**Association of London Directors of Children’s Services**

**Practice paper - Domestic Abuse during Covid 19**

**(April 2020)**

**Introduction**

1. This paper offers practitioners and managers:

* Some ‘Practice Prompts’ to support contacts and discussions with families
* Information about specific practice initiatives from local areas
* Information about resources and materials, including “sign-posting” documents about national/London-wide organisations and helplines.

1. Domestic abuse (DA) often involves physical violence but it is also about a broader pattern of behaviours used to control a current /ex-partner or other family member.  It includes emotional, psychological, financial and sexual abuse.  The circumstances of the lockdown, including overcrowding and worrying about money and employment, is likely to lead to increased tensions and conflict in some families, including domestic abuse.
2. International evidence indicates that the circumstances of lockdown can significantly increase risks to adults and children. Some national domestic abuse helplines have reported significant increases in contacts whilst other agencies have not yet seen this reflected in local service ‘demand’ and need. ALDCS is currently undertaking a survey of London’s children’s services to ascertain how Covid 19 has, to date, impacted on domestic abuse related work, including referrals.
3. The usual routes and means for assisting and supporting families affected by domestic abuse have become more limited in the current emergency. This has required practitioners to use their knowledge of, and expertise in working with families in a different way to assess and respond to potential risks to children and adults.
4. This document intends to be short and accessible summary of how we can together strengthen practice in an area which is of considerable concern in the current emergency. If you have examples of good practice that you feel could be added to this list of resources, please contact use at [administrator@liia.london](mailto:administrator@liia.london) so that this can be included in updated versions of this document. This practice paper will be unloaded with related resources to the LIIA website Covid-19 area.

**Some practice prompts;**

1. Recently published guidelines (see below) are helping to keep many families safe and well. At the same time, it is recognised that current social distancing and isolation measures, whilst necessary to control the spread of the spread of the virus, may also be amplifying the risks and danger faced by victims of domestic abuse DVA.  The controls implemented may reinforce the power that an abuser has over his/her family.  Practitioners will want to bear this in mind as we work and have contact with families, acknowledging the extra level of complexity and risk that Covid 19 has revealed.
2. The following are some practice prompts to support practitioners in addressing added risks in a safe way.

**Some issues for practitioners and managers to consider:**

* How does self-isolating and the lockdown change the risk for children and their families?
* What is the safety plan for the family? How does this change or need to change as a result of lockdown and families self-isolating? Are families able to access the same level and type of help and support as previously, particularly from friends and family network?
* Consider the safety plan with children, do they know who to call and what to say if they need help?
* Consider the ‘triggers’ that may be present; how does lockdown increase these triggers? What can the family do to minimise these triggers?
* What changes and resources are needed to the safety plan?
* Who is seeing the family/children? Can these agencies provide information from their interaction to formulate and strengthen risk assessments?
* How worried are you about a child if they are not being seen by any agencies such as school, health etc?

**Safety advice for service users if they are living with an abuser**

* Keep your phone charged and on you at all times
* Ensure phone credit is topped up
* Keep away from the kitchen if trying to find a safe space / avoid your abuser
* Speak to a trusted neighbour about the situation and ask them to call 999 if they hear loud noises/arguments
* At the first sign of abuse call 999 for help. Silent calls can be made to the police by calling 999 and then 55 if you cannot talk.

**Strengthening decision making and risk assessment**

* In general discussions with families, find out what the family day to day routine is around food shopping etc. Call victim and children at the time alleged perpetrator is out shopping/exercise etc to help undertake a safer risk assessment/ safety planning
* Are the family going out each day for exercise, are they doing this together, if not, can the practitioner contact victim whilst they are alone during exercise? This might assist in being able to have a less guarded discussion of concerns and assessing levels of risk.
* If possible, set up a ‘code word/response’ with victim – for example, ‘are you safe to talk?’ if the answer is ‘9’ then this indicates that it is not safe to talk, and ask ‘can I call you later at 3pm’?
* Does victim/children have access to their own phone? Can they call police/services if needed?
* If possible, involve the wider family network in safety plan. Can grandparents, friends etc check in, can they seek support for the family if they are worried about domestic abuse, including assaults? Can a code word and agreed response be set with family and friends?

