

Dear Secretary of State,

As members of the National Housing and Domestic Abuse Policy and Practice group, we are writing to ask you to consider further measures to better protect and support survivors fleeing domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Housing and Domestic Abuse Policy and Practice Group, led by the [Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance](#) (DAHA), aims to find consensus, share best practice and influence policy and practice on domestic abuse and housing in England and devolved authorities. We recognise that those who have experienced domestic abuse or violence and other forms of abuse from an intimate partner or family member in the home, have insight and knowledge that service providers can learn from to improve joined up multi-agency working. It is for this reason that we aim to ensure survivors' perspectives are embedded in the effective planning, delivery and monitoring of partnership initiatives. We work together nationally to ensure:

- The experience of survivors of domestic abuse is more prominent in the housing sector and helps shape improved and enhanced service delivery;
- Women and children can access secure housing and good quality services when experiencing domestic abuse; and
- Co-ordination exists between the housing and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) sectors with regards to domestic abuse.

We appreciate the significant pressure the Government is facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and we welcome the action that has already been taken to protect and support survivors of domestic abuse.

However, we are still seeing major obstacles for survivors accessing accommodation. Currently, survivors fleeing domestic abuse without dependent children are only considered in priority need for long-term settled housing if they can demonstrate that they are more vulnerable than someone else who is also facing homelessness. Providing evidence to demonstrate vulnerability can be traumatic and near impossible for people who have experienced domestic abuse. There are accounts of survivors being told to return home to a dangerous situation, or to the place of violence, to retrieve ID or evidence to prove they are homeless due to domestic abuse. In some cases, survivors are also being asked to provide a criminal reference number. Given lockdown measures currently in place during the COVID-19 crisis, it is near impossible for survivors to gather this type of evidence, leaving them at further risk of homelessness or further abuse as they will not qualify for assistance.

Additionally, we are aware of people being refused support under the Government's 'Everyone In' initiative due to legal tests in the homelessness legislation being applied by local authorities. We have heard from frontline organisations repeated examples of local authorities across England denying help to people applying for homelessness assistance on the basis of 'local connection' criteria, alongside on-going confusion and denial because people are deemed to have no recourse to public funds. We argue that anyone who experiences domestic abuse is, by definition, vulnerable and therefore should automatically qualify for assistance.

We are calling on the Government to lift tests in the homelessness legislation in England to remove additional barriers to settled housing during the COVID-19 outbreak. This would have the effect of ensuring that anyone who is made homeless as a result of domestic abuse can access safe and secure housing and prevent victims from having to choose between returning to an abusive or potentially life-threatening situation, or the devastating consequences of homelessness.

Refuges provide a vital stepping stone in enabling survivors to escape abusive partners/family members and critical support at a very difficult and uprooting point of their lives. However, survivors often face significant difficulties in finding refuge spaces. There have been serious concerns raised by domestic abuse charities about pressures facing refuges and the need for additional funding for these services, which are facing increased costs from remote working and staff shortages, so they can cope with COVID-19. These vital specialist services have been forced to reduce service delivery to survivors. 85% of service providers responding to a Women's Aid survey said they had had to reduce or cancel one or more of their services,

and a third of refuge providers also responding have had to do the same. We welcome recent funding announcements for domestic abuse charities, including a share of £160 million in government grants announced by the Treasury, and £2 million for the Home Office for online support and helplines – but we are concerned about how effectively this funding will reach the frontline. **We urge the Government to guarantee emergency funding of at least £65 million to ensure frontline domestic abuse services can cope with COVID-19 and cover additional costs over the next sixth months.** This emergency funding should be ringfenced, and should be made available swiftly and allocated fairly to life-saving frontline services. This must include ring-fenced funding for specialist refuges led by and for BME women, migrant women, disabled women, LGBT survivors and other marginalised groups.

We welcome the Home Secretary's recent commitment to explore alternative emergency accommodation for people who are fleeing domestic abuse and her statement that wherever possible it should be the perpetrator who has to leave the family home. However, adequate provision is urgently needed for both victims, and where it would better ensure the safety and wellbeing of the victim, for perpetrators. **We are calling on the Government to provide local authorities with additional funding to procure emergency accommodation for all homeless households with no fixed abode, including survivors of domestic abuse, in suitable emergency accommodation where they can follow public health advice. This should be accompanied by clarification to local authorities that all survivors escaping domestic abuse, including those with no recourse to public funds, are automatically in priority need and should receive ongoing support delivered by specialist services.**

In light of a significant increase in reports of domestic abuse as a result of the of the Coronavirus outbreak, guaranteeing survivors access to emergency accommodation, specialist services and an offer of safe and secure housing will be critical in helping Government meet their commitment of truly protecting and supporting victims. It's vital that the Government lifts the legal barriers stopping people who are homeless because of domestic abuse from accessing a safe home as a matter of urgency. This should happen alongside a coherent public message to all local authorities making clear that everyone who is fleeing domestic abuse is eligible for assistance, regardless of priority need, intentionality, local connection, or immigration status.

Yours sincerely,

The group has representatives from the domestic abuse, LGBT+, housing and homelessness sectors. The following members of the group have given their signature to this letter:

- DAHA
- Crisis
- Women's Aid
- Gentoo Group
- Homeless Link
- Respect
- Against Violence and Abuse (AVA)
- End Violence Against Women (EVAW)
- Surviving Economic Abuse
- Shelter
- Stonewall Housing
- Safer London
- National Housing Federation
- Agenda
- SafeLives