



Staying safe at home during COVID-19

Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner

Podcast transcript

Key:

US – Unknown Speaker

JS – Jo Silver

NJ – Nicole Jacobs

Start of audio at 00.07

US

The coronavirus pandemic is creating unique challenges for the domestic abuse sector. In this podcast episode, Jo Silver from SafeLives talks to the UK's first Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs.

Nicole was formerly the CEO of the charity Standing Together Against Domestic Violence, and has more than two decades of experience in the sector. In her current role, Nicole leads on driving improvements on the UK's response to domestic abuse, and today Jo and Nicole discuss this response in light of the pandemic, and how the domestic abuse sector is adapting, as well as implications for adult and child victims and the role of employers.

JS

Thank you, Nicole, for joining me today – I really appreciate your time, and I know you're busy. I just thought, for our listeners, we would start by giving the opportunity to introduce your role, as it's new, and not everybody knows what your role is and how you're approaching it. So, can we start with that?

NJ

Yeah, sure! So, my name is Nicole Jacobs and I'm the... relatively new designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales. So, I would have been appointed in late September, by government, but I'm not party-political, or am not working for government. I'm appointed to be independent of government, to both advise but also hold government account at a local level and national levels for... really adhering to their ambitions and strategies related to domestic abuse and, to some extent, wider violence against women and girls.

JS

Excellent! And this is a new role, which will have specific powers attached to it when... the domestic abuse finally... bill... finally... erm...

NJ

[chuckles] Yeah!

JS

... finally goes through the process, that's been stalled quite a few times. But I just wanted for us to talk about – for the next 10 minutes or so – how, kind of, COVID-19 has impacted on your role, and what you're using your new role to do, and what we're doing as a state response, if you like, knowing that staying safe at home – for the majority of our families in the UK – is *absolutely* the right thing to do; but knowing that for some of our families, where there is domestic abuse ongoing, that might not be the safest route. So, I know you've been doing a *lot* of negotiating and bringing people together; can you tell us what your day looks like, at the moment?

NJ

Yeah. So, erm ... you know... my work life has been in the sector, so I've worked with you, Jo, I've worked at Refuge, I've worked at quite a few... erm... local and national organisations. So, I think anyone who works in domestic abuse, or has any experience of domestic abuse, will understand really quickly how devastating the... kind of... the lockdown, the self-isolation would be for people. So, the Department for International (*inaudible – 03.21*) sent me, a few weeks ago, which really gave very early indicators of what was happening in other countries like Italy and China, where they saw – and have seen – marked increases in domestic abuse reporting. And so, even though we would know that, just kind of in our bones, it is quite stark when you see the kind of data coming from other countries. And obviously, ... you know... there's been some analysis of previous types of epidemics, and the effects of kind of self-isolation or the kind of measures we're seeing. So, that has really helped to get... allow *me* to get government focussed. And obviously, there will be people in every government department who will have been feeling the same, and thinking the same, but part of my role is helping just to co-ordinate that effort and bring in the voices of the frontline services and co-ordinate that.

So, on a Monday – this is for the second week running, so it's all relatively new – I chair a call that has mainly the national helplines and organisations that are helping with the contingency planning, or the kind of... you know... getting together information from frontline services, along with representatives from each of the Government departments. And we share just the most basic of information; obviously police information, calls to the helplines, all of that.

And then we do a read-out of that call to kind of wider stakeholders; so, the Victims' Commissioner, the Children's Commissioner, ... you know... Government Ministers, obviously, first and foremost in a lot of ways, and the opposition, so, Labour opposition party, so that people have a really good... people who are in positions where they're going to be discussing, making decisions, and really involved in conversations about this, so that they understand the current information out there.

JS

Thank you. I did join that call yesterday, and I was struck by – for me, in my career, working in domestic abuse – it's definitely a 'first' that we've had all of those sector players and Government talking as one, and understanding where the gaps were and the duplication; it feels, from a policy and funding and commissioning perspective, more joined up...

NJ

Yeah.

JS

...than I feel it's probably ever been. And I think that's just probably a reflection of the whole country at the moment; I think the whole country, communities, all feel a bit joined up – whether that's on Skype or Teams – we're all desperately trying to make the most of the resources that we've got, and I've seen that happening from the frontline, as well.

NJ

Mm-hm.

JS

So, at SafeLives, we're talking to frontline services, and victims, through different surveys, and calls, and Skypes, and every other way that you can talk to people. And what the frontline services just have a gut feeling around is what you've already said about other countries ... you know... we know that putting families in the situations where they're isolated is *particularly* risky for families experiencing domestic abuse. But also, it's really difficult to know what... what to do about it, and I can see lots of great, creative ideas coming through about how we get information to those families, and understanding... erm... what the services are struggling with and [chuckles] it is *always* the same – I think this is funny – so the... services that are coming back to us, it's *always* 'the IT'.

