**Stay Safe East report**

**on Policy and Change work**

We had already been running an Advisory Group on domestic abuse against disabled people and doing policy work but the COVID pandemic created opportunities which may not have happened, as we were able to join national VAWG sector networks meeting online.

Since the UK entered lockdown in March, we have been asked to comment and advise on a wealth of COVID and VAWG related campaigns, materials and initiatives. We have quickly been recognised as experts in the cross section between disability and violence against women and girls, quickly adjusting to being put in the spotlight at a time of unprecedented national crisis.

**The Domestic Abuse Bill**

The Domestic Abuse Bill has been our main focus since its return to the House of Commons for its second reading on 28th April. We then followed it closely as it moved through Committee Stage in June and entered Report Stage in July. During this time, we watched and live tweeted each stage in the House of Commons, lobbying MPs and garnering support for our amendments. We have put forward four amendments, and produced a briefing[[1]](#footnote-1) detailing our arguments for change. This is currently being updated for the next stage of the Bill’s progress in the House of Lords.

Our first amendment seeks to repeal a clause in the previous legislation that allow a ’carer’s defence’ by claiming that the abuser was acting in the best interests of the disabled person. This amendment is gaining some traction and may be accepted by government. Our second amendment seeks to include abuse by paid and unpaid carers who are not family members in the definition of domestic abuse. This amendment has seen the beginnings of a debate about the specific nature of domestic abuse against disabled people, but it will be some time before a law is passed that reflects our experiences and gives parity to disabled survivors.

Ahead of the Bill’s second reading at the House of Lords, we have been liaising with members of the House of Lords. We are working with cross-bencher and disabled Peer Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson to organise a presentation to members of the House in the interests of gaining support for our amendments. The presentation is on standby to move very quickly once the date for the second reading is announced.

As members of the national COVID sector network on VAWG, we have contributed to developing a set of joint recommendations for the Domestic Abuse Bill[[2]](#footnote-2) which for the first time include the rights of disabled survivors. Our partners in the sector have supported our amendments.

While the Bill goes through parliament, the Home Office has produced draft guidance on the Bill. We have commented and met with civil servants, and the guidance now includes specific references and examples of the experiences of disabled survivors.

**Policy and Practice briefings**

We are working on a series of policy and practice briefings. The policy briefings include a briefing on the implications of COVID for disabled survivors and a data factsheet on violence and abuse against disabled people (to be published shortly); the practice briefings include guidance on what best practice looks like when working with disabled survivors (to be published in December), adult safeguarding, the rights of disabled survivors and housing. Our main achievement over the past few months – our COVID briefing[[3]](#footnote-3) – was originally submitted as a response to the Women and Equalities Committee consultation on the impact of COVID on those with protected characteristics. The completion of this briefing became our priority as the inequalities exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic were brought sharply into view. Along with other disabled people’s and BAME organisations, we will continue to press for a response to COVID which does not discriminate against those whose lives are deemed to have less value, be they disabled people or key workers.

**Advisory Group**

The Advisory Group continued to run throughout the pandemic, quickly evolving into virtual meetings held on Zoom. We have discussed a range of topics, focusing on bigger policy topics in the main meetings and bringing casework-related issues to the smaller meetings. Among subjects discussed included:

* The Domestic Abuse Bill
* The Home Office VAWG strategy
* The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled survivors
* How we can be better advocates for disabled survivors
* Our response to the Victim’s Code consultation
* How we can meet the needs of disabled survivors throughout and after lockdown
* The future of the Advisory Group, which all members agreed should continue

We are currently looking at expanding membership of the group to ensure better representation across the UK.

**Victim’s Code Consultation**

We responded to the Ministry of Justice consultation on Improving the Victim’s Code in May 2020. Our response can be found on the Stay Safe East website under the ‘policy work’ page[[4]](#footnote-4). The response includes answers to set questions regarding the restructuring of the Code and the rights of victims. We are currently engaging with the Victim’s Commissioner on her consultation on a new Victim’s Rights Bill, with a view to ensuring that the specific needs of disabled victims of crime are addressed in law.

**#YouAreNotAlone Home Office campaign**

We were highly instrumental in the development and implementation of the #YouAreNotAlone government domestic abuse campaign. We liaised with the Domestic Abuse team at the Home Office to advise on the campaign materials, social media messages and practicalities of rolling out the scheme. We were influential in the process of ensuring that these materials are accessible in terms of format and content, and advised on the Easy Read format[[5]](#footnote-5). Our details are now on the Home office website, which has led to enquiries and self-referrals by disabled survivors.

**External partnerships**

We have been invited to participate in a number of advisory groups and calls, the number of which increased as a result of COVID-related initiatives. We have been attending the weekly (now fortnightly) COVID Violence against Women and Girls sector call hosted by Women’s Aid. In September our CEO was invited to join the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s call which includes the major national domestic abuse organisations, the Home Office and key government departments. Our policy officer has been participating in the monthly ‘Ask for ANI’ Advisory Group and the weekly SafeLives call for service providers, and feeding back information to the Stay Safe East caseworkers. Attending these regular meetings alongside running our own Advisory Group has enabled us to give our input on a range of external campaigns and initiatives, whilst discussing these developments with our colleagues across the disability sector.

