



Guidance for housing providers during COVID-19

The Government's stay at home advice in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic can create new challenges for people experiencing domestic abuse. Victim/survivors may be at home with their perpetrator and unable to escape from the abuse. Self-isolating while living with an abuser may also increase the risk of harm. Reports of domestic abuse as much as tripled in China during periods of isolation.

Housing providers are uniquely placed to access people in their homes. Your response to domestic abuse is therefore even more important during these times. We have produced this guidance for housing providers on how you can offer safe responses to your tenants/service users where it's known they are living with domestic abuse or where new concerns arise.

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Terminology used in this guidance

Those perpetrating domestic abuse are referred to as the **perpetrator** and those who have experienced abuse are referred to throughout as **victim/survivors**.

The term **survivor** is included within this in recognition that the person is adopting an active, resourceful and resilient response to the abusive behaviours of the perpetrator.



1. Spotting the signs

The cross-government definition of domestic abuse is:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, 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.



The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:

- psychological (including coercive and controlling behaviour)
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- emotional

This can also include economic abuse, which is when an abuser restricts how their partner or family member acquires, uses and maintains money and economic resources, such as accommodation, food, clothing and transportation. During periods of isolation, this may include controlling how and when money is spent on food and other essential items, dictating what the victim/survivor can buy, controlling the use of their mobile phone, etc.

The [Safe at Home: the case for a response to domestic abuse by a housing provider report](#) was created by Gentoo in collaboration with SafeLives. It includes a brief summary of key findings of the key signs of domestic abuse that housing providers should look out for, which include:

- Existing or increase in rent arrears. Victim/survivors are seven times more likely to be in rent arrears of over £1000 than people not experiencing domestic abuse;
- Damage to the property;
- Requests for lock changes or enhanced security or replacement keys;
- Repair call outs, particularly regarding damage to the property (door, window and kitchen damage; holes in walls);
- Noise nuisance complaints;
- Police call outs;
- Neighbours reporting concerns;
- Substance misuse;
- Sense that something isn't quite right.

Surviving Economic Abuse have published guidance for [spotting the signs of economic abuse during the COVID-19 outbreak](#).

Domestic abuse is commonly labelled by housing providers as antisocial behaviour (ASB), which can include noise complaints, reports from the police and social services and requests for repair work.

Responding to domestic abuse requires a different approach than the usual ASB route. Where ASB issues are presented, it's important to first rule out if domestic abuse is a factor as the safety needs of the victim/survivor can be missed otherwise.

For example, issues relating to ASB such as rent arrears, property damage and noise complaints are all reasons why a housing provider may seek to evict tenants. However, all these issues can be a manifestation or result of domestic abuse.



Identifying domestic abuse in the first instance may provide opportunities to help the victim/survivor and prevent them from becoming evicted and made homeless due to the actions of the perpetrator.



2. Availability of specialist domestic abuse support

Many specialist domestic abuse services are continuing to deliver services during the lockdown: some with adapted measures to continue offering face to face support and others offering online and telephone support only. This will vary from service to service.

It is likely that victim/survivors of domestic abuse may assume that these services have closed so it is crucial that you:

- a) Familiarise yourself with the national domestic abuse services available;
- b) Check what specialist services are being delivered in your local areas;
- c) Let victim/survivors know, in a safe way, what specialist domestic abuse support is available.

National Domestic Abuse Services

The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) offers a free 24-hour helpline – **0808 2000 247** – that can provide victim/survivors with emotional support and advice on their options. It is also the gateway to the national network of refuges available in England and can signpost you to your local domestic abuse services. They can also offer advice to professionals who are supporting victim/survivors.

The helpline is likely to be busier than usual as some areas in England have already seen an increase in domestic abuse cases. If someone is struggling to get through or just wants an alternative to calling, then they can visit the [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) website and fill in an online form which will give them the option of requesting a safe time to be called back. This online method of accessing support is especially important now when telephoning for help may be more difficult.

Victim/Survivors can also receive automated guidance via the [Refuge instant messaging service](#) on how to secure their devices.



