

# BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION:

RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION COMMUNITIES  
DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Universities UK

## INTRODUCTION

Universities should already have policies and practices in place to support their staff and students experiencing domestic violence and abuse. This briefing includes some information which may be helpful in supporting staff and students **at greater risk** due to the lockdown period relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. National helplines and services are still available for referrals and are included at the end of this briefing.

In pulling this briefing together UUK has consulted with a range of people and organisations. We are particularly grateful to Professor Nicole Westmarland at the University of Durham; Dr Jayne Osmond and Dr Diane Phimister at Coventry University, and David Malpas and Ben Serlin at Middlesex University. We have also sought advice from specialist organisations including Refuge, Women's Aid and Respect, #EmilyTest and sector groups including UCEA, NUS, Advance HE and AMOSSHE.

Although the UUK taskforce to address harassment drew attention to domestic abuse this was not a major feature of the Changing the Culture report. This briefing marks the beginning of an important new programme of work for UUK in this area.

### Call for action and next steps

Given the current situation continues to evolve rapidly, it would be helpful to share resources, strategies and practical approaches adopted by institutions to the increased risk of domestic violence and abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples will be collated and circulated in a second briefing note. Please send to [fiona.waye@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.waye@universitiesuk.ac.uk) by Friday 22 May 2020.

UUK is also running a digital campaign [#WeAreTogether](#) to promote examples of how universities are contributing to the national effort against Covid-19. If your university is working with specialist organisations to support local communities in addressing domestic abuse through this difficult time, please send these to [covid19@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:covid19@universitiesuk.ac.uk).

UUK is also hosting a webinar on this topic in May. This will enable institutions to hear directly from academic experts, and those working in organisations specialising

in responding to domestic abuse and to share their experiences and learn from each other. We will circulate details shortly.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### Incidents of domestic abuse and online harassment is increasing

[Women's Aid](#), [Refuge](#), [Respect](#) and other national abuse charities have raised concern about the impact of the lockdown on those experiencing and perpetuating domestic abuse.

Evidence from China shows a threefold increase in domestic violence during self-isolation<sup>1</sup>. In the UK, ten women and two children were killed by men in the first two weeks of the lockdown (23 March – 6 April)<sup>2</sup>. This is three times higher than the average of three women killed every two weeks. The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) reported a 120% rise in the number of calls it received across a 24-hour period on 9 April 2020 and an even greater increase in traffic to its website. Respect (a domestic abuse organisation working with perpetrators, and male victims) has reported a 67% increase in perpetrators calling their helpline.

Domestic violence and abuse includes physical and sexual violence, verbal abuse, coercion and threats and financial control between intimate partners and family members. These behaviours might escalate in times of lockdown, constant physical proximity and emotional intensity. Those conducting abuse may also use the measures such as social distancing and isolation as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour and/or use virus-specific misinformation and scare tactics as a form of control or to stop someone seeking help or medical attention.

For those experiencing multiple forms of discrimination – including BAME women, disabled people, and LGBT+ victims/survivors – the barriers to safety are multiplied.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on emerging global evidence including China on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls is available in a [Research Report](#) produced by the Department for International Development, Violence Against Women and Girls Team (16 March 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Figures from [blog](#) by Sarah Davidge, Research and Evaluation Manager at Women's Aid

For example, those from the LGBT+ community may find they face abuse or a hostile environment if living with families hostile to their sexuality or gender identity.

Domestic violence and abuse can also involve control, coercion, threats and stalking which can be carried out through email, text and phone messages (known as **technology mediated violence and abuse**). Research on online domestic abuse by Women's Aid showed that for 85% of respondents the abuse they received online from a partner or ex-partner was part of a pattern of abuse they also experienced offline. As students and staff may be cohabiting with family, other students or partners, this raises the potential for an increase in incidents of online harassment including cyberbully, cyberstalking and image-based abuse such as 'revenge pornography' in the home.

As well as the increased risk to students and staff by friends and family, the unanticipated 'jump' online may increase technology mediated violence and abuse between staff, students, or between staff and students. Communicating from private rather than public spaces (the home rather than the university), using technology such as private mobile phones, and an increased use of work based social media accounts to communicate to students may create a sense of social closeness that can be exploited. Power dynamics may be less visible than in the classroom environment, and those being targeted may (wrongly) feel more to blame and feel less able to seek support. Ultimately, the full implications of this way of working on violence and abuse are likely to take some time to become known.

