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# COVID-19



## Domestic abuse and sexual violence guidance for homelessness settings (April 2020)

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**The COVID-19 outbreak is a dangerous time for clients experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. Police are already seeing a rise in cases during this period.**

**Domestic abuse** is violent, coercive or controlling behaviour by partners, ex-partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and/or economic.

**Sexual violence** is a common risk in homelessness settings. It may involve partners, ex-partners, family or other abusers, including friends, sex buyers, people offering drugs/shelter or the general public.

Clients isolating with an abuser are at risk of violence and serious harm. Perpetrators may use illness or isolation to control victims and use stress or withdrawal from drugs or alcohol as an excuse - but **there is no excuse for abuse**.

Clients experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence may feel afraid or alone. As a homelessness worker, you may be the only person they can ask for support, and the only person checking in on them to see how they are doing.

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**If you know or suspect that violence or abuse is taking place, take action:**



**Trust your gut if something doesn't feel right, and always call 999 in an emergency.**

- **Ask** your client about what is happening when it is safe to do so
- **Validate** that the abuse is not their fault and ask what support they need
- **Support** your client to be safe and connect them with specialist services
- **Report** the violence or abuse to the police, safeguarding, and/or MARAC

### Before you make contact:

- Establish methods to keep in regular contact with clients in your service. For example, if they don't have a phone, are you able to take a cheap mobile phone topped up with credit to give to the client, so they can keep in touch with you? Remember to put your work mobile number and your team number on to the phone. If your team does specialist women's/domestic abuse work, save the number as something generic such as 'outreach team' in case the perpetrator checks the phone.
- How much do you know about the circumstances of the person you are calling/visiting? e.g. do they have a partner? Is there a history of domestic abuse? Is the perpetrator likely to be with the client at the time of the visit/call? Make sure you have as much information as possible, speaking to other services first if necessary to see if anyone has had recent contact/information.

- ➔ Regardless of the method of contact used, safety comes first. Be mindful that survivors are likely to be self isolating with perpetrators, and that the perpetrator may be listening in on your conversation, or reading the texts or emails that you send.
- ➔ Plan for the perpetrator being there. When doing face to face visits, if possible, take a basic food parcel, a coronavirus support and information sheet or similar. This means that if the perpetrator is present at the meeting and you are not able to talk to the client about their safety, you can look like you are completing a routine welfare check without arousing the perpetrator's suspicion. You will then have a better chance of maintaining future contact.

### Phone welfare checks

1. **Open the conversation with:** *'We know that socially isolating is hard, and likely to make someone's situation worse, so we are contacting everyone regularly to check in on them, and to make sure they are safe and have what they need. How are you doing at the moment?'*
2. **Check who else is around:** *'Are you self-isolating alone or with someone else? Are they with you now? Can they hear what we're saying?'*
3. **If you hear someone in the background, and are worried it could be the perpetrator, or if the client confirms that they can be overheard say:** *'Ok, cool, we just wanted to check. How are you both? Have either of you had any symptoms? Do you need food/medication etc?'*
4. **If the client says they are alone, or can't be overheard ask directly about domestic/sexual abuse:** *'Is your partner/partner's name/the person you are self isolating with doing anything that is making you feel frightened or anxious at the moment?'*
5. **If the client discloses see the advice below. If not say:** *'Ok, great. Well we just want to check in with everyone regularly to see if they are ok – would it be ok for me to check in with you again?'* Try and agree a time, and put this in your/your team's diary so that this is covered.

### Face to face welfare checks

There will be times when the risk to the client from violence and abuse is high, and you will need to see the client face to face. Be mindful to observe the social distancing rules and follow your organisational guidance on PPE. You could encourage the client to come to reception, or another communal space, under the pretence of signing a letter or making a telephone call. If the perpetrator won't allow this, or insists on accompanying the client, this is a warning sign that abuse could be occurring.

### Making the visit:

1. **Observe social distancing throughout the visit. If you are visiting a client's home/hostel or hotel room and the perpetrator is present, use social distancing as a reason to ask the client to step outside on their own. Try:** *'Because of the virus we have to stay 2 metres apart, can I ask you to step outside of your room to keep us both safe?'*
2. **Open the conversation with:** *'During this time of self-isolating we are doing welfare checks on clients to make sure everyone is ok and has everything they need. How are you doing at the moment?'*
3. **Check who else is around, and if you are unfamiliar with the client/perpetrator, try to get more information:** *'Is anyone else staying with you at the moment? We want to check that everyone is ok - who are they? Do they have the support they need at the moment?'*
4. **Checking the environment – If you are able to see in to the room/home, be alert for signs of damage/disarray which may indicate that physical abuse has taken place.**
5. **If you hear someone in the background, and are worried it could be the perpetrator, say** *'How are you both? Because of social distancing guidelines I'm not allowed to come in to your room/home - please could you step outside and have a quick chat with me?'*  
**Ask when would be a good time to come back and visit again.**

## If the client discloses abuse

### Validate

- Thank that person for sharing with you, reinforce that the abuse/violence is not their fault, and reassure them that support is available to them if they want it.

### Support

- Ask them what they want to happen and what they want to do next.
- Ask how you can safely check in with them next. Are there times when the perpetrator is out i.e. when they are out doing the food shopping. Is it safe to send text messages or emails?
- You could ask whether establishing a safety code word or phrase would be useful, choosing something that will be memorable to them e.g. a friend's name, or someone they know. Make sure you agree with the client what the code word means, and what action you should take if the client has to use it.

### Refer and report

- Refer to your local specialist service, or call helplines below for advice.
- Refer to MARAC if client is at risk of serious harm or death. Contact your local MARAC coordinator or local authority VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) lead to find out meeting arrangements during COVID-19. MARAC may still be operational in some areas, see <http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/news/marac-plan-response-covid-19>.
- Follow your organisational safeguarding policy and refer to the local authority where appropriate.
- Support the client to report to the police, or make a third party report where necessary.

## Get support

### Support for clients

**Silent 999 calls:** if your client is in danger and it's not safe to talk on the phone, they can call 999 and then press 55 for help without speaking.

Support your clients to access support or call on their behalf:

- **National Domestic Violence Helpline, 24/7: 0808 2000 247**
- **Rape Crisis ([opening hours](#)): 0808 802 9999**
- **London Survivors Gateway: <https://survivorsgateway.london/>**
- **Women's Aid's online chat <https://chat.womensaid.org.uk/>**
- **LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline ([opening hours](#)): 0800 999 5428**
- **Men's Advice Line ([opening hours](#)): 0808 801 0327**
- **Respect perpetrator helpline ([opening hours](#)): 0808 8024040**

### Advice for staff working with clients experiencing violence or abuse:

For advice on complex cases, staff can contact:

- Local specialist domestic abuse or sexual violence services – many are continuing to deliver support during the lockdown, search your local authority website for contact details for your local service to find out how they have adapted.
- Your organisational domestic abuse and safeguarding leads.

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