Victim/Survivors may experience additional barriers to seeking help as a result of their identity and protected characteristics. There are national services that respond directly to these issues. There is a list of other national specialist domestic abuse services at the bottom of this document.

These services may offer:

- Leaflets available in other languages;
- Information about additional barriers particular in relation to specific protected characteristics, such as abuse toward the elderly where the perpetrator is also their carer, and abuse directed towards someone because of their sexual identity;
- Details about any local specialist service provision available where one-to-one and/or phone support can be provided.

Women's Aid

Where telephone support is not safe, Women's Aid have online services to support victim/survivors. These include:

- [Instant messaging service](#) (Mon–Fri, 10am–12pm);
- [Email support](#) (response within 5 days);
- [Survivor's handbook](#) (to get help on housing, safety planning, dealing with police and more)
- [Online survivor's forum](#);
- Access to local services.

Local Specialist Domestic Abuse Services

We recommend that you contact your local domestic abuse service to find out how they are operating before contacting tenants/services users. Please note that some areas may not have a local service.

The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline \(0808 2000 247\)](#) can help signpost you to your local service if you don't know who this is.

We also recommend that staff who are likely to come into contact with victim/survivors download [Hestia's Bright Sky App](#), which is free to download on mobile phones. It offers a UK-wide directory of specialist domestic abuse support services with contact details and links to further resources and information on topics on domestic abuse.

Bright Sky was designed to look like a weather app so that it would not look suspicious if a perpetrator found it on a victim/survivor's phone. However, in the current state of lockdown it



may not be safe for the victim/survivor to download the app, particularly when in close proximity to their perpetrator or if the perpetrator checks their phone as part of the abuse.

The Hestia Bright Sky App is available in 4 languages: English, Urdu, Punjabi and Polish.

Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs)

MARACs are victim focussed information sharing and risk management meetings attended by key agencies to safety plan for people experiencing domestic abuse who are at **high risk of harm**.

During lockdown your local MARAC may move from face-to-face meetings to alternative arrangements to ensure safety is maintained and risk is managed.

To find out more contact your local MARAC Coordinator; if this isn't known, you should be able to find out who this is by contacting a VAWG Lead in your local authority.

The role of a specialist domestic abuse worker (often referred to as an IDVA – Independent Domestic Violence Advocate) in the MARAC process is to coordinate the multi-agency response to the victim/survivor of domestic abuse and so it is essential that links are made with your local domestic abuse/IDVA service and that you share information with them and you are informed of updates and risk management plans.

Standing Together has produced a [MARAC plan in response to COVID-19](#) which outlines the measures that can be taken in order to continue holding MARACs during this period.



3. Raising awareness with all tenants/service users

DAHA has produced a leaflet with a range of support services that are continuing to deliver services during COVID-19 and includes the number for the [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#), as well as other key national services such as services offering helplines for general housing needs advice, financial advice, food support and mental health support.

This leaflet has been designed to distribute to all your tenants and the [National Domestic Abuse Helpline \(0808 2000 247\)](#) is included amongst a range of generic, national services so that it is less likely to raise suspicions with the perpetrator.

It should be noted that a perpetrator who is controlling the post will withhold this leaflet and prevent the victim/survivor from seeing it when they see that it includes domestic abuse support helplines.

The support services to distribute to tenants is available to download on our [website](#).



4. Offering a helpful response to victim/survivors of domestic abuse

As a housing provider, there will be tenants who you know are living with domestic abuse and there will be new cases you become aware of as this situation progresses. We recommend that before contacting any tenants, you create a plan for how this can be done as safely as possible so that your intervention doesn't unintentionally increase a perpetrators' use of abuse to punish or further isolate a victim/survivor.

Creating a plan of action

We have recently discovered that some housing providers are adopting a plan to contact their tenants who they know are living with domestic abuse – where a significant concern has been flagged in the last three to six months.

This could be based on your organisation's direct contact with a victim/survivor and observing an escalation of abuse over time or as a result of information shared by another agency (including specialist domestic abuse services, the police, children's services, or their case being heard at a recent MARAC).

