

Written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee to inform their inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus).

Submitted by Frank Mullane MBE, CEO of AAFDA (Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse), Registered Charity 1125973.

1. AAFDA is a Centre of Excellence for reviews after domestic homicide. It provides specialist and expert advocacy and specialist peer support to families bereaved by domestic homicide and domestic abuse related suicides and unexplained deaths. Its CEO is widely published on this subject, is a 'reader' of Domestic Homicide Reviews (advises the Government's National Quality Assurance Panel) and sits on the Government's Victims' Panel.

Further details of our work can be found at www.aafda.org.uk.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 AAFDA offers its support to Government and highlights that the 'stay at home' guidance and proposed support for victims of domestic abuse and child abuse, may not recognise the likely increase in suicides¹ related to domestic abuse.
- 2.2 Government should ensure Police investigate suicides where there has been a domestic abuse history or where there is suspicion of domestic abuse, with the same rigour that they investigate homicides.
- 2.3 Government should expect Police to record suspected domestic abuse suicides so that the extent of the problem can be estimated well before the inquest.
- 2.4 Government should consider sending messages to the Police, NHS, other responders and the community to ensure they know the incidence of domestic abuse related suicide, what to look out for in potential victims, and who to signpost to.
- 2.5 AAFDA's learning from helping hundreds of families after domestic homicide and around 30 families bereaved by domestic abuse related suicide, may assist the Government in messaging and responding at this time.

3. Reason for submitting evidence

- 3.1 AAFDA is the only organisation currently providing specialist support to families bereaved by suicide and unexplained death where there

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/14/fiona-dwyer-2m-for-coronavirus-domestic-abuse-victims-its-pitiful>

was a history of domestic abuse. We have unique experience and learning which would benefit the Government response to help reduce domestic abuse / homicide / suicide. We have been helping the Home Office to develop domestic homicide review methodology since these reviews began in 2011.

- 3.2 We recommend that the Government informs its initiatives and responses with this knowledge and we offer our assistance.

4. Detail

- The prevalence of domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home during the crisis since the Government issued 'stay at home' guidance on 23 March.**

- 4.1 Likely increase in suicides because of domestic abuse

Given that domestic homicides have more than doubled since the 'stay at home' policy, according to Karen Ingala Smith, the founder of Counting Dead Women², we can reasonably speculate that suicides will also rise because of the same policy. An increase in domestic abuse related suicides has also been noted by the CEO of Solace Women's Aid, London's largest provider of domestic abuse services.³

- 4.2 Walby (2004)⁴ estimated that between four and ten women took their own lives each week in the UK because of domestic abuse.

- 4.3 Aitken and Munro (2019)⁵ found a connection between being trapped in domestic abuse and feeling suicidal. It might be arguable that the 'stay at home' policy will increase feelings of entrapment and being beyond rescue.

"The idea that those trapped within domestic abuse contexts feel defeated, beyond rescue and unable to escape was also reflected in the high numbers feeling despairing and hopeless - both overall and within the suicidal group in particular...."

- 4.4 Assuming domestic abuse related suicides also more than double, because of the 'stay at home' policy, as per the Counting Dead Women finding mentioned above, then at least,

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-covid-19-lockdown>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/14/fiona-dwyer-2m-for-coronavirus-domestic-abuse-victims-its-pitiful>

⁴ <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21681/1/The%20Cost%20of%20Domestic%20Violence.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.nspa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/New-Suicide-Report2c-Refuge-and-University-of-Warwick.pdf>

between eight and twenty women may lose their lives this way each week. The number gets higher when we add in, suicides of children and males because of domestic abuse (not as well researched).

- **Measures or proposals to help support victims of domestic abuse and child abuse at this time;**
- 4.5 In our experience working with close to 30 families bereaved by domestic abuse related suicide / unexplained death over the past year, most front-line responders and the community, are not well informed as to the incidence of suicides due to domestic abuse and have missed opportunities for intervention. We also find that many suicides following domestic abuse are not investigated with the same rigour as are suspected homicides.
- 4.6 We ask Government to ensure Police investigate suicides where there has been a domestic abuse history or where there is suspicion of domestic abuse, with the same rigour that they investigate homicides.
- 4.7 We ask Government to ensure Police record suspected domestic abuse suicides so we can understand the extent of the problem well before the inquest.
- 4.8 We ask Government to send a message to Police, the NHS, other responders and the community, to ensure everyone is aware of how often suicide occurs because of domestic abuse and what to look out for in potential victims. This should be part of the early intervention response of front-line agencies, which go on to signpost specialist domestic abuse organisations or other specialist support agencies as appropriate.
- **Measures or proposals to reduce or avert domestic abuse and child abuse at this time;**
- 4.9 Given that the Head of the National Police Chief's Council said on 11 April, that a reduction in crime has freed up police time⁶, Government should task the NPCC with ensuring that all police officers meeting domestic abuse victims and/or perpetrators, understand the incidence of domestic abuse related suicides and can signpost relevant support. This will likely better equip them to spot escalating cases and to intervene earlier, helping to reduce these fatalities.

⁶ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/police-issued-more-1000-fines-21851895>

- **The effectiveness of Government advice, co-ordination and support for responders and service providers.**
- 4.10 AAFDA has not seen any Government proposals in this crisis specific to reducing domestic abuse related suicides. Research currently under way, by Dr. Jane Monckton Smith at the University of Gloucestershire, is looking at all domestic abuse related deaths.⁷
- 4.11 The Government has recognised that suicide is an outcome of some domestic abuse. The statutory guidance for Domestic Homicide Reviews states that a review should be conducted after suicides where "*the circumstances give rise to concern, for example it emerges that there was coercive controlling behaviour in the relationship,*".⁸ AAFDA is supporting, without any funding, 28 families bereaved by domestic abuse related suicide or unexplained deaths. Because there was no specialist support for these families, to help them with the Domestic Homicide Review, Inquest and other inquiries, AAFDA began helping these families.
- 4.12 This work is an important and innovative approach to improving responses to victims of domestic abuse and averting fatalities. The expertise and knowledge that we have gained from these cases and our experience gathered since we started in 2008 will benefit the Government's response to domestic abuse victims and perpetrators in the crisis, and beyond.

⁷ <https://janems.blog/2020/02/15/hidden-homicide-update/>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/revised-statutory-guidance-for-the-conduct-of-domestic-homicide-reviews>