Responding to this the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and the National Crime Agency have launched a new campaign, [\*\*#OnlineSafetyAtHome\*\*](#) to encourage people to be aware of how to stay safe on the web. The government has also published a briefing on [\*\*staying safe online during the coronavirus outbreak\*\*](#).

## **Domestic abuse can have a significant impact on mental health**

Measures introduced to decrease social contact are also likely to exacerbate the social isolation felt by victims/survivors. Moreover, the mental health impacts of social distancing and isolation are also likely to be more acute for survivors coping with and/or

recovering from trauma. The closure of a university also means that opportunities for respite for students and staff may be significantly reduced.

Research also shows that domestic abuse (both in childhood and in adult life) is a significant factor in the development of depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders, and may lead to sleep disturbances, self-harm, suicide and attempted suicide, eating disorders and substance misuse. In 2019, a study by researchers at the University of Birmingham found that those experiencing domestic abuse were nearly three times as likely to develop mental distress and were also nearly three times more likely to have a history of mental illness.

### **There are a variety of domestic abuse campaigns being launched**

Due to the rise in domestic abuse, on 11 April 2020, the Home Secretary Priti Patel launched a new national communications campaign across social media to highlight that help and support services are still available for those at risk of domestic abuse. This uses the hashtag [\*\*#YouAreNotAlone\*\*](#).

The Home Secretary has also announced that government is working with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to provide £2m to support domestic abuse helplines and online support. This follows the £750m pledged on 9 April for the charity sector including domestic abuse charities to help with the increase in demand for support.

On 9 April 2020, Crisis charity Hestia's national campaign [\*\*UK SAYS NO MORE\*\*](#) launched [\*\*Listening From Home\*\*](#), a new domestic abuse awareness campaign to encourage family members, friends, colleagues and neighbours to be aware of, and report, signs of domestic abuse whilst the UK is in lockdown. The [\*\*campaign\*\*](#) has tools and resources to provide a community response to domestic abuse and to raise awareness that Hestia's refuges remain open. This includes the free-to-download [\*\*mobile app, Bright Sky\*\*](#) which enables users to locate their nearest support services by searching their area, postcode or current location.

The [#NoExcuseForAbuse campaign](#) was also launched in April. This is a multi-agency campaign led by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, West Midlands Police and victims' services. This is a social media campaign highlighting services available in the West Midlands including promoting services for those concerned about their use of violence and abuse including the [Respect Phonenumber](#).

## **Those experiencing domestic abuse are allowed to leave the home**

The government's campaign will also highlight that those experiencing domestic abuse are able to leave the home and seek help at refuges. It is important to note that this **includes students living in private rented accommodation or student halls**. This means that students and staff **should not be fined by police** for travel under these circumstances.

The NPCC has also reaffirmed that responding to people facing violence or controlling behaviour at home remains a police priority and that people should still report their experiences to police. Information on how to report is available on the [government's website](#).

## **Free travel available for those leaving home/place of residence to seek refuge**

Women, men and their children travelling to refuge accommodation while coronavirus lockdown measures are in force can still apply for free train travel through a partnership between train companies and Women's Aid. Tickets can be accessed through the member services of [Women's Aid Federation of England, Welsh Women's Aid, Scottish Women's Aid](#) and [Imkaan](#) (addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls), once an offer of a refuge place has been received.

To obtain a free rail ticket an individual should get in touch with their local domestic violence service (which can be found at [womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/)) and the service can request the tickets on behalf of the person.

This industry-wide scheme follows the successful launch of similar initiatives by South Eastern Rail – the ‘[Rail to Refuge](#)’ scheme introduced in 2019, which Great Western Railway also joined in March 2020 as part of its celebration of International Women’s Day.

## **UK helpline services still available**

At the time of writing, UK helpline services are still available. Although many have closed their face-to-face services and operating differently in accordance with advice from the UK government, **services are still open and available for referrals.**

A list of services available for those experiencing domestic abuse and those concerned about their use of violence and abuse is available in the resources at the end of this briefing. Given the uncertainty as to when services will return to normal universities will wish to check websites and social media for updates.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Providing safe spaces**

Those in full-time education, international students and those with savings around £16,000 or more, are not typically eligible for housing benefit and this is the most usual way to access refuge, however, it is **not the case** that a student must be in receipt of housing benefit to access refuge. Most refuges will work with people on a case-by-case basis and will usually find a way if they have space. Some universities are providing safe and suitable spaces for staff and students such as providing a room in a hall of residence. This is potentially possible for students, staff and members of the general public. Given the complexities and sensitivities, if universities are able to provide accommodation this should be done with the support of specialist women’s refuge and other support organisations.