To do this with safety at the forefront of your actions, we recommend taking the following steps:

a. Identify a lead to pull together a list of all the tenants who you have concerns about so you can create a plan of action.

This should include capacity to capture any new information about tenants where domestic abuse was not previously known to your organisation but comes to light during the pandemic (for example, neighbours call to complain, multiple repair request call outs start to occur, or rent arrears are escalating).

Information captured should include details about what is known regarding the context, circumstances and views and wishes of the victim/survivor. For example:

- Is the abuse historic and/or ongoing?
- Who is/are the perpetrator(s)?
- Are there any children in the household?

- A summary of contact your organisation has previously had with anyone in the household (and can this be used as a safe means for checking in with them?)

Your plan of action should take into account how you have become aware that domestic abuse is occurring (i.e. first hand or via a third party source) and what your relationship with the tenant is like (i.e. you have had previous contact with them about domestic abuse? Or have you never had a conversation with them about it?) as this will affect how you approach making contact.

b. Decide who is going to contact each tenant on the list and how this contact can be made safely.

Those making contact should ideally have received recent training on domestic abuse awareness and must feel confident to carry out these tasks. Points to consider when allocating a person to check in:

- Does the tenant have a trusted professional within the organisation that they would feel safe and more comfortable talking to?
- Is it possible to offer a person of the same gender? Consultations with women survivors have identified that they feel safer sharing their story with someone of the same gender.
- Is there another agency involved that is best placed to make contact rather than someone from within the organisation?
- Acknowledge that some perpetrators will be listening in on calls and may instruct victim/survivors to put calls on speaker phone. Encourage staff to trust their gut instincts and report if they are concerned this has happened.

c. Agree a plan for how you can monitor each situation, including cases where you have not been able to speak to the victim/survivor directly because it hasn't been safe to do so.

During this period, it may be helpful to meet regularly/weekly with key leads in the organisation to review how attempts to contact victim/survivors are going, what information is being gathered about each case and how best to respond to rising needs.

Where it isn't safe to talk about domestic abuse because the perpetrator is constantly monitoring or nearby, can a plan be put in place to check in daily, making a phone call at the same time each day and also arranging a weekly face-to-face check in for non-descript purpose, such as to deliver a food parcel? Despite not being able to talk about the abuse, this intervention may disrupt the perpetrator's abusive behaviours because they know their household is being monitored.

It is vital that you follow through with any offers to call back so as not to let the victim/survivor down. This would not only create distrust but would be a missed opportunity where the victim/survivor had created safe conditions for them to talk to you.

d. Support staff with making contact

- Send a clear plan of action that includes how to flag safeguarding concerns and how this information will be shared with any other agencies if needed. Be mindful that the intervention of another service could unintentionally increase risk if the perpetrator suspects that the victim/survivor has reported them for domestic abuse.
- Share practical guidance in this resource with staff so that they familiarise with the national and local domestic abuse services available and have downloaded and familiarised with Hestia's Bright Sky app.
- Refer to the suggested script below for how these calls can be made.

Checking in with tenants you are concerned about or suspect are living with domestic abuse

So that this is carried out in a safe way, we have prepared the following tips and a suggested script in order to minimise the risk that the perpetrator becomes aware of your intentions, which is likely to make the situation much worse for victim/survivors and any children in the household.

Tips for making safe contact by telephone

Where possible, contact the tenant's mobile number and avoid landlines.

Ask to speak to the person you're concerned about and if questioned why, say where you're calling from and explain that you are carrying out a courtesy call and asking to speak with the first named person on your records for that household.

If they're not available, ask if there's better time to call back. If they say no, you could try to ask some basic questions to avoid raising suspicion. This might help you gather information about the victim/survivor. For example:

- Are you self-isolating? Is anyone in your household considered to be in the high-risk/vulnerable category?
- Of those in your household, has anyone shown any symptoms?
- Is there any COVID-19 related support that you need that we can look into for you?



If you do get to speak to the person you're concerned about, it is important to check if it is safe to talk openly about your concerns.

