



## **Domestic Violence and Abuse Professional Briefing in Response to COVID-19**

This briefing has been prepared in response to the potential increase in domestic abuse incidents as a result of the lockdown caused by COVID19. It is aimed at professionals working to prevent and support people experiencing domestic abuse. We would like you to promote the key messages to your frontline staff and to promote via social media.

### **KEY MESSAGES**

- Domestic abuse services are still in operation
- Police response is business as usual
- Businesses can support employees who are experiencing domestic abuse by referring them to appropriate services and maintaining contact
- Victims are not alone and help is available

### **Definition of domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse is defined across Government as any incident of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of their gender or sexuality.

### **Prevalence of domestic abuse**

The Crime Survey in 2019 estimated that 2.4 million adults in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in the preceding year (5.7% of the adult population)<sup>1</sup>. This equates to around 160,000 adults across the West Midlands region, each year. Violence with Injury (with a domestic abuse marker) comprises 36% of West Midlands Police violence with injury incidents.<sup>2</sup> These statistics are only the tip of the iceberg as the majority of domestic abuse incidents go unreported. Behind every statistic is a person and often a family which suffers.

### **The impact of COVID 19**

The challenge of dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic brings with it extreme measures including lockdown, social distancing, infection control and transmission reduction which requires us to stay in for long periods and reduces our contact with others, even though where we live may not be a safe place. The consequences of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.crimesurvey.co.uk/en/SurveyResults.html>

<sup>2</sup> West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit Strategic Needs Assessment (due to be published shortly)

COVID-19 infection control measures, whilst challenging for all of us, can pose extra difficulties and risk for those who are living with domestic abuse. Staying indoors is even harder for people whose home is not the haven it should be. Enforced isolation may increase abusive behaviour. It reduces victim's ability to access help and support. Isolation may be used as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour by perpetrators, as they attempt to shut down victim's routes to safety and support.

Initially reports of domestic abuse and the calls to helplines of support providers were lower than normal and this under reporting highlights the difficulty some people may have in reporting incidents and getting help; due to the lockdown situation. However, recently reports have been increasing. Now more than ever it is vital that we all must play our part in keeping victims safe. Services in the West Midlands are still operating, although using different methods of delivery; remote working has replaced face-to-face contact, advocacy and therapeutic support is now offered via telephone/online, MARAC is running remotely, importantly refuges and housing outreach are still open to support victims in crisis. To further manage the risk spreading COVID-19, some providers are looking into securing alternative self-contained properties as many of the properties used are in form of shared accommodation.

### **Role of Professionals**

If you are a professional working on the front line domestic abuse services are open and it is important to encourage people experiencing domestic abuse to call them and for you to make referrals as you usually would. Refuges are also operating within the COVID 19 guidance and local authorities have a duty to assist individuals and families who are made homeless due to domestic abuse.

It is important that we all play our part in keeping victims safe and are able to promote ways to report incidents, such as using apps and the silent solution. When you are having contact with the public, check how things are going at home, any problems, concerns.

- Set up a system to review cases that you have where domestic abuse is known to be an issue
- Include links to useful resources on your website, social media and other forms of communication
- Take extra care when speaking to individuals by phone, text or video chat. Assume that their calls and communications are being monitored by a perpetrator living in the home until you have checked that they are able to talk openly. Remember that if the perpetrator is checking their phone, a survivor may be abused if they erase their call logs, text messages, or browser history

### **Responding to a disclosure**

- Safety must always be paramount, in cases of immediate risk always risk 999
- Encourage them to contact specialist support, reassuring them it is a free and confidential service.
- Help them to think about things they can do to protect themselves, using a safety plan such as women's aid

- Record what has been said and refer to your organisation's domestic abuse and safeguarding procedures
- Agree how you will or another person can continue to contact them safely
- When making contact by phone, start conversations by using a generic reason, to reduce the likelihood of raising suspicion. If you do get to the speak with the person you are concerned about, check if it is safe for them to talk openly

A multi-agency West Midlands wide campaign will be launched promoting these methods, information resources and these will be promoted through social media, supermarkets, pharmacies and businesses still operating using the [#noexcuseforabuse](#) All national, regional and local resources will be listed on the website <https://noexcuseforabuse.info>

**For Further Guidance on Domestic Abuse relating to COVID-19 please [click here](#).**

### **Role of Employers**

Business have a role in keeping their employees safe. This can be harder when employees are working remotely. The role of the line manager, if domestic abuse is suspected is to offer support by signposting to domestic abuse support services. It is important for line managers to have regular contact with employees, including via video conferencing, at least once a week. Businesses need to have a clear domestic abuse policy in place and promote this within their organisations.

This [toolkit](#) published by Public Health England (PHE) and Business in the Community provides support to to help employers support workers affected by domestic abuse. Now more than ever with remote working line managers can give additional support to employees on domestic abuse.

### **Three key actions for employers to address domestic abuse**

- **Acknowledge.** Use this toolkit to help understand the issues, and acknowledge every employer's responsibility to address domestic abuse. Enable colleagues to openly discuss this topic, and provide a supportive workplace.
- **Respond.** Review your policies and processes to ensure you are providing a supportive workplace and can respond to disclosure. Make sure the policies and processes are implemented correctly.
- **Refer.** Provide access to organisations who can help employees affected by the issue.

[Safe Lives](#) have produced COVID 19 guidance for employers to help support employees who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

The [TUC](#) has also published a helpful resource for Trade union representatives.

**For further messaging on domestic abuse and a link to Regional resources please click [here](#).**