

Jane Hutt AC/AM
Y Dirprwy Weinidog a'r Prif Chwip
Deputy Minister and Chief Whip



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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To: AMs
VAWDASV umbrella bodies and sector leads
PCCs
Chief Constables
CEOs of local authorities
CEOs of local health boards and health trusts
WCVA
CVCs

9 April 2020

The Covid-19 crisis is an anxious time for all of us, but doubly so for those for whom Government restrictions on movement means they are trapped in their homes with an abuser. For these, home is not a place of safety, but a place of fear, abuse and violence.

International evidence shows that during times of crisis domestic abuse rises, as do other forms of violence against women and sexual violence. This has been exacerbated by social distancing, self-isolation and heightened tensions as concerns about health, job stability and money lead to violent outbursts. Other countries affected by the pandemic are reporting significant rises in domestic abuse.

My officials are in regular discussions with key leads across the sector and Government, as well as with the UK Government's Domestic Abuse Commissioner designate. She has noted there is much to be learned from the work we are doing in Wales. In particular, she has remarked on the wealth of communication coming out of Wales.

Communication is key at this time. Last week I recorded a message to let those who need it, know that our Live Fear Free helpline will continue to provide support throughout the pandemic. Yasmin Khan, one of our two National Advisers for violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) also recorded a message to help victims know how stay safe.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Making calls to the helpline is difficult when an abuser is within earshot, so we are promoting 'silent' methods of communicating with Live Fear Free, such as text, web chat, and email. We are also sharing messages that the police will respond to 999 calls and how to alert the operator if someone is unable to talk.

We want others to notice the signs that someone needs help and will be re-running our 'Don't be a bystander' campaign. We want to work with the police, pharmacies and supermarkets to share our "Don't be a Bystander" message together with information about access to help and support. We have also opened up our VAWDASV e-learning module for all and are sharing it on the volunteering network, to enable people to spot the signs of VAWDASV and know how to get help.

At the weekend I announced that I was launching a £1.2 million fund to purchase disbursed community accommodation for victims of domestic abuse. This will enable move-on accommodation and prevent lack of bed space in refuges, or provide accommodation where refuge is not the right answer. There will also be £200,000 for furnishings and white goods, while our annual VAWDASV capital grant will prioritise projects that respond to this immediate crisis.

Officials are working across Government to find safe solutions for those fleeing domestic abuse and other forms of violence. The £10 million support fund that my colleague, the Minister for Housing and Regeneration announced, will help to meet these needs, together with new powers for local authorities to protect public health and meet the needs of the vulnerable, including those with no recourse to public funds

Food security is more critical than ever, and we are ensuring that those who need to bulk-buy food for refuges and similar accommodation are not prevented from doing so by supermarket limits on the number of items they can buy.

We are supporting services which work with perpetrators of VAWDASV to take into account the increased risks associated with COVID-19 and the changes and restrictions on daily life in the UK. Welsh Government Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for services for perpetrators of VAWDASV was published last week and contains advice on managing these risks, adapting programmes and interventions and ensuring the safety of staff working from home. Officials have also worked with Welsh Women's Aid, who developed corresponding guidance focused on victims and families to be read alongside the Welsh Government guidance.

Officials are working closely with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in Wales to inform contingency plans, which prioritise the safety of staff and service users and maintain a focus upon public protection. For the National Probation Service, this will include prioritising cases who are assessed as high or very high risk of serious harm, domestic abuse and safeguarding children and adult cases. Social distancing requirements have necessitated, adopting different methods of supervising offenders as appropriate.

Across the Welsh Prison estate, restricted regimes have been implemented in a bid to create greater social distance between the men in HMPPS care whilst maintaining a decent and safe environment. The UK Government has agreed to release pregnant women and women in mother and baby units. HMPPS is working closely with partners, including Welsh Government to complete release plans for these individuals, a small number of which will be released to Wales. Work is underway to ensure partners are well prepared should there be a decision to release any further prisoners. Safeguarding and public protection remain the priority during this time.

Officials have been working together to ensure that consistent safety messages and safe solutions are implemented, such as safeguarding vulnerable children and young people. They have also ensured that VAWDASV front-line staff are prioritised as critical key-workers so that staff can access childcare or PPE.

These are exceptional times and the risk cannot be overestimated. It is no exaggeration to say that our response to this crisis could be the difference of life or death to those at risk of violence and abuse. I am receiving very many letters from those who share my concerns and I want to give reassurance that we are working at pace to put in measures to mitigate these dreadful impacts. The scale of the task is enormous, but together with my fellow Ministers and my officials, I will do my utmost to meet it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane Hutt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line above the first letter 'J'.

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The Live Fear Free Helpline provides support for victims and survivors irrespective of gender; service providers and 'concerned others:

<https://gov.wales/live-fear-free> Tel: 0808 8010 800

The Safer Wales Dyn project provides support to Heterosexual, Gay, Bisexual and Trans men who are experiencing Domestic abuse from a partner.

<http://www.dynwales.org/contact-dyn-project/?contentID=577> Tel: 0808 801 0321

The Bawso helpline offers support to BAME victims and survivors affected by domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.

<https://bawso.org.uk/contact-us/> Tel: 08007318147