

Support Available to Victims of Domestic Violence and Abuse

Debate on 6 June 2019

On 6 June 2019, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion moved by Baroness Newlove (Conservative) that “this House takes note of Her Majesty’s Government’s plans to support victims of domestic violence and abuse”.

This briefing provides an overview of the extent and impact of domestic abuse in the United Kingdom and examines recent government policy on the subject. A selection of key documents and parliamentary materials are identified at the end of the briefing.

Extent and Impact of Domestic Abuse in the United Kingdom

Domestic abuse is defined across government as:

any incident or pattern of incidents 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 gender or sexuality.¹

It can encompass physical, emotional, psychological, sexual or financial abuse. The definition is not currently statutory.

Domestic abuse is estimated to have cost over £66 billion in England and Wales in 2016/17. Around £47 billion of that cost was the physical and emotional harm experienced by victims. The cost of lost output to the economy was estimated to be £14 billion.² The Home Office has estimated that the average cost for a single victim of domestic abuse is £34,015.³

Women are more likely to be subject to domestic abuse than men. In the year ending March 2018, an estimated 1.3 million women aged between 16 and 59 experienced domestic abuse, in comparison to 695,000 men.⁴ However, the Women’s Aid federation notes that although domestic abuse is “very common”, it is “often difficult to accurately quantify”.⁵ This is attributed, in part, to domestic abuse being a “largely hidden crime”, occurring primarily at home.⁶

However, in the same reporting period, the police recorded 599,549 domestic abuse-related crimes in England and Wales. This represented an increase of 23% from the previous year. This has been attributed to improvements by police forces in the identification and recording of such incidents. There has also been an “increased willingness” of victims to come forward.⁷

Prosecutions for domestic abuse-related offences totalled 89,091 in the year ending March 2018. This accounted for around 17% of all prosecutions in England and Wales. In total 76% of domestic abuse-related prosecutions resulted in conviction. This is its highest level since the year ending March 2010.⁸

Increases in domestic abuse incidents have also been reported in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland reports that there were 31,682 incidents in 2018/19. This represented an increase of 1,769 on the previous year. It was the highest financial year figure recorded since the start of the data series in 2004/05.⁹ In Scotland, 59,541 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded by the police between 2017/18, representing a 1% increase on the previous year.¹⁰

The effects of domestic abuse can result in victims requiring medical treatment. In England and Wales for the year ending 2018, around 33.1% of partner abuse victims who had experienced any physical injury or other effects received some medical attention. In the same reporting year, 73.6% of victims who received medical treatment were female and 26.4% were male. Of those victims, 42% experienced both a physical injury and other effect, 56.8% experienced only non-physical effects and 1.2% experienced only a physical injury.¹¹

Support Available for Victims

There are several frontline services available for victims of domestic abuse or violence. These are often delivered by local councils. For example, many individual councils will listen to individuals and assess the individual's safety. The council then:

- provides information and support on housing and legal rights;
- helps obtain legal protection; and
- works with other professionals.¹²

Charities also play an important part in supporting domestic abuse victims. They often provide temporary accommodation or helplines. The charity Refuge provides emergency temporary accommodation for women and children who have suffered domestic abuse. Alongside Women's Aid, Refuge also runs the National Domestic Violence Helpline. This is a 24-hour, confidential service for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.¹³ It also runs several outreach and independent advocacy services nationwide for male victims.¹⁴ The women's charity Rights of Women also provides free legal advice and information to women in England and Wales.¹⁵

Recent Developments and Commentary

In recent years, the Government has introduced several measures to support the victims of domestic abuse. These include the publication of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and a review into the role of family courts in protecting both parents and children in domestic abuse cases.

Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (2016–20)

On 8 March 2016, the Home Office published a strategy aimed at ending violence against women and girls by 2020. This included pledging £80 million in funding to support frontline services, such as refuges and rape crisis centres.¹⁶ The strategy was updated in March 2019, continuing to run through to 2020. It included information on the Government's commitment to introduce mandatory relationships education in primary schools and relationships and sex education in secondary schools.¹⁷ Alongside the updated strategy, the Government published a position statement on male victims. This includes a government commitment to provide £500,000 to specialist organisations that support male victims of domestic abuse.¹⁸

Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

In February 2017, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced plans to bring forward a Domestic Violence and Abuse Act.¹⁹ Prior to the publication of the draft bill, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee had welcomed the Government's plans to introduce such legislation. In its report, published in October 2018, the committee said it was "very welcome" that the Government had "committed" to developing a domestic abuse strategy and to preparing a draft bill on domestic abuse.²⁰ However, the committee expressed concern that the proposed strategy made "no explicit additional provision" for children who had experienced domestic abuse. It called on the Government to "explicitly" recognise in the legislation the impact that domestic abuse has on children.²¹ In addition, it called on the Government to develop a strategy to protect and support children experiencing such abuse. In its response, the Government said it would introduce "wide-ranging reforms" to children's social care. These would ensure that social workers provide "effective support" to children and families affected by domestic abuse.²²

On 21 January 2019, the Government published the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. It includes the following measures to support victims:

- Introducing the first ever statutory government definition of domestic abuse to specifically include economic abuse and controlling and manipulative non-physical abuse.
- Establishing a domestic abuse commissioner to "drive the response to domestic abuse issues".
- Creating new domestic abuse protection notices and domestic abuse protection orders to "further protect victims" and place restrictions on the actions of offenders.
- Prohibiting the cross-examination of victims by their abusers in the family courts.²³

Announcing the legislation, the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, Victoria Atkins, said that the draft bill was introduced as part of the Government's commitment to deal with the issue. She said that the Government:

Recognises the complex nature of these horrific crimes and puts the needs of victims and their families at the forefront. This government is absolutely committed to shining a light on domestic abuse to ensure this hidden crime does not remain in the shadows.²⁴

Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, welcomed measures to outlaw the cross-examination of survivors of domestic abuse by perpetrators. However, Ms Abbott called on ministers to "go further" and provide assurances that an inquiry would be set up into the culture, practice and outcomes of the family courts in child contact cases where there are allegations of domestic abuse.²⁵

The charity Women's Aid also welcomed the ban on abusers cross-examining victims in family courts. However, it stated that it would "continue campaigning" to ensure that the bill "improves" the response to domestic abuse across frontline services, such as housing, health and social care.²⁶

Review into Family Courts

In addition to the measures in the draft bill, the role of family courts in protecting victims of domestic abuse is also under consideration. On 21 May 2019, the Ministry of Justice announced that a panel of experts would be undertaking a three-month review. It would look at the role of family courts in

protecting children and parents in cases of domestic abuse and other serious offences. As part of the review, the panel would examine the courts' application of its requirements relating to child arrangement cases where domestic abuse is a factor—known as Practice Direction 12J.²⁷

Other Recent Action

In addition, the Government has announced other policies and programmes to tackle domestic abuse and provide support to victims of such crimes, including:

- Starting a consultation that would make it a legal requirement for councils to provide “life-saving” support in secure accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse and their children. The consultation is set to close on 2 August 2019.²⁸
- Announcing it would be allocating £22 million to 63 projects over two years to help domestic abuse survivors.²⁹
- Launching a five-year strategy to tackle domestic abuse within the Armed Forces and defence civilian communities.³⁰

Labour has also announced its own proposals. Describing domestic abuse as a “hidden killer”, the Shadow Equalities Minister, Dawn Butler, has said that employers should have a “duty of care” for employees experiencing domestic abuse. Consequently, she announced that Labour would require employers to have a domestic abuse employment policy and provide up to ten days' paid leave.³¹

Women's Aid has called on the Government to find a “long-term and sustainable funding solution” for frontline services with “national oversight for all domestic abuse services”.³² This comes after figures collated by the charity found that nearly 1 in 10 refuges and 1 in 5 community-based services stated that they had received no local authority funding in 2017/18.³³

Key Documents

- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, '[Government Unveils New Support for Survivors of Domestic Abuse](#)', 13 May 2019
- Home Office, [The Economic and Social Costs of Domestic Abuse](#), January 2019, pp 5–6 and 44–5
- Office for National Statistics, [Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018](#), 22 November 2018, pp 2–4, 8, 11–12 and 29–30
- Police Service of Northern Ireland, [Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland](#), 17 May 2019
- Scottish Government, [Domestic Abuse Recorded by the Police in Scotland, 2017–18](#), 27 November 2018, pp 1–3
- House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, [Domestic Abuse](#), 22 October 2018, HC 1015 of session 2017–19, pp 3–5; and [Domestic Abuse: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2017–19](#), 9 May 2019, HC 2172 of session 2017–19

