



# Responding to the challenges of COVID-19: Guidance for multi-agency forums (including Maracs)

Version date: 19 March 2020

This will be regularly reviewed and updated

## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is to help multi-agency forums flex and respond to the accelerating COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. The potential threat to the health and safety of frontline staff and service users poses a real and immediate challenge for safeguarding families at risk.

## Advice for employers

- Follow your organisation's Health and Safety and Business Contingency guidance.
- Conduct a risk assessment to determine the likelihood and consequences of employee exposure to the coronavirus (COVID-19). COVID-19 is classed as a biological agent under the [2002 Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations](#). This means that potential exposure through work activities must be carefully controlled.
- The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has [a section on its website dedicated to infections at work](#), containing useful guidance for employers. The sections on pandemic influenza and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) – a coronavirus which emerged in 2003 – outline appropriate risk assessment and control measures.
- The risk assessment should take account of the latest guidance from [Public Health England](#) and should be reviewed as advice changes.
- Information on when and how-to self-isolate can be found on the [NHS website](#).

## Governance

- Implement your governance structures. The governance group are responsible for supporting the forum during this period. Any decisions which are made should be via this body, not by the operational forum.
- Members of the governance group should take steps to communicate the following to the agencies involved in the forums:
  - Who sits on the governance group and how they can be contacted
  - Reiterate that decision-making rests with the governance group
  - Share timelines for communicating decisions more widely
  - Update on changes to the operating protocol
- We recommend the governance group hold an emergency planning conference call to sign off decisions related to the forum.

- The governance group should consider inviting key staff who would not normally attend. For example, the chair of the operational forum, the coordinator, the administrator – colleagues who can flag up operational challenges as the group discusses options.
- Information should be circulated to representatives of the operational forum, via the administrator. A written statement can provide clarity, but there should be instructions on where and how recipients can access any updates over the following weeks and months.
- Each representative should pass this information onto colleagues who need to know any changes in process or procedure.
- The information provided by the governance group should include how the forum is going to function.

## Virtual forums

- In these unprecedented times, implementing virtual meetings is a sensible way forward.
- Using technology that allows for face to face communication is preferable for clarity and accuracy. For example, Skype, Zoom or similar platforms.
- SafeLives cannot attest to the security of platforms. The governance group will need to determine which they feel is appropriate and may be led by the protocols already in use by their local Police and Social Care teams.
- We recommend that the governance group
  - Decide upon the most appropriate form of virtual meeting, with consideration given to what works for all partner agencies.
  - Access information on whether representatives are currently working in their respective offices or at home and address any technical limitations arising.
  - Test all relevant equipment to ensure no technical difficulties will arise at the actual meeting and allocate a person responsible for managing the technical set up.

## Staffing challenges

- We recommend that the governance group confirm that each representative at the forum has appointed named deputy/deputies and the coordinator/administrator has their contact details.
- Where this is not already in place, appointments should be made. In respect of Marac, we have [online learning packages](#) and [toolkits](#) to support training.
- Appoint a deputy for key members of the forum e.g. chair, coordinator, administrator. For Marac, we have [online learning packages](#) to support training.
- In the event that no representative can attend the meetings, a nominated person from the agency needs to submit information and any potential actions they could take.
- Maracs should continue with the SafeLives recommendation of all nine core agencies attending. In these extreme circumstances, and in order to run a virtual meeting effectively, the decision may be taken to ask for information from agencies outside of the nine, in lieu of attendance. The governance group should decide who will collate this information e.g. Idva, coordinator or administrator.
- Public Health England (PHE) have produced [Interim guidance for first responders and others in close contact with symptomatic people with potential COVID-19](#).
- This guidance is for first responders as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act and others who may have close contact with symptomatic people with potential COVID-19 infection. This includes

professionals and members of voluntary organisations who, as part of their normal role, provide immediate assistance to a symptomatic person until further medical assistance arrives.

- You can view guidance from the [College of Policing](#).

## Meetings

- The meeting Chair must be skilled in facilitating sharing of information and action planning. This is essential as a virtual meeting has the potential for creating a chaotic forum.
- Chairs should prepare a format for the meeting that takes into account the limitations and challenges of meeting virtually.
- In respect of Maracs; it is an ideal opportunity to use the recommended **case structure**. We would advise sending this guidance to all representatives prior to the Marac.
- Information should be relevant and proportionate.
- For Maracs, the Idva should lead the action planning and coordinate the safety/action plans, steering representatives through the challenges victims face with increased isolation and reduced interaction.
- Actions need to consider increased social distancing and the increased risk from families in isolation together for greater periods of time.
- Action plans must include how actions will be carried out in the light of current restrictions. This requires creative and flexible thinking from all agencies.
- Action plans need to be SMAR (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely).
- If these meetings are audio recorded, please ensure they are stored safely in accordance with data protection.
- We would emphasise that all information being submitted needs to be clear, concise and proper thought given to the potential actions. When the action plan is communicated back to agencies, there needs to be absolute commitment to adopting those actions.
- The governance group will need to ensure that all non-attendees are accountable for giving the same level of creativity and commitment as they would in the 'normal' Marac process.
- CAST have created guidance for **remote meetings**.

