



F/T: 0300 244 4000  
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Donald Cameron MSP,  
Convenor for COVID-19 Committee

17 September 2020

Dear Donald,

At the Committee's evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, Europe and External Affairs on 2 September, Shona Robison MSP raised with Mr Russell a number of points on support for those experiencing domestic abuse in the context of the response to the Covid 19 pandemic. I am pleased to be able to provide the Committee with more information on this.

It is absolutely right to point out the serious risks posed to those who are experiencing domestic abuse during these difficult times – we are working closely with partners to ensure that the response to domestic abuse is effective and that those at risk are being supported, and all our work in this area is underpinned by our Equally Safe strategy to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Ms Robison asked for an update on the work the Scottish Government is taking forward in this area. Our COVID response aims to ensure that women and children have their health, wellbeing and safety needs met during the current emergency and we are taking a number of steps in this area

To support the specific requirements under the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Act 2020, we have published Guidance on Domestic Abuse to support Scottish Government Coronavirus advice and regulations to ensure that anyone who is experiencing domestic abuse, or any form of harm, is in no doubt that they may leave home to seek help from support services, family or friends or to report it to the Police or take measures to stay safe. This was updated in July. In terms of the broader service response to domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women and girls, in May we published with COSLA guidance for local authorities, on tackling violence against women and girls during Covid-19. This guidance is currently in the process of being refreshed.

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh [www.lobbying.scot](http://www.lobbying.scot)

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Our partners are taking strong action. Police Scotland are committed to tackling domestic abuse and will use the full extent of their powers to ensure that perpetrators face the full consequences of their behaviour, and front line services have moved rapidly to support victims and survivors in a different and uncertain environment. One of the challenges of Covid-19 has been the need for these support services to redesign at pace. To support this, we have invested over £1.5 million to Scottish Women's Aid, ASSIST and Rape Scotland to ensure they can continue to provide support at this time. Furthermore, we are continuing to engage with the sector to understand ongoing resourcing needs in the context of the increased reports to which you refer.

Ensuring that victims of domestic abuse receive access to justice is a priority, and we have been working closely with partners, including victims groups, the Scottish courts and prosecution services, and the legal profession to quickly find the best possible solution to deal with the backlog of criminal cases due to court business being paused for a number of months. I recognise that trial delays present particular issues in the context of domestic abuse cases. That was why when initially announcing the restrictions on court business in March, the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) outlined that priority would be given to custody cases - where people are held in police custody or on remand - and then for non-custody cases, as far as possible, on cases relating to domestic abuse, sexual offending and violence. These cases will continue to be prioritised as the courts reopen and resume more trials. In addition, SCTS and COPFS have been working together to identify the most appropriate types of cases for the initial recommencement of jury trials, recognising that the increased capacity provided by remote jury centres will allow greater flexibility as to the type of cases that can be brought forward, including those with a greater number of witnesses and those which may involve vulnerable witnesses.

Further to this, we have recently announced £5.5 million to establish the ground-breaking solution of remote jury centres to rapidly increase the number of Scottish High Court trials. You may also be aware that the Justice Board has established a Criminal Justice Board (CJB) to lead the justice system's 'Recover, Renew and Transform' (RRT) programme of work. The CJB includes SCTS and COPFS, Police Scotland, Scottish Legal Aid Board, Scottish Prison Service, Community Justice Scotland, and Scottish Government.

The RRT programme will contribute to recovering a viable justice system that can live with COVID-19 whilst delivering a more effective and efficient justice system – which is fundamental to protecting rights and freedoms and addressing inequality. Discussions will continue with victims support organisations around the workstreams given their essential role in relation to domestic abuse.

Going forward, I will be bringing forward legislation to Parliament to bolster our response to domestic abuse, which will provide the police and courts with powers to make emergency notices and orders to protect people at risk of domestic abuse. These will provide powers to remove a suspected perpetrator from a home they share with a person at risk and prohibit them from contacting or approaching them. These powers are intended to provide protection for people at risk of domestic abuse and make it easier to stay in their own home. These proposals have been warmly welcomed by Scottish Women's Aid and others as an important step in improving protections for women and children at risk of or experiencing domestic abuse.

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At Committee, the question was asked what more members could do to get the message out there. Raising awareness is critical, and at the outset of lockdown, we re-launched a Scottish Government campaign to highlight domestic abuse within the context of Covid-19. The campaign sought to provide reassurance so that anyone experiencing domestic abuse in the home understand that although they may feel isolated and vulnerable during these unprecedented times, they are not alone. It reinforces the message that services are available and that any person experiencing domestic abuse should not delay to report it. Although that campaign has now concluded, the material remains available for anyone to use through a stakeholder toolkit and I would encourage every member of the Scottish Parliament to consider how they can use this material to get the message out to their communities that for those experiencing domestic abuse, help is available and they do not have to wait.

**HUMZA YOUSAF**

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