It will not be safe for victim/survivors when they are in proximity of their perpetrator as this can increase their risk of harm if the perpetrator becomes aware or suspicious.

You should start the conversation by using a generic reason for making the call, which reduces the likelihood of raising suspicions:

'Social distancing is likely to negatively affect some people which is why we're contacting all of our tenants to check in on them and to make sure they are safe and have what they need'

Before expressing any concerns about domestic abuse, you should ask whether anyone else is in the home/room with them and if it's safe for them to talk. For anyone experiencing domestic abuse, this gives them control over the conversation and an opportunity to say no and to keep safe.

It is important that callers do not press victim/survivors for information as some perpetrators will monitor phone calls as part of their abuse (i.e. by listening in or making sure all calls are on speaker phone), which will prevent the victim/survivor from being able to speak freely. In this instance, consider whether it is possible to implement a monitoring call every day as recommended in the 'Creating a plan of action' section above.

Offering a helpful response if it's NOT safe to talk

If the person says no to asking if it is safe to talk, it is recommended that you offer information about your opening hours so that they can call you back if they get a chance.

You could suggest that they call back when they are on their own, when alone at home or when they are out for a walk or buying food. If you can, find out when the perpetrator is likely to be out.

If you have identified that this person is someone you are concerned about and will want to make regular check in calls with, tell them what day and time you will call them back. And make sure that you follow through with this.

Offering a helpful response once you have established it is safe to talk

At the outset, establish a code word or sentence, which the victim/survivor can say to indicate that it's no longer safe to talk and they can then end the call. You could say:

'If your situation changes and you're no longer safe to talk, please say "thanks but I'm not interested" and I'll know you have to go. I will then try to call you back at another time.'

It's recommended that you gather the following information:

- Ask how you can safely check in with them next. Are there times when the perpetrator is out of the house i.e. when they are out doing the food shopping. Is it safe to send text messages?
- Find out what the person is frightened of and what they are worried might happen.
- Ask if the victim/survivor has any concerns about their children (if applicable) or other people living in the household.
- Check if they are safe to remain at home and if they feel safe to call 999 in an emergency.
- Find out what they want to happen and want to do next.
- Let them know what essential shops will remain open as they may become safe places to flee to during an emergency. This includes food retailers, pharmacies, hardware stores, corner shops, petrol stations, shops in hospitals, post offices, banks, newsagents, launderettes and pet shops.
- Check if it's safe to offer information about specialist domestic abuse services. Check if it's safe for them to store the [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#), which they can do under a different name, like a hair salon or GP practice.

Offering advocacy support

The victim/survivor may not be aware of what options are available and it may not be possible for them to investigate their options so they may need your help with this. They may also be limited in their ability to access other services for help while in isolation.

In this instance, you could offer to:

- Find out what services their local authority department are operating and pass on their contact details, including emergency duty lines and an email address.
- If someone is about to be made homeless and in need of emergency accommodation, you could contact the local authority on the victim/survivor's behalf by either making a Duty to Refer referral (local authority website should hold this information) or by simply contacting prior to the victim/survivor attending, supporting their application in order to reduce the likelihood that they are turned away.
- Provide them with information about their local domestic abuse service and how and when their services are operating.
- Check if they need assistance with repairs and lock changes. Hardware stores are considered an essential shop. If it's not possible to carry out work through an in-house team, is it possible to offer to reimburse victim/survivors if they need to buy security devices.

Please note that adding additional security measures is not recommended where the alleged perpetrator is living in the home.

- If rent arrears or ASB are a factor, speak to leads from these teams so that systems are flagged with domestic abuse and punitive actions aren't taken against victim/survivors.
- Check if a payment break can be provided.
- If you need to share information with other services such as Children's Services, it is vital that you tell the victim/survivor who you will be sharing information with so they are aware that another service may be contacting them.
- If the victim/survivor is worried that this will negatively impact on their safety should the alleged perpetrator find out, it is crucial that this information is included in the referral so that steps can be taken by relevant agencies to avoid the perpetrator becoming aware that the victim/survivor has disclosed domestic abuse.

