saying that they will throw survivors out of the house where they risk catching the virus. Some survivors have told us that the perpetrator has threatened to kick them out under the guise that they don't want to catch the virus from the survivor.

#### Survivors accessing services

17. While evidence indicates that VAWG is increasing globally during the Covid-19 crisis, survivors are experiencing enhanced difficulties seeking support while living with abusers while lockdown and social distancing is in force. First, survivors are likely to be alone or away from their perpetrator far less under lockdown than in typical circumstances, giving them fewer opportunities to disclose abuse to friends, family, or other individuals they trust, as well as public sector professionals. Many, although not all, survivors would normally have opportunities to disclose when they go to work, drop off and pick up their children from school, and during social occasions with friends and family. Additionally, survivors would have had opportunities to disclose at the GP, at routine hospital appointments, and to other public sector professionals. These opportunities are significantly reduced in the current environment, making it less likely that survivors will be referred to specialist VAWG support services. For survivors that are aware of Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline and want to make contact, many of them will find it even more difficult to call than under normal circumstances, given the high level of surveillance and coercive control survivors are experiencing, which is likely to be exacerbated under current conditions as abusers take advantage of lockdown measures, co-opting them as tools of abuse.

18. Women have called the National Domestic Abuse Helpline in recent weeks saying that they are worried that if they leave an abuser now there will be no help for them and they are frightened that they will be stopped by the police for leaving their homes. Refuge welcomes the public communications #youarenotalone campaign announced on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> April by the Home Secretary, with the intention of raising awareness of what support is available to survivors and how they can access it, including promotion of Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline. The campaign launch was accompanied by police leaders stating clearly that women could leave their homes if they were at risk of harm. This is an essential step in ensuring survivors know that they are not alone and that support is available to them, including online. It is now crucial that these messages continue to be shared by senior politicians, police leaders and others as the crisis continues. The focus on domestic abuse at the Downing Street press conference must not be a one-off. Refuge recommends that in addition to this, guidance on self-isolating and social distancing when you experience harm at home is drafted in collaboration with the specialist VAWG sector and published urgently.

#### Financial impact on survivors

19. Some survivors are experiencing significant hardship as women's poverty intensifies during the Covid-19 crisis. The survivors Refuge supports are already having difficulties accessing food as foodbanks are closing or have significantly reduced capacity while facing increasing demand. Some survivors are also experiencing difficulties engaging with remote services due to lack of resources such as money for mobile phones, computers, and phone credit, and are experiencing other financial difficulties as a result of job losses. In Refuge's experience, limiting survivors' access to money and other resources limits their options to stay safe. Women's economic independence and their physical safety are intimately linked, with survivors staying longer the less access to money they have. For example, survivors who are unable to build up the small amounts of money to travel to a refuge or another safe space will experience this as a barrier to fleeing. The wider economic impact of Covid-19, i.e. job losses, reduced hours or no hours for women on zero-hours contracts, and compulsory pay cuts will therefore have a significant, profound impact on survivors in relationships with abusers. It is more important than ever that the benefits system provides a real safety net that can support survivors to keep as many options as possible open to stay safe, including for those who want to leave perpetrators.

20. At the same time, many survivors who are not already claiming benefits are likely to be accessing Universal Credit for the first time, either because they have lost their job or have had a significant reduction in income, or because they are moving into refuge accommodation, which typically requires survivors to give up their jobs for safety reasons. This means that survivors are facing the minimum five-week delay in accessing the first Universal Credit payment at a time of severe hardship. We are also seriously concerned that some women currently in refuge are thinking about returning to perpetrators because they have no income to support their own and their children's basic needs.

21. Refuge therefore recommends that the minimum five-week delay in receiving the first Universal Credit payment is ended or suspended immediately and that survivors are exempt from repaying benefit advances. Additionally, we recommend that the welfare reform policies which have a disproportionate impact on women, such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit on child-related benefits, are ended. Refuge welcomes the £750 million fund for charities announced by the Chancellor, which is due to include funding for specialist VAWG service providers. Refuge recommends that alongside sufficient funds to underpin VAWG specialist services, funding is also provided which can be used by VAWG services to directly support survivors experiencing hardship as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, such as having difficulties accessing food and other essentials.