Parliamentary Material

- [Oral Question on 'Family Courts: Domestic Violence'](#), HL *Hansard*, 21 May 2019, cols 1862–4
- [Statement by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, James Brokenshire, on 'Domestic Abuse'](#), HC *Hansard*, 13 May 2019, cols 33–44
- [Oral Question on 'Specialist Domestic Abuse Services'](#), HL *Hansard*, 4 March 2019, cols 433–6
- House of Commons, '[Written Statement: Domestic Abuse](#)', 21 January 2019, HCWS1255
- [Debate on 'Domestic Abuse'](#), HL *Hansard*, 22 March 2018, cols 512–36
- A selection of written questions from both Houses: [252017](#) (13 May 2019); [245861](#) (25 April 2019); [243336](#) (24 April 2019); [240065](#) (9 April 2019); [910148](#) (1 April 2019); and [HL11561](#) (3 December 2018)

Further Information

- House of Commons Library, [Domestic Violence in England and Wales](#), 21 November 2018

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- ¹ Home Office, '[New Definition of Domestic Violence](#)', 18 September 2012.
- ² Lost output due to time off work and reduced productivity by victims of domestic abuse (Home Office, [The Economic and Social Costs of Domestic Abuse](#), January 2019, p 6).
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Office for National Statistics, '[Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018](#)', 22 November 2018.
- ⁵ Women's Aid, '[How Common is Domestic Abuse?](#)', 23 May 2019.
- ⁶ Office for National Statistics, '[Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018](#)', 22 November 2018.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ Police Service of Northern Ireland, '[Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland](#)', 17 May 2019.
- ¹⁰ Scottish Government, '[Domestic Abuse in Scotland: 2017–2018 Statistics](#)', 27 November 2018.
- ¹¹ Office for National Statistics, '[Domestic Abuse: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales—Year Ending March 2018](#)', 22 November 2018.
- ¹² Hackney Council, '[Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence Support](#)', accessed 28 May 2019.
- ¹³ Refuge, '[24-hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline](#)', accessed 28 May 2019.
- ¹⁴ Refuge, '[Our Work](#)', accessed 28 May 2019.
- ¹⁵ Rights of Women, '[About Our Advice Lines](#)', accessed 28 May 2019.
- ¹⁶ UK Government, '[Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Strategy 2016–20](#)', March 2016, p 11.
- ¹⁷ UK Government, '[Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: 2016–20 Strategy Refresh](#)', March 2019, p 9.
- ¹⁸ UK Government, '[Position Statement on Male Victims of Crimes Considered in the Cross-Government Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\)](#)', March 2019, p 5.
- ¹⁹ Prime Minister's Office, '[Prime Minister's Plans to Transform the Way We Tackle Domestic Violence and Abuse](#)', 17 February 2017.
- ²⁰ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, '[Domestic Abuse](#)', 22 October 2018, HC 1015 of session 2017–19, p 3.
- ²¹ *ibid.*
- ²² House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, '[Domestic Abuse: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2017–19](#)', 9 May 2019, HC 2172 of session 2017–19, p 5.
- ²³ Home Office, '[Government Publishes Landmark Domestic Abuse Bill](#)', 21 January 2019.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ Labour Party, '[Diane Abbott Responds to Publication of Domestic Abuse Bill](#)', 21 January 2019.
- ²⁶ Women's Aid, '[Women's Aid Responds to Government's Draft Domestic Abuse Bill](#)', 21 January 2019.
- ²⁷ Ministry of Justice, '[Spotlight on Child Protection in Family Courts](#)', 21 May 2019.
- ²⁸ Prime Minister's Office, '[Government Unveils New Support for Survivors of Domestic Abuse](#)', 13 May 2019.
- ²⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, '[£22 million for Projects to Support Domestic Abuse Survivors](#)', 10 November 2018.
- ³⁰ Ministry of Defence, '[MOD Launches First Ever Defence Domestic Abuse Strategy](#)', 6 July 2018.
- ³¹ Labour Party, '[Dawn Butler Speech to Labour Party Women's Conference](#)', 22 September 2018.
- ³² Women's Aid, '[Nearly 60% of Survivors Using Domestic Abuse Services Are Mothers and 1 in 15 are Pregnant. According to Latest Women's Aid Report](#)', 31 March 2019.
- ³³ *ibid.*

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