The unprecedented demands of this year have enabled us to forge connections and relationships that would not have happened had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic. Our cross-sector open letter to the Prime Minister in early April[[6]](#footnote-6), listing recommendations for responding to an increase in violence against women and girls during the pandemic, exemplifies the beginning of our COVID-related collaborative working as a sector. In early September the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs brokered a meeting with the Chief Social Worker for England and Wales, Fran Leddra. We discussed not only our work but specifically the role of adult safeguarding and adult social care in relation to domestic abuse. We have agreed to work on a checklist for social work and other social care staff on ensuring the safety of disabled survivors of domestic abuse.

Our CEO recently attended the Ministerial domestic abuse roundtable on the subject of the new Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy, alongside colleagues across the sector.

In the last month, our growing partnerships with women’s organisations led to a meeting with the Centre for Women’s Justice, who have agreed to put together legal guidance on an issue of great concern to Stay Safe East, namely the systemic discrimination faced by disabled mothers who have been through domestic abuse in the child protection system and in the Family Courts. This is an important move forward as at the moment we have to argue these cases individually and disabled mother’s rights to family life (and that of their children) are being abused.

**Ask for ANI**

We have also been instrumental in advising on the campaign materials and implementation of the ‘Ask for ANI’ scheme, a COVID-related initiative led by the Home Office focusing on enabling victims/survivors to approach pharmacies for help. As the campaign evolved, we commented on each aspect of the initiative, from draft materials to the practicalities of where and how to roll out the scheme effectively. We are waiting for this scheme to be launched.

**Partnership with SafeLives and Shared Lives**

We continue to work closely with SafeLives, with the Police Officer attending their fortnightly meetings whilst they attend our Advisory Group meetings. Working with SafeLives has led us to form a partnership with Shared Lives, an adult fostering scheme working to provide safe accommodation for disabled women and women with additional support needs.

We are also being commissioned by SafeLives to advise on their new project, Whole Health London. This is an influencing project regarding health based domestic abuse support for victims. The project is forecast to span the years 2020-2023. We will be attending the advisory group for this project four times a year.

**Victim’s Funding Strategy**

We have advised the Ministry of Justice on the Victims’ Funding Strategy. We argued for ring-fenced funding for the specialist ‘by and for’ disability sector. At present this sector is very small, with only two organisations both in London working on domestic abuse/violence against Deaf and disabled women. We argued for seedfunding/ capacity building funds to help DDPOs and VAWG organisations to work in partnership with disabled survivors to develop services similar to Stay Safe East outside of London.

**COVID-19 safety and support resources**

We advised on the COVID-19 safety and support resources for survivors and their friends, family neighbours and community members. We were instrumental in the development of the Easy Read version of the survivor resource, liaising with Women’s Aid and Change in Leeds to produce this. The resources are now available in 15 different languages and BSL on the Women’s Aid website[[7]](#footnote-7).

**Looking forward**

We aim to build on the policy work and our evolving relationships with VAWG organisations and government department over the next 6 months, and focus on some key issues:

* Continuing to gain allies for our amendments to the Domestic Abuse Bill and to push for the guidance on the Bill to encompass the needs of disabled survivors. We are preparing to follow the Abuse Bill as it returns to the House of Lords this autumn. This will include watching and live tweeting each stage, meeting with various Lords and MPs, and giving a presentation on our amendments to select members of the House ahead of the Committee Stage.
* Ensuring that the Violence against Women and Girls strategy addresses the blatant gap in policy, services and responses to disabled survivors
* Working with the Chief Social worker and others on guidance for social care staff on disabled survivors of domestic abuse
* Working with the Centre for Women’s Justice on the rights of disabled mothers
* We will also be working on a response to the Law Commission’s consultation document on hate crime law, alongside our partner organisations in the London DDPO Hate Crime Partnership
* We are also preparing to respond to the Law Commission consultation on hate crime laws, currently at consultation stage and due to close for responses on 24th December 2020.
* Having published our COVID-19 briefing, we are near completion of our next policy briefing (a review of local and national data on violence against disabled people) and practice briefing (meeting the needs of disabled survivors in practice).
* The Advisory Group will continue to run as we move through the next stage of the pandemic, with the next meeting being held on Monday 2nd November 2020.
* We have also been invited by Galop to sit on a panel for a live webinar on the subject of how COVID-19 has changed the landscape of domestic abuse and affected survivors from different communities. This will be held on 3rd December 2020.

**Stay Safe East November 2020**

1. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GBA95OxQHMzmx3n3Pztag03uHbtn9gkD/view> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Joint-Recommendations-on-the-Domestic-Abuse-Bill-.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://staysafe-east.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stay-Safe-East-Response-to-Consultation-Equality-Impact-of-Covid-19-final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://staysafe-east.org.uk/index.php/policy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/For-Survivors-COVID-19-Advice-SCREEN-READER.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-safety-and-support-resources/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)