#### Equal protection for migrant survivors

22. Controlling the spread of the coronavirus requires all of us to take action, so all women must be supported to stay safe as part of the response. Women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are at particular risk of VAWG during this emergency due to the already limited support available to them given they are ineligible for a raft of state support, including benefits. Having NRPF presents enormous difficulties for some survivors attempting to flee dangerous abusers. Typically, women financially support a stay in refuge via their entitlement to housing benefit, for which migrant survivors with NRPF are not eligible. Migrant survivors who have the right to work and have jobs are usually not able to use this income to support a stay in refuge as it is typically unsafe for survivors fleeing abusers to keep their jobs and have to give them up. The perpetrator will usually know where the survivor's place of work is, making it easy for them to track her down if she stays, putting her at an even higher risk of harm. Additionally, many migrant survivors will be unable to work given the ongoing crisis. As a result, many migrant survivors find it very difficult to access vital, life-saving refuge accommodation. A limited cohort of migrant survivors on spousal or family visas are eligible to apply for the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) which grants survivors eligibility to access benefits for three months while they gather evidence for their indefinite leave to remain application under the Domestic Violence Rule. However, this route is available only to survivors on a limited number of visas, leaving a significant proportion of survivors ineligible to apply for this support.

23. In a time of public emergency, no survivor should fall outside of a basic safety net. Refuge therefore recommends that the NRPF condition is suspended and that central Government and local authorities allow funds to be spent on survivors with NRPF, which is the step the Welsh Government has already taken, so that all migrant survivors experiencing or at risk of VAWG have immediate access to financial and housing support. Refuge also recommends that the length of the DDVC is extended to protect migrant survivors who are unable to make progress with their immigration applications due to Covid-19.

24. Additionally, during this global pandemic, the public health of all, including migrant survivors, must be prioritised above immigration enforcement. Migrant

survivors trapped at home with abusers due to Covid-19 measures should not face escalating danger due to the fear of immigration authorities. Refuge recommends that immigration detention is suspended, as is all forms of information sharing between public services, such as the police, and immigration enforcement. Further, public communications should be produced which include reassurances to migrant survivors that anyone accessing advice, healthcare, or other essential services will not have their data shared for the purposes of immigration enforcement. All forms of public communications should be available in multiple languages, particularly any changes to the asylum and immigration systems and information about the specialist BME services that can offer support.

#### The impact of coronavirus on vulnerable children and women with disabilities and mental health problems

25. Due to school closures, that are likely to last many months more, children will be spending even more time with abusers without the protection and escape of school. Children are never simply witnesses to abuse that happens at home, they are themselves victims and action must be taken to ensure these children are being properly looked after and supported. High priority measures should be taken to maintain vigilance over those with child protection arrangements. However, schools are often aware of many other children who are at risk of harm where attending school involves the only daily contact they may have with individuals outside their family. Vulnerable girls and young women, who will not be in regular contact with teachers and school staff, will have reduced opportunities to disclose abuse or for problems and risks to be detected. There will also be an enhanced vulnerability to abuse by peers or adults in homes or online.
26. Refuge therefore recommends the Government estimates and records schools' concerns for children who are both on and not on the child protection register and work creatively with school leaders and the specialist VAWG and children's sector to develop appropriate protection measures. Additionally, the guidance for school leaders and local authorities on self-isolation and safeguarding vulnerable students against abuse should be produced and published.
27. Additionally, vulnerable women with disabilities and mental health support needs may see their usual support arrangements being disrupted - this is a group of women who already face higher levels of domestic and sexual violence and so need continuity of support as far as possible. Even as face to face visits and case management conferences become more logistically difficult, we need dedicated work to gauge the risks to vulnerable women. Refuge is also concerned about the suspension of measures in the Care Act which protect the rights of disabled people.
28. Refuge therefore recommends that the Government engages with experts in the VAWG sector about the enhanced risks women are facing and about everything that can be done locally to try and mitigate these. Refuge also recommends that no care support package for disabled adults and children is



reduced without a full domestic abuse risk assessment, and that safeguarding measures are maintained as far as possible, including regular independent contact with women in institutional care.

