

Written Evidence submitted by Women's Aid Federation of England

Education Select Committee's Inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of nearly 180 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. Over the past 45 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Education Select Committee's inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services. In line with our organisational expertise, our response focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse is the most common factor in situations where children are at risk of serious harm in this country.¹ The complex and traumatic impact of exposure to domestic abuse may result in a range of emotional, social, psychological and behavioural responses. Despite domestic abuse being a recognised form of child abuse, Women's Aid remains concerned about the lack of a joined-up response between child protection and agencies responding to domestic abuse. We are also concerned that the impact of domestic abuse on children, particularly the impact of coercive and controlling behaviour, is often not sufficiently acknowledged by public services and authorities. The current crisis has only exacerbated existing challenges in regards to the recognition of, and response and support to, children experiencing domestic abuse, and our response to this inquiry sets out key issues and recommendations to ensure this is addressed.

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

Women's Aid's national network of members provide refuge services and a range of other specialist support services to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. These services are a critical part of our national infrastructure and their sustainability is critical to preventing serious harm as a result of domestic abuse. The government recognised this by determining frontline domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) workers as 'key workers' whose children can access educational provision during the COVID 19. However this definition was never spelt out clearly, but came under a broader definition of 'charities and workers delivering key frontline services'. It was left to second tier VAWG organisations such as Women's Aid to communicate this with our member services. This has led to some inconsistency in definition which members of staff fall within the definition, and we know that some of our member services have therefore had to support their employees in evidencing their status to schools.

¹ [Department for Education, Characteristics of children in need: 2015 to 2016](#)

In addition, as frontline domestic abuse and VAWG organisations are led by and for women, their services have been significantly impacted by women’s caring burden during the pandemic. Services responding to our survey on COVID 19 in March told us:

“We have a lot of staff with childcare issues because of school closures, some with underlying conditions and others with partners/children with such conditions, so we are having to be as flexible as possible.” Women’s Aid Member Service

“The majority of the team are single moms with young children, this means that their priority is home schooling and they are fitting in work around caring for them.” Women’s Aid Member Service

This issue, alongside staff sickness and staff having to self-isolate with symptoms, has impacted on the provision of domestic abuse services during the pandemic. 84% of respondents reported that they have been forced to reduce or cancel one or more of their services due to COVID-19, including 36% of refuge providers who had to do so, and 69% were concerned about future loss of income from fundraising.

Access to school for children in refuge

For children living in refuges we know anecdotally that there have been differing local approaches in regards to their access to schools during the pandemic. Not all children living in refuge are on child protection plans and are therefore not all meeting the definition of a ‘vulnerable child or young person’². In some cases, refuges have established arrangements with schools to ensure all children living in refuge are still able to access school and educational settings.

However these arrangements have not been universally implemented and in some cases wouldn’t be safe given the challenges of social isolation within certain refuge buildings. Refuge services can be delivered in varied types of accommodation, but often they are based in communal buildings which poses challenges for managing social distancing. In some cases, if one child contracted COVID 19 as a result of attending school it would have significant implications for both the other women and children living there, and potentially staff and their own families. Furthermore, there may be a reluctance to send the child to school as a ‘vulnerable’ child for fear of stigma. This is clearly a widespread issue; the highest number of vulnerable children attending school during the lockdown (reached on 20 May) only accounts for 15% of ‘children in need’³. Unfortunately Women’s Aid’s has heard from member services that this has been a reality for some children.

The capacity of children’s services to support vulnerable children and young people

Before the pandemic, our national network of member services struggled to deliver quality services that meet the needs of women and, critically, their children due to an ongoing funding crisis. As the government recognise, domestic abuse has a ‘chronic’ impact on children and their futures yet specialist domestic abuse support for children and young people has been severely impacted by cuts during the past decade. It is therefore highly concerning that the number of dedicated children and young people’s domestic abuse services listed on Routes to Support⁴ fell by 10% from 2010-2017. Women’s Aid’s Annual Survey has also repeatedly shown that the services being run without dedicated funding includes support for children and young people – existing only because of the fundraising efforts of specialist services.

