

After abuse: We owe it to survivors to enhance mental health support

Today marks the start of 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence, following this year's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

The Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey Lisa Townsend, Women's Aid and the Surrey Domestic Abuse Partnership are calling for the impact of domestic abuse on the mental health of women and children to receive the attention it deserves.

Supporting the Women's Aid 'Deserve to be Heard' campaign, we're asking the Government to recognise domestic abuse as a fundamental driver of women's mental health issues, and to fund and work with specialist domestic abuse services, so that they are resourced to provide a range of therapeutic and holistic mental health support.

And we all have an active role to play in breaking down the stigma attached to abuse and mental health. So that more women and children experiencing the effects of trauma feel confident to seek, and can access, help that is tailored to them.

We know that the impact of abuse including domestic violence is severe and can be long-lasting. Research from Women's Aid shows that almost half of women in refuges experience depression and suicidal thoughts. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Many women and children do not speak out due to the fear and stigma around disclosing ill mental health – and the majority of women and children need our support closer to home; to reduce the impact of anxiety, depression and PTSD, rebuild their self-worth, and learn to trust again.

Providing this support requires organisations including the police, healthcare professionals, charities and local authorities to work together. Community services such as helplines and specialist outreach workers account for around 70% of the assistance provided to survivors and play, alongside refuges, a fundamental part in halting the cycle of abuse. It is important to recognise that many individuals will not feel comfortable speaking to the police – they just want the abuse to stop.

The amazing people we work with in refuges and community-based services tell us they are worried about their own funding to support the long-term needs of survivors. We know from survivors that there can be long waiting lists for support such as counselling, and that help online and by phone remains invaluable.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, abusers used lockdown to intensify and escalate abuse. Survivors used accessible services provided by specialist domestic abuse services such as refuges, helplines, web chat and online resources to access help. After lockdown, we're seeing an increased demand for support, which will need to be long-term to help survivors recover. In Surrey, calls to the Your Sanctuary Domestic Abuse helpline almost doubled in the weeks following the first lockdown in 2020, while the National Domestic Abuse Helpline recorded a 61% increase in contacts between March 2020 and March 2021.

A Home Office report into domestic homicides and victim suicides during the first year of the pandemic showed there were 163 murders by a current or former partner, family or household member and as many as 38 suspected suicides related to domestic abuse in England and Wales. For the first time, this report has shone a light on the number of suicides nationally, highlighting the hidden tragedy of victims taking their own lives.

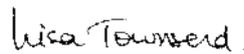
There have been welcome steps forward by the Government such as the Domestic Abuse Act and a new Strategy to Reduce Violence against Women and Girls published in 2021. The former includes an obligation on local authorities to ensure sustainable funding for accommodation-based support for women and children such as refuges, however Women's Aid still identifies a significant shortfall, estimating that at least £409 million is needed to run all specialist domestic abuse services across England, including ring-fenced funding for specialist 'by and for' services.

We owe it to survivors of abuse in every situation to go further than this. The Government has an opportunity in the upcoming Victim's Bill to make progress, by increasing and ringfencing the funding

that specialist community-based services receive. It would also send a strong signal in the upcoming Women's Health Strategy to explicitly recognise domestic abuse as a driver of women's mental health issues.

Anyone concerned about themselves or someone they know can access confidential advice and support from Surrey' independent specialist domestic abuse services by contacting the Your Sanctuary helpline 01483 776822 9am-9pm every day, or by visiting the [Healthy Surrey](#) website.

Support the Women's Aid #DeserveToBeHeard campaign at www.womensaid.org.uk/deservetobeheard



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