#### Child contact arrangements

29. One of the most prevalent issues being cited by our frontline services team are the concerns survivors have around the safety of child contact during the Covid-19 crisis. In Refuge's experience, perpetrators of abuse frequently use child contact arrangements as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour in normal, non-pandemic circumstances. Refuge and the survivors we work with are concerned that abusers may threaten to not adhere to contact arrangements due to Covid-19, or use it as a justification for flouting child contact arrangements. Survivors are also concerned that they will be accused of breaching a court order if they limit or prevent contact during the crisis in order to keep them and their children safe, for example. Whilst the President of the Family Division has issued general guidance which states that if parents cannot agree to an arrangement they may exercise their parental responsibility and vary the arrangement to one that they consider to be safe, the guidance is open to interpretation and leaves survivors vulnerable to being brought back to court. Given the significant barriers to accessing legal advice at the current time, Refuge recommends that clearer guidance is published on varying contact arrangements in cases of domestic abuse during Covid-19.

#### Perpetrators and survivors in prison

30. Refuge acknowledges that there is a significant risk of Covid-19 spreading throughout prisons and that this risk has prompted plans to release people from prison early, on a risk assessed basis, as long as they meet certain conditions. However, Refuge is concerned about the potential risk of harm this poses to survivors if their perpetrators are released early. Whilst the Ministry of Justice has stated that those convicted of violent or sexual offences will not be released early, not all domestic abuse-related crime falls into this category and there will be many men in prison who are known perpetrators of domestic abuse, but are sentenced for a different offence. It is therefore vital that the early release programme is closely monitored and safeguards are put in place to ensure that survivors are not put at risk by the early release scheme. The National Probation Service's 'doorstop' interviews with perpetrators of domestic abuse should also be monitored and assessed to ensure this is safe for survivors.
31. The Ministry of Justice estimates that 60% of women in prison in England and Wales have experienced domestic abuse.<sup>5</sup> However, this is likely to be an underestimate as the charity Women in Prison reports that 79% of the women in prison they work with have experienced domestic abuse and/or sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> In addition, over 80% of the female prison population are on

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<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Justice (2018), 'Female Offender Strategy'.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/719819/female-offender-strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offender-strategy.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee (2013), 'Women offenders: after the Corston Report.'

remand or sentenced for non-violent offences.<sup>7</sup> Refuge therefore recommends that the Government plans for the early release of all women in prison who are particularly vulnerable to the virus, as well as those on remand, nearing the end of their sentence, or have been recalled for administrative breaches of licenses.

### **The impact of coronavirus on Refuge and other specialist VAWG services**

#### Keeping the network of specialist refuge services open

32. Refuges are vital life-saving services for women and children fleeing domestic abuse and it is essential that every effort is made to enable them to stay open during the Covid-19 crisis. To ensure that spaces are available for those who need them in an emergency, women and children who are ready to move on from a refuge must be able to. Finding safe, affordable accommodation for women to move to after a refuge is always challenging, but has become more so during the crisis as some local authorities have cancelled planned moves, are not accepting new referrals and finding funding for essentials including beds and fridges has become very difficult.
33. Refuge recommends that automatic priority need for homelessness assistance is extended to all survivors of domestic abuse and that guidance is issued to all local authorities stating that they should prioritise facilitating moves of women and children ready to leave refuges. In addition, a move-on fund should be established, so that practical considerations like access to basic furniture are not barriers to moving out of a refuge.

#### Financial impact

34. The impact of coronavirus on specialist VAWG service providers is significant and substantial. Government support is essential to sustain the sector and ensure it can continue to deliver specialist services for women and children. Refuge is experiencing a significant increase in demand for its services whilst having to transform the way it operates in a very short amount of time. It has been particularly challenging and costly to move Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline from its secure office location to similarly secure offsite locations, in line with Government guidance on home working during the Covid-19 crisis. Costs incurred include providing frontline workers with cyber-secure computers, mobile phones, headsets, and other equipment. Some refuges have had to stop taking new referrals in order for current residents to self-isolate and will lose rental income for unoccupied beds. Some survivors and children that do make it to a refuge are experiencing enhanced food insecurity and difficulties accessing basic provisions given the decreasing availability of foodbanks and delays accessing Universal Credit. Already cash-strapped refuges are having to step in and support survivors and their children financially using their limited reserves. This is against a backdrop of declining

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<https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Justice/Women-offenders.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Women in Prison (accessed 2020). 'Key facts: a round-up and latest key statistics regarding women affected by the criminal justice system.' <https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/research/key-facts.php>

fundraised income, particularly as corporate income drops and fundraising events are cancelled.