Universities could be proactive in reaching out to local domestic violence and abuse services and the police who may have service users with immediate safety needs. If they have academics specialising in this area, they should utilise these links and the local knowledge and built up trust they can provide.

It will be for individual institutions to determine their policies towards accommodation and rents; however, institutions may wish to consider the following:

- appoint a local domestic abuse champion who can provide signposting advice and represent the university in the weekly local multi agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)
- liaise with local domestic abuse organisations regularly
- ensure that staff or students are aware and accept that any move to university accommodation is a temporary rather than permanent solution from the outset
- make available bespoke accommodation; if this is not possible, make available accommodation while eligibility for a refuge space/alternative accommodation is in discussion
- allocating different areas in halls of residence for different people, ie separating students from staff
- seek advice about how to phase out temporary accommodation and move a student or staff to other more permanent accommodation or specialist support
- enable students in university-owned accommodation to break their contracts to move to their safe alternative accommodation
- exploring rent discounts and rent suspensions in university accommodation on a means-tested basis to protect students experiencing ongoing hardship
- providing emergency funding to help with rent and food

## OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

Some universities will already have reviewed their advice and support around safety planning for staff and students who may be in this situation. To further support this process UUK has consulted with academic experts and organisations working in this field to offer a few points institutions may also wish to consider:

**Reiterate messages that domestic abuse and online harassment is always unacceptable** in any situation, no matter what stresses someone is under and that everyone has the right to feel safe wherever they are.

**Promote understanding** that stress and anxiety does not cause domestic abuse, but it may increase in families where it is already being perpetrated.

**Signposting, sensitively and appropriately**, that help from the university, doctors, health services, hospitals, external support agencies and the police<sup>3</sup> is still available, although this may have moved largely online. This could also include signposting to information on sexual health and support for contraception.

**Messaging should also include support and advice** for anyone who might require medical attention following physical harm.<sup>4</sup>

**Pregnancy can be a trigger for domestic abuse** and existing abuse may get worse during pregnancy or after giving birth which also highlights the need the including information on how medical care can be accessed. Consideration as to how universities with the NHS, GPs and third-party support agencies might work through this challenge could be helpful.

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<sup>3</sup> The police have publicly stated that no one should be put off calling because of COVID-19.

<sup>4</sup> The NHS has raised concerns that some people are reluctant to seek help from their local hospital if it is not COVID-19 related.

**Signposting could be done via university communication channels** such as websites, social media pages and email to relevant sexual violence and domestic violence and mental health organisations. This could include organisations which:

- **support those who feel they are at risk of abuse**
  - [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#), available 24 hours a day on **0808 2000 247**
  - During the lockdown opportunities to make a call safely to seek help may be limited. Refuge has a [web form](#) which can be used to request a safe time for a call from a member of the expert helpline team.
  - **National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline, 0800 999 5428**  
Email: [help@galop.org.uk](mailto:help@galop.org.uk)
  
- **support those concerned about their use of violence and abuse:**
  - [Respect Phonenumber](#), **0808 8024040**
  
- **are local to the university** (for example, those featured on local council websites)

**Ensure communications to students and staff:**

- include how to report domestic abuse and online harassment
  
- reference how to access institutional support services and domestic violence and abuse specialists. This could include the use of social media channels for positive engagement and pastoral support along with options for immediate ‘on-campus’ support, such as the warden or security telephone numbers, and ‘off-campus’ immediate support, such as the local women’s refuge or Samaritans 24/7 line. This could also include drawing attention to

supermarkets and pharmacies which could also provide a safe place to ask for help.

- include students wherever they are located such as in halls of residence
- take account of potential cultural and social differences which may mean that students and staff need specialist support

Alongside universities' own arrangements for 'keeping in touch' with students and staff, universities may wish to encourage students and staff to keep in touch with friends and family who they are worried about and could be facing abuse. This could take the form of phone calls or messaging, while recognising that these channels may not be confidential to the suspected domestic violence victim or survivor. Friends and family can also outline how those at risk can report to the police quietly by calling 999 (and if unable to speak) to press 55. This will transfer them to the relevant police force.

## **EXIT STRATEGIES AND FUTURE PLANNING**

Given much of the support such as the offering of university accommodation is likely to be a temporary solution during the lockdown, universities may also wish to ensure they have 'exit strategies' so that there are plans in place for what happens when the lockdown measures are partially or fully lifted.