To add to this, our survey of local domestic abuse service providers in March 2020⁵ shows that COVID 19 presents a ‘perfect storm’ of staff shortages and reduced capacity, and practical

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

³ <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/increase-in-vulnerable-children-attending-school-latest-dfe-figures-show> Accessed 28th May 2020

⁴ Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Scottish Women’s Aid, Welsh Women’s Aid, Women’s Aid Federation of England and Women’s Aid Federation of Northern Ireland

challenges. Of the providers who responded, 91% said COVID 19 had left them less able to effectively support children, and 60% had had to reduce their capacity to support children. Anecdotally, we've heard from member services that they have really struggled to support children within refuge services effectively under social distancing guidelines. The number of staff allowed, and the time they can spend, within refuges has had to be reduced to prevent the spread of the virus and this has negatively impacted how they can support children. In particular, refuges who aren't able to provide televisions, laptops and other IT for families have struggled to keep children occupied and supported and have reported that children's behaviour and recovery has suffered as a result.

Women's Aid have long recommended that any future funding for domestic abuse support services to integrate funding for children by default – this should not be left to be an optional 'add on' fund, as it is central to the services specialist domestic abuse organisations provide. This is vital work to support children and young people's recovery and address trauma. It is why it is also critical that the government seize opportunities within the Domestic Abuse Bill to recognise that children experience domestic abuse and are victims in their own right, particularly within the proposed statutory definition.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:

- a) Children's early development**
- b) The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market**
- c) The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment**

The impact of provider closure within the early years sector and childcare under lockdown has been absorbed in the home, disproportionately by women. Women survivors are particularly negatively impacted by this, as nurseries and other early years provision can be essential ways for abuse to be identified and gateways to specialist support for both children and mothers experiencing domestic abuse. They also offer essential support post-separation for women survivors. Many women need to escape far away from their support networks to ensure the safety of themselves and their children, and early years provision can therefore replace family and friends as a crucial network of support.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- a) The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**

As highlighted above, not all children living in a refuge meet the definition of a 'vulnerable child or young person' despite requiring ongoing support to cope and recovery from their experiences. To ensure all children in refuge have the option of attending school, we recommend that the government clarify to local authorities, schools and early years providers that they should proactively contact refuge services to offer that any resident child can attend during the pandemic.

- b) Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

It is well known that children and young people are most likely to disclose problems in a one-to-one setting with a staff member who has their trust⁵. Women's Aid is concerned that due to the lockdown, there is a lack of safe spaces for children to disclose their experiences. Data from ChildLine indicates that, as well as being concerned about coronavirus, children and young people are very concerned

⁵ Women's Aid surveyed domestic abuse providers listed on Routes to Support

⁶ Women's Aid and Save the Children (2006), Safe Learning: How to support the educational needs of children and young people affected by domestic violence. Available [online](#)

about abuse now that they are unable to leave the house to get support at schools, clubs, friends' or relatives' houses⁷.

There are still opportunities within virtual and remote settings for education providers to ensure that children and young people experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of harm are aware of safe spaces and support available. Schools, colleges and other education provider's website can be used to display information about local support services that are being offered virtually such as, for example, access to school counsellors. This information should also include external agencies, including local domestic abuse services, national helplines, the police, and sexual assault referral agencies.

Women's Aid are also concerned about the impact that lockdown is having on the mental health of children experiencing domestic abuse. The British Psychological Society specifically highlighted children who have experienced domestic abuse in their letter to the Prime Minister about the impact of COVID 19 on children and young people's mental health⁸. The fear of becoming ill or seeing a loved one become ill, the loss of routines, the difficulties of social connection, the impact of loneliness, the disruption to education and the challenges of living in difficult or dangerous situations are creating additional pressure for children and young people.