## Data protection

- Partner agencies should follow normal data protection procedures. If representatives are home working, agencies should follow their own organisational protocols/advice around confidentiality.
- Staff working from home need the right equipment. Computers must have the appropriate levels of encryption and security settings. Paper files and confidential notes need to be stored in lockable cabinets, which only the staff member can access. Documents need to be disposed of in a confidential waste bin. This may mean staff transporting documents to their office, or to another location such as the police station for appropriate disposal. Managers must speak to staff individually about how this will be accomplished in line with data protection.
- Managers should take this opportunity to remind staff about data protection requirements and discuss how they will manage this with increased home working and increased likelihood of having other family members at home.

## Risk management

- All frontline practitioners with a role in safeguarding families, should take time to review each of their cases, in particular, the risk posed to victims of domestic abuse and their children by:
  - increased time at home
  - increased proximity to the person causing harm
  - increased emotional and financial stress
  - increased isolation
  - reduced family and social support
  - increased risk of debilitating illness
- Review safety plans with each service user.
- Where there is social care involvement, contact the designated lead social worker to review risk and to discuss contingency plans for increased isolation for vulnerable families.
- Consider risk for separated families. With more time being spent at home, there is increased opportunity for victims of domestic abuse to be located and harassed. Liaise with your local housing teams to ensure that they have a protocol for reacting to reports of anti-social behaviour linked to domestic abuse.
- Where the perpetrator of domestic abuse is homeless, they may use coercion to re-establish the relationship or request temporary housing with victim/survivor. Discuss with housing what options are available for alternative accommodation.
- Discuss with partners the current plans the police force have for managing arrests and contact with perpetrators who have reported symptoms of COVID-19 or who are in self isolation.
- Ensure all agencies involved in the management of individual perpetrators have updates or are included in discussions about the risk management approach that will be taken during this period. Where 'disrupting' the perpetrator has been the main tactic, this will need to be reviewed in detail.

## Safety planning

Safety planning needs to be creative and flexible, maximising opportunity for safe communication between vulnerable families and as many different services as practical, keeping these families in sight.

Options to consider with each client include:

- Establish realistic code words for safe contact.
- Discuss whether contact via platforms such as Whatsapp video or messaging, phone, text, email, FaceTime or Skype are possible and safe as an interim measure. Bear in mind we are not clear how long 'interim' will be.
- All direct work with service users needs to take into account Government advice. See [interim guidance for first responders and others in close contact with symptomatic people with potential COVID-19](#).
- Suggest clients save the Idva's phone number under a pseudonym e.g. their health visitor, their manager, a friend – anything that is realistic and safe.
- Discuss whether they have planned contact with professionals, friends or family who can raise the alarm if they need emergency help.
- Discuss where they can flee to if needed e.g. is there a neighbour they can rely on? What if that neighbour is isolating – do they have an alternative?
- Local community beat officers or health visitors could be a source of contact during this time. Is there regular contact, or can this be introduced?

- Scenario planning: discuss how they might manage risk in different situations. The aim is to facilitate your client so they can talk through what they might do, thus highlighting where they need extra help or resources.
  - In instances of lockdown, citizens are permitted to leave the house for a number of specific and restricted reasons, such as buying food, and for medical appointments. How can these limited freedoms provide opportunity for safe contact between the victim and others?
  - [Chayn](#) have set up a Telegram channel which survivors can sign up to to receive supportive notes and helpful information daily.
  - There are also useful apps e.g. the [Hollie Guard](#) app which can also offer reassurance.
  - The [Bright Sky app](#) is currently available in English, Urdu, Punjabi or Polish and is free to download.
- Share plans with multi agency partners. Highlight the families you are most concerned about with your multi agency partners, and ask the police to flag in case of a 999 call.

### Further guidance and resources

- **Coronavirus Action Plan**
- In **England**, contact the **Freephone 24h National Domestic Abuse Helpline**, run by Refuge: 0808 2000 247 or visit [www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk)
- In **Scotland**, contact the **24 hour Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline**: 0800 027 1234
- In **Northern Ireland**, contact the **24 hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline**: 0808 802 1414
- In **Wales**, contact the **24 hour Life Fear Free Helpline**: 0808 80 10 800.
- **National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline**: 0800 999 5428
- **Men's Advice Line**: 0808 801 0327
- **Respect helpline** (for anyone worried about their own behaviour): 0808 802 4040

**SafeLives are offering virtual support through our [Community Platform](#). Please join to access free webinars, blogs and to network with 1,000s of other professionals across the UK.**

We will be checking and responding to queries daily. You can email us at [info@safelives.org.uk](mailto:info@safelives.org.uk).