Experts also suggest that universities may see a spike in reports after the lockdown. This could be due to the closing down of some routes to safety, or difficulties in accessing support from services during the lockdown, or that a person did not feel it was right or safe to leave the home during the lockdown period. Planning now to ensure that counselling and student support services are aware of the potential raise and the need for increased capacity will be important.

## NEXT STEPS

We hope that this briefing is helpful.

1. If there is information you would find useful not included in this briefing, please let UUK know and we will follow up for inclusion in our second briefing.
2. Given the current situation continues to evolve rapidly, it would be helpful to share resources, strategies and practical approaches adopted by institutions in responding to domestic violence. Please send to [fiona.waye@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.waye@universitiesuk.ac.uk) by 22 May 2020 and these will be collated and circulated in a second briefing note.
3. We would also like to hear examples of how your university is working with specialist services and support organisations to help local communities in addressing domestic abuse; please send details to [covid19@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:covid19@universitiesuk.ac.uk) and we will showcase these in our digital campaign [#WeAreTogether](#) which highlights how universities are contributing to the national effort against Covid-19.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### **Guidance developed for Scottish Principals to support staff and students experiencing gender-based violence during the COVID-19 crisis**

Alongside this guidance the Scottish Funding Council has commissioned Advance HE to draft a briefing to highlight the messages that universities and colleges in Scotland should provide their students and staff and to identify key actions that can be taken to promote the safety of victims/survivors. This briefing will be published imminently. The briefing also builds on and aligns to the recently [distributed letter](#) Scottish Principals from Mrs Fiona Drouet, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of to [#EmilyTest](#). This letter helpfully includes details of helplines and national organisations by country as well as organisations in relation to stalking and cyberstalking and mental and emotional health.

## HELPLINES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

A comprehensive list of support services and organisations available for those facing domestic abuse and those concerned about their use of violence and abuse is available in guidance provided by the government and the letter to Scottish Principals from #EmilyTest: [Tackling Gender Based Violence in Education.](#)

- [Support for victims of domestic abuse](#)
- [Domestic abuse: how to get help](#) which sets out how to recognise domestic abuse, report it, seek help, help a friend if they are being abused, get help from police and further support materials.

Some additional resources which may also be useful are set out below.

### **(VAWG) Helpdesk Research Report No 284<sup>6</sup>**

#### [Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls](#)

looks at emerging global evidence from the current outbreak of corona virus as well as other similar epidemics and lessons learned that could also be applicable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Women's Aid**

Offer guidance and services including:

- [Live chat service](#) for female survivors, Monday to Friday 10am-2pm which can be accessed [here](#)
- [Safety advice for survivors.](#)
- [Guidance for services, staff and volunteers.](#) This covers practical advice, preventative measures, resources and support
- [Domestic abuse and your mental health](#)

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<sup>6</sup> London UK. Fraser, E (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence and Women and Girls.](#) (VAWG is funded by the Department for International Development.)

## **Men's Advice line**

**Men's Advice Line** offers information for male victims: **0808 801 0327**

## **SafeLives**

- **[A guide for victims and survivors of domestic abuse](#)**
- **[Supporting friends, family members, neighbours and colleagues experiencing domestic abuse](#)**

## **Threshold DAS**

**Threshold DAS** has a **questionnaire** which has prompts for people who feel like they might be either experiencing and those concerned about their use of violence and abuse.

## **Respect**

- **[Guidance for practitioners working with domestic abuse perpetrators](#)**

## **Support for employers for supporting employees**

- **Eida**, an employers' initiative responding to domestic abuse has developed **guidance** to help employees
- **Safe Lives**, Advice for employers on supporting their employees at home

## **Local Government Association (LGA)**

The LGA website highlights examples of good council practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, and have released a resource for councils, **Tackling domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic**.

## **National Union of Students (NUS)**

**Hidden Marks report** illustrates the incidence of violence amongst students and the barriers to reporting.

## **Online digital abuse**

Resources and guides for online harassment and abuse include:

- **Tackling online harassment and promoting online welfare** (UUK, 2019). Including **helplines and resources** for tackling online harassment
  
- **Womens' Aid guidance** has guidance for **Covering your tracks online** and **Online and digital abuse**
  
- **Report harmful online content**  
**Report Harmful Content** is provided by the **UK Safer Internet Centre** and includes an avenue for reporting. The UK Safer Internet Centre also run:
  - **Professionals Online Safety Helpline**
  - **The Revenge Porn Helpline**