Safeguarding Children and Young People

Victim/survivors and their families interconnect. Where there are children and/or young people in the home it is essential that internal and local safeguarding protocols are followed as all children living with domestic abuse are impacted by it; evidence tells us that many are directly harmed.

We should encourage neighbours, families and friends in our communities to consider protecting and safeguarding children when we ask them to be aware of domestic abuse.

Safeguarding is everyone's business.

Thinking about how to safeguard the non-abusing adult parent during periods of isolation is also crucial and part of safeguarding any children involved. Especially during periods of isolation and quarantine, consideration needs to be given that risks to any victim/survivor, including children, do not increase after an agency's intervention. This may require careful planning and discussion prior to contacting a family.



5. For residents who are worried about a neighbour, friend or relatives

Housing providers may receive increased number of calls relating to concerns about neighbours and asking for advice on what to do.

Neighbourhood Watch have produced [this guide](#) for community members on how they can help if they have concerns about someone living with domestic abuse.



The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline \(0808 2000 247\)](#) can also offer advice and emotional support and guidance to anyone, including neighbours, friends or relatives.



6. Taking action against perpetrators

When taking actions against perpetrators, always speak to the victim/survivor before doing so and please refer to the [Whole Housing Approach Perpetrator Management Toolkit](#) for options available.

During this time, the police response may be limited, however 999 emergency calls will still be prioritised. In 2019 the Independent Office for Police Conduct launched [Silent Solution](#) in order for individuals who need urgent police help through 999 but cannot speak.



7. Supporting staff and colleagues

Domestic abuse may also be experienced by staff and colleagues. Managers should take steps to ensure that their team members are supported whilst in self-isolation. The support services and strategies mentioned in this document are applicable to everyone.

If you have enhanced access, please refer to DAHA's [online toolkit](#), which includes resources on how employers can support staff who are living with domestic abuse, including having domestic abuse policies and procedure for staff. These resources are not directly linked to COVID-19 however they are a good starting point for housing providers. If your organisation has signed up to the [Make a Stand](#) pledge, you will already have staff policies and procedures in place which you can use to inform your response during this time.

If you do not have enhanced access to DAHA's online toolkit, we have put together a suite of free and helpful resources such as examples domestic abuse policies from housing organisations to give you an idea of what you can do. These are available in the Resources section below.

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8. Other national specialist domestic abuse services you may want to let victim/survivors know about

GALOP

National LGBT+ domestic abuse helpline offering emotional and practical support for LGBT+ people experiencing domestic abuse.
0800 999 5428 (National)
020 7704 2040 (London)

Karma Nirvana

Advice and support for victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage.
0800 5999 247

Southall Black Sisters

Advice and support for black & minority ethnic women experiencing all forms of gender-related violence.
0208 571 0800 (Helpline)
0208 571 9595 (Enquiries)

Forced Marriage Unit

Government office providing information and advice for British nationals forced into marriage.
020 7008 0151
020 7008 1500 (out of hours number)

Respond

Support for people with learning disabilities who have experienced trauma and/or abuse.
0808 808 0700

Deafhope

Domestic and sexual abuse support for the deaf community.
020 3947 2600 (Phone)
079 7035 0366 (Text)

Men's Advice Line

Support for male victim/survivors.
0808 801 0327

Respect Phonenumber

Support for male and female perpetrators to stop using abusive/violent behavior, and advice for staff working with perpetrators.
0808 802 4040

Rights of Women

A range of advice lines available for law advice including domestic abuse, child contact, sexual violence and the criminal justice process and immigration and asylum advice lines. Follow these links for more information on the support that Rights of Women can offer: [Family law](#); [Criminal law](#); [Immigration law](#); [Sexual harassment at work](#).

Childline

Free 24-hour helpline for children in distress or danger.
0800 1111



9. Resources

Please visit [our website](#) for additional resources and guidance issued by other organisations and Government.

Thanks to the National Housing Federation, Chartered Institute of Housing and SafeLives for supporting us in this work and agreeing to circulate this guidance.