

Draft minute of the meeting of the
Cross Party Group on Men's Violence Against Women and Children
22 February 2021, 12.00-13.30, via Zoom

1. Present/Apologies

Present

CPG Members

- Rona Mackay MSP (RMa)
- Claudia Beamish MSP (CBe)
- John Finnie MSP (JF)
- Rhoda Grant MSP (RG)
- Ann Fehilly – ASSIST (AF)
- Ann Hayne - NHS Lanarkshire - EVA Services (AH)
- Ashley Scott – Thriving Survivors (AS)
- Fiona McMullen – ASSIST (FMcM)
- Gillian Baker – Individual (GB)
- Jan Macleod – Women's Support Project (JMa)
- Kallia Manoussaki – Individual (KM)
- Karen Hendry – Individual (KH)
- Kate Fry – Office of Rhoda Grant MSP (KF)
- Kelly Johnson – Individual (KJ)
- Kirsty Pate – City of Edinburgh Council, Community Justice (KP)
- Lily Greenan – Individual (LG)
- Linda Rodgers – Edinburgh Women's Aid (LR)
- Linda Thompson – Women's Support Project (LT)
- Louise Johnson – Scottish Women's Aid (LJ)
- Mariam Ahmed - Amina The Muslim Women's Resource Centre (MA)
- Marsha Scott – Scottish Women's Aid (MS)
- Melanie McCarry – Individual (MMcC)
- Nancy Lombard – Individual (NL)
- Nicola Gilbert – Scottish Women's Aid (NG)
- Pam Hunter – SAY Women (PH)
- Richard Whitecross – Individual (RW)
- Sarah McMillan – Scottish Association of Social Workers (SMcM)
- Sarah Weldon – Clinical Psychology Division of the Forensic Mental Health and Learning Disability Service of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS (SW)

Non-Member Visitors

- Eric McQueen, SCTS (EMcQ)
- Kate Wallace – Victim Support Scotland (KW)
- Laura Pasternak – Equality and Human Rights Commission (LP)

Apologies

- Carolyn Fox McKay, Girl Guiding Scotland
- Christine Gray, Individual
- David Ferguson, Barnodo's Scotland
- Davy Thompson, White Ribbon Scotland
- Dilraj S. Watson, Amina The Muslim Women's Resource Centre
- George Eckton, Individual
- Johann Lamont, MSP
- Katy Proctor, Individual
- Nicoletta Primo, Girl Guiding Scotland
- Nikki Dillon, Individual
- Rachel Adamson, Zero Tolerance

2. COVID and VAWG in the Justice System

A. An Assessment of the Impact of SCTS Responses to COVID on Women and Girls, Eric McQueen, Chief Executive SCTS

RMA welcomed EMcQ, who opened his presentation by stressing that the SCTS were aware COVID had had an impact on those involved in domestic abuse cases. He went on to update those attending about the impact of COVID on the SCTS responses to COVID. Impacts included:

- The closure of the courts for three months, followed by a phased re-opening of the courts, which meant there was a significant backlog of cases to address.
- A change in work location, with 40% of staff had been working from home.

In addressing the backlog, the SCTS had introduced a variety of measures to ensure the safety of all involved, including:

- The implementation of robust physical distancing measures.
- Additional measures taken to protect vulnerable witnesses.
- Close working with Victim Support Scotland.

There had been a number of developments, affecting the ability to address the backlog of cases. These included:

- The announcement of a £50m justice fund, which is not just available to court. This fund was seen as a first step, which would need to be increased over a 3 to 4 year period, to address backlogs in the High Court, Sheriff/Jury and Summary Business cases.

While a backlog will exist for some time, there have been a number of unexpected outcomes from changes brought about by responses to COVID, among them:

- The use of large-scale venues, such as cinemas, as jury centres.
- The benefits of technical and digital solutions. While these are not the only solution to issues arising out of COVID, they form part of the response.

EMcQ's presentation was followed by questions or comments from those attending:

Had COVID affected the make-up of juries? (NL)

- The impact on this area had not seemed to be significant, with one exception, where excusals for key workers and those with childcare issues had been higher.
- However, EMcQ assured those attending that the statistics would be reviewed, and softer methods of evaluation would also be carried out with jurors, victims and others.

MS re-iterated the focus of the Cross-Party Group and asked if processes had been reviewed to allow the SCTS to assess the impact on women and girls as victims, but also on their own staff, making sure actions do not disproportionately burden those already disproportionately burdened through inequalities.

- EMcQ said that the answers are not simple, but stated that domestic abuse and those cases involving children had been given priority.

B. From the Coalface Ann Fehilly & Fiona McMullen, ASSIST; Kate Wallace, Victim Support Scotland

Presentation by Kate Wallace of Victim Support

KW outlined the work being carried out by Victim Support Scotland, which takes place partly in the courts and partly in communities.

KW went on to discuss various impacts of COVID on those who use the services of Victim Support Scotland. Among the impacts were:

- Severe impacts on mental health.
- Additional risks to victims, whose abusers could be much more certain of their location throughout lockdown.
- The danger of technology, where cyber bullying was an issue.
- A reduction in custodial approaches to perpetrators, where they were kept out of prison, to reduce the risk of their catching COVID.

Presentation by Ann Fehilly and Fiona McMullen of ASSIST

Ann Fehilly and Fiona McMullen of ASSIST discussed the work carried out with their 1300 clients and outlined representative examples, which illustrated wider situations and issues.

It was underlined that there appeared to be a 'postcode lottery' as to where court advocacy was available.

C. COVID and Commercial Sexual Exploitation– Linda Thompson, Women's Support Project

LT discussed the effect of COVID on Sexual Exploitation, confirming that COVID was not viewed by the women involved as their highest priority. Instead a lack of money remained the highest priority, while COVID exacerbated existing problems.

LT confirmed that many parts of the sex industry had continued through the pandemic, including direct contact sexual activity.

The presentations by Victim Support Scotland and ASSIST were followed by some questions:

If there was one policy priority the CPG could campaign for, to help victims of sexual exploitation, what would LT suggest? (MS to LT)

- LT answered that programmes of support for women who wanted to exit situations of sexual exploitation, along with a consistent approach across all forms of violence against women would help.

What would help the people ASSIST support? (RMa to KW):

- It was suggested that it had to be clear that the victims were the priority and that, while delays in cases were a concern, those delays should not be addressed at any cost - The impact on the victim of any actions by statutory organisations, and in any communications, had to be considered.

3. Cross-Party Group business

- A. Approval of previous minutes: minutes of CPG November 30th 2020 were approved as an accurate record (proposed by MS, seconded by RMa).

No action points arose out of the minutes for the CPG November 30th 2020.

- B. Members' Updates:

The focus of the meeting had been the extensive presentations. There were, therefore, no members' further updates on this occasion.

- C. AOCB:

- a. MS thanked RMa, CBe and JF for all their work, help and support throughout this session of the Cross-party Group, which was deeply appreciated.
- b. MS confirmed members of the group would be contacted following the election, as part of the process of re-registering the Cross-party Group.
- c. Action Points:
 - a) It was agreed to send a letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, regarding importance of enabling the scaling up of virtual trials.
 - b) LT's point re. a lack of programmes for exit was seen as something to be discussed and work progressed.
 - c) MS asked those attending to email if anything else came to mind.

4. Date and time of the next meetings

To be confirmed.