**How London boroughs are responding**

1. Children’s services and their partners across different London Boroughs have been making changes to their service ‘offer’ to better protect non abusing parents and children in the exceptional circumstances resulting from COVID 19. The following are some examples of these initiatives and may be of interest to colleagues in other boroughs.
2. **Developing new multi-agency approaches:** Some boroughs are developing multi-agency approaches specifically to respond to the coronavirus situation in anticipation of increased domestic abuse, for example Redbridge have introduced a ‘Hub process’. This has been designed by the Children’s service, in conjunction with Community Safety, Refuge, Health and Adult Social Services, police and support services.
3. **Proactive approaches to identifying risk:** Some MARAC teams are working with police to review MARAC cases over past 6 -12 months to look at what support is in place and any potential risk concerns (e.g. Wandsworth, Haringey). Boroughs are also monitoring noise complaints, as neighbours may complain about arguments and noise which is domestic abuse related (e.g. Havering).
4. **Virtual MARACs**: A number of boroughs have taken steps to continue with MARACs remotely, such as through teleconferencing to convene core agencies to discuss high risk cases. It will be important to ensure that practitioners are aware of their local process for referring to MARAC in the current situation and follow up.
5. **Alternative ‘respite’ accommodation for families at risk of domestic abuse:**  A trial scheme is being developed across London to provide a preventative and early help response to help alleviate immediate family stress through the offer of alternative accommodation for a family member for limited period of time and to help give everyone a breathing space. Such alternative accommodation would be provided in hotels and be as close as possible to the family. Further details will be available shortly.
6. **Internal communications**: Communication will be key, so that all parts of the councils are aware of the available support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse, how it can be accessed and where to flag concerns.  Internal newsletters have been used to communicate information about VAWG services, with details on how they are providing support to victims (e.g. Tower Hamlets, Kingston, and Lambeth).
7. **External communication/marketing:** The use of social media and other channels to share information about how to access help, and to reassure victims that help is available has been very important.  This includes posters and other awareness raising material in settings where victims may still be going, such as pharmacies and supermarkets or food bank boxes. Lambeth have created a [specific web page](https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/noise-nuisance-pollution-and-anti-social-behaviour/abuse-and-violence/violence-against-women-and) with information relating to coronavirus and VAWG. The Home Office have recently launched a national campaign with the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone – [LINK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-support-for-domestic-abuse-victims)
8. **Webinars and e-training:** there are a range of online learning opportunities for professionals offering opportunities for fast access to coronavirus-specific training (e.g. Tower Hamlets, Solace Women’s Aid [free online webinars](https://www.solacewomensaid.org/free-webinar-series-supporting-survivors-during-covid-19)).
9. The LGA has also produced some guidance for Councils across England and Wales on tackling domestic abuse during Covid-19, including examples of good practice : <https://www.local.gov.uk/tackling-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19-pandemic>

**Useful resources and links**

1. There are a range of resources available about where to get help with advice about supporting victims of domestic abuse in the current crisis. This includes safety advice and signposting to support services, as well as guidance for agencies and advice for family, friends and neighbours. Some examples are listed below

**Helplines and support services**

1. The UK Gov website provides the information about main national support helplines, as well as signs of domestic abuse:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

1. The National Domestic Abuse helpline is run by Refuge and open 24/7 on 0800 2000 247. They also have an online form to request a call back at a safe time. <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>
2. Members of the LGBT+ community can contact Galop who run a specialist helpline on **0800 999 5428** open Monday-Friday 10am to 12.30pm & 1.30pm to 4pm or email [help@galop.org.uk](mailto:help@galop.org.uk)
3. The above services support men and there is a specific Men’s Advice line **0808 801 0327** open Monday-Friday (9am-8pm Monday & Wednesday; 9am-5pm Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) or email info@mensadviceline.org.uk
4. Women’s Aid have an online support service https://chat.womensaid.org.uk/ Monday to Friday 10am-12pm. They also have provided survivors a COVID-19 safety guide you can find here.
5. Hestia provides a free-to-download mobile app, Bright Sky, which hides as a weather app but provides support and information to anyone who may be in an abusive relationship or those concerned about someone they know.

**Safety advice**

1. Specialist domestic abuse organisations have put together guides for with safety advice which can be helpful for supporting victims of domestic abuse to stay safe:

* Women’s Aid:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-safety-advice-for-survivors/>

* Solace Women’s Aid:

<https://www.solacewomensaid.org/get-help/staying-safe>

* Safe Lives:

<https://safelives.org.uk/staying-safe-during-covid-19-guidance>

**Guidance and resources for professionals**

1. Some specialist organisations have also produced Covid-19 specific guidance to help assist practitioners and organisations in identifying and responding to DVA:
   * Standing Together Guidance has produced a range of guidance for agencies, including for MARAC, Health and Housing Providers

<http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/news/read-our-latest-covid-19-guidance-and-procedures>

* + Surviving Economic Abuse have produced helpful resources for identifying and responding to economic abuse during Covid 19

<https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/resources/>

* + MHCLG have published guidance on isolation measures and domestic abuse safe accommodation services (e.g. refuge)

[MHCLG Covid - 19 - guidance for domestic abuse safe accommodation](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-domestic-abuse-safe-accommodation-provision)

* + FLIC has produced guidance for homelessness settings in partnership with St Mungo's, Standing Together, and Homeless Link with useful practitioner prompts:

<https://www.shp.org.uk/news/a-guide-to-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-during-covid-19-outbreak>