35. Refuge welcomes the announcement from the Chancellor that £750 million will be made available to charities, including those providing frontline services to survivors of domestic abuse. However, we are concerned that it has been 10 days since the announcement it is still unclear whether any of the funding will be ring-fenced for survivors of domestic abuse and the services that support them and what the process will be for charities to apply for funding. We similarly welcome the subsequent announcement made by the Home Secretary of an additional £2 million for vital helpline services. We are awaiting the detail on how these funds will be administered, but it is vital that the process is streamlined and is delivered in a way that is responsive to need and ensures funds reach frontline specialist services as soon as possible. We would strongly urge against any plans to channel funds through local authorities or Police and Crime Commissioners as this would significantly slow down the process of delivering funding and require charities to make several different bids to different bodies for different parts of the services they provide. We therefore recommend:

- A proportion of the £750 million fund is ring-fenced for specialist VAWG service providers to ensure we can meet the additional demand. We support calls from Women's Aid Federation England that approximately £50 million should be dedicated to VAWG services
- Emergency funds should:
  - Enable specialist services, including national helplines and online services, the national network of specialist refuges and community based services, to prepare for an increase in demand as survivors are required to isolate in homes with abusers. We anticipate demand for support will be even higher when restrictions start to be relaxed and survivors have more opportunities to reach out for help
  - Enable services to directly support survivors experiencing severe hardship as a result of the Covid-19 emergency with access to food, money and other essentials. Services urgently need to be able to financially support some of the very vulnerable women and children accessing our services
  - Enable services to provide increased online support for survivors who face challenges in accessing services due to isolation and reduced access to GPs and other key services where women commonly disclose abuse
  - Cover increased costs for VAWG organisations as they transition to providing essential services remotely, training staff to use new remote working systems, and operating with lower staffing levels as a result of illness, self-isolation and the additional caring burden resulting from the Covid-19 crisis falling disproportionately on the sector's largely female workforce
  - Cover all lost income for refuge providers resulting from Covid-19. This will include loss of housing benefit for refuge spaces that will be necessarily left unoccupied, as well as rent arrears built up as women struggle financially due to the measures taken in response to Covid-19. This should include joint working between the Department for Work and Pensions and

- local authorities to provide block housing benefit payments to keep refuge providers on a sustainable financial footing
- Cover lost voluntary (fundraised) income as a result of Covid-19. Much of the sector is experiencing significant reductions in income as fundraising events are cancelled and postponed and corporate funding decreases. This funding is not an added extra, it maintains provision
  - The remaining £15 million of the Tampon Tax fund should be repurposed as unrestricted grant funding for the specialist VAWG sector to assist them in coping and adapting
  - All local authorities should suspend competitive tendering for VAWG and women's services to ensure staff can focus on delivering frontline responses and managing increased demand
  - Where refuge accommodation is unavailable, funding should enable local authorities to work with specialist VAWG organisations to provide immediate alternative accommodation for survivors safely, in a flexible manner

### Health and safety

36. Those working on the frontline in VAWG services have already been recognised as key workers, whose role is essential to maintain the functioning of a safe, secure society. Face to face contact is often an essential element of service provision, particularly for survivors who face very high levels of surveillance at home, or who are deaf and/or disabled. Coronavirus therefore poses an enhanced risk to survivors and frontline VAWG workers.
37. Refuge therefore recommends that staff working within refuges and other VAWG services working directly with survivors should be given access to testing kits and personal protective equipment, such as gloves and aprons. This will help identify the virus early and reduce its spread, protecting both staff and survivors. It will also allow the isolation of staff who test positive and ensure staff who do not have the virus can continue to work to support survivors and their children.

April 2020