Due to the expertise and knowledge of our member services, there are good initiatives being carried out to tackle this – such as refuge services creating activities such as supporting children to write to children in other refuges, or creating other resource and activity packs. We also know that some members have been proactively contacted by local authorities to provide support and practical support, such as additional IT and laptops to families in refuge, during this time. Unfortunately other members have not had this experience, and are only able to deliver additional support by using their reserves or by undertaking charitable fundraising. It is therefore evident that a clear and coordinated approach to tackling the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health needs to be taken - part of this must include ensuring that specialist domestic abuse services have the resources and funding to effectively support children and young people.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

It is important that the government learns lessons from similar epidemics, which have shown:

- Quarantine measures and the stress associated with epidemics can create household tensions, leading to increased parental frustration and corporal punishment.
- School closures can increase the risks for adolescent girls of different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, and early marriage.
- There are also increased risks of sexual exploitation and abuse associated with outsiders who transport goods into the community and provide services and who demand sex in return for assistance or take advantage of reduced caregiver supervision.
- Outbreaks can create and intensify child protection issues due to children being separated from caregivers, being stigmatised, and difficulties accessing services⁹.

During the lockdown, it is therefore crucial that the Department for Education, school leaders, social workers, local authorities and other key professional are actively looking out for domestic abuse and VAWG, and taking proactive approaches to prevention. Furthermore, due to the impact of lockdown

⁷ Home Affairs Committee (2020), Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home. Available [online](#)

⁸ The British Psychological Society (2020), <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/open-letter-government-young-peoples-mental-health-during-lockdown>

⁹ Department for International Development (2020), Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls. Available [online](#)

on children and young people's ability to reach out for support an increase in reports when restrictions are eased are anticipated. Therefore there must be advanced planning and consideration for this and the increased contact with professionals that children and young people will need.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

Whilst we have welcomed the government's public awareness campaign, and guidance, on domestic abuse and COVID 19 announced in April, the absence of coordinated government leadership to prevent domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) and protect survivors and their children remains stark. The Home Office have started to focus on resources specially targeted at children and young people, which Women's Aid alongside a number of children's sector organisations have been working to develop. However a number of other key departments, including the Department for Education, should be actively involved in shaping and disseminating this. Women's Aid is also concerned that there isn't an inter-ministerial group on VAWG and the cross-governmental VAWG strategy, which includes a chapter on men and boys, came to an end in March 2020. Both of these would provide the representation and leadership needed to help prevent these forms of harm to children and young people.

The crisis funding that the government has made available for services has been welcome, with £27 million for domestic abuse services and £34.15 million for vulnerable children and young people, however these funds have to be spent within a six month period despite the forecasted spike in demand once lockdown measures are lifted. We also remain concerned that the fragmented and complex process led by five government departments, which has placed a significant burden on specialist services to bid into at a time when they are incredibly stretched with frontline work.

This has demonstrated the importance of a resilient sector which can cope with crises, and it is therefore essential that the government improves access to specialist support services for children and young people that can help them to cope and recover in the long-term. Although more children than women are resident in refuges - who deliver significant cost-savings to statutory children's services - there is no secure funding for this element of their work. There is a crucial need for longer-term and consistent funding. As highlighted above, Women's Aid are concerned the percentage of domestic abuse services providing dedicated support to children and young people fell from 62% in 2010, to 52% in 2017. Many more services operate unsustainably, running areas of service such as support for children and young people, with no dedicated funding and only operating through charitable fundraising. This results in a 'postcode lottery' in access to support, and essential therapeutic and specialist support services for children only exist in some areas and funding concerns are perennial issues¹⁰.

Women's Aid urges the government to ensure a sustainable future funding model for domestic abuse support services that integrates funding for children by default. It is also vital that the work of specialist domestic abuse services in supporting and protecting children is recognised and funded by children's services, and there is an increased investment into existing therapeutic and specialist children and young people services.

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¹⁰ Women's Aid (2018) Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report. Bristol: Women's Aid.