So, if you just think about frontline services, they're normally professionals who are happy running around from meeting their clients and survivors, going to court, speaking to lots and lots of people; now, the very same professionals are in lockdown, with a laptop that they probably don't know how to use very well, with not enough equipment, so it's the *IT* that frontline are feeding back, that the people are committed – of course, they're trying to juggle looking after children – professionals are committed to delivering the services, but the IT and the skill-set around working from home needs to be very quickly much better than it is. And we heard that yesterday, on the call, too, didn't we?

NJ

Yeah, we did. And the fact that it's costly. So, to divert calls from something that's set up as a national helpline maybe to home working – which are what some of the helplines are doing – it's costly. They're losing money from kind of... from not being able to do the same kinds of fundraising that they're used to, and kind of day-to-day operations, so... so, I suppose *some* of the thinking is about how to sustain those kind of very initial points of contact on national helplines, getting the word out that there's a varied number of helplines – that there's webchats, that there's ... you know... email facilities – that there's a national helpline for male victims, there's a national helpline for people who are worried about their own abusive behaviour, the rights of women helplines, and the kind of money advice helplines – those are all seeing increases, and a lot of drive to the webchats, and all of these things. And it's a very... it's a big challenge for people to – for services to – adapt to that so quickly, to change to home working, diverting calls, webchats, kind of a driving of the... kind of increased... erm ... you know... the increase in the traffic to their own websites and updating all of that information. So, I guess one of the concerns that I have is just making sure that Government, in the really quick time, supports that as quickly as possible, while we're thinking about... erm... this kind of broader, co-ordinated response.

JS

Thanks, Nicole. And I suppose that speaks straight to families, doesn't it, because what you hear Nicole saying is *all* of those helplines are still up and running. It *is* a challenge, but there *is* help out there, and those helplines are accessible on any... erm... website search. We'll be putting those helplines on the podcast, and links too. So, I think what you need to hear, if you're a family experiencing domestic abuse, is *all* of those helplines are still up and running, and will be on the other end of the phone when you give them a ring.

NJ

Yeah, and I just... I wanted to say a word about your surveys, too, because I know you all have a survey out, I noticed this morning Women's Aid – I was retweeting a survey that they're doing, which I know they've linked up and kind of joined up with you about – but those types of surveys are *really* well worth people investing some time to do, because when you summarise those, and give them back to people like me and others – working in government and making decisions – it *really*, really helps. It helps to make decisions more quickly, have clarity about what the situation is, where the needs are. And also, one of the things we talked about yesterday on the call is just how many people are in a position to kind of get out the best of what's going on, and the best of ideas, so, the Local Government Association was committing to doing that on the call yesterday. People in government departments will be in positions to kind of draw linkages with other... erm... more kind of mental health helplines, and other wider efforts that might be happening, in terms of just focussing on more vulnerable groups in general. So, there's a lot of linking up to do, so anything we can do to get people investing a little bit of time and energy on those surveys is *really*, really important, so thank you for doing that.

JS

And just to link into that, I think... just some numbers – and it *is* early days – and this is 113 services that are operationally supporting families where there's domestic abuse; one in ten of those services said that they had unsafe staffing levels at the moment – and that was more about... I think, the mobilisation from working one way to another...

NJ

Mm-hm.

JS

...not that their staff are unwell with the coronavirus, just that the technology and just the momentum... and we're going to keep an eye on that every month, and see how that settles out. And just under a quarter of services were saying they weren't... effectively supporting adult victims as much as they would want to. But what they're all really saying – I think this is useful for you and colleagues, and in government – is that... isolation is proving *really* difficult for us to support child victims of abuse.

NJ

Yeah.

JS

And that's due to a lot of the ways that we work with children, and not being in the same room with them is extremely difficult. So, I know the children's sector, the Children's Commissioner, children's charities are all aware of that, but it's just to say that we are hearing that from domestic abuse services too – I think that's important.

NJ

Yeah.

JS

And also, again to bang home, the role of a domestic abuse professional is seen as a keyworker, and that does mean that your children can access school, and we're seeing that that's not being played out across the country consistently. So, we would urge you to help us make that clear, that...

NJ

Yeah. Yeah.

JS

...that domestic abuse professionals can access school for their children.

NJ

Absolutely. And one thing that... it seems to me that helps people, is when they have a letter from their employer that really makes that clear. If you look on ... you know... the twitter feed or some of the Government websites, there is some clarity – there's not an actual change to the guidance; the guidance sounds a little bit broad in terms of ... you know... charity workers, who work in relation to kind of ... you know... various groups – so it doesn't say 'domestic abuse workers' specifically. But we've had ... you know... I've had clarity in writing from Government, so I think people can feel very clear that that's absolutely assured, from a government point of view, and I think having letters from your employer that really state that, because I think some of it is just the confusion of... schools are mobilising quite quickly in all of that.

JS

Yeah.

NJ

So, yeah. I wanted to say something about children. I mean, I was up early this morning, doing an interview for the Today Programme on Radio 4, and they led with a story of a 14-year-old boy who was in ... you know... who was listening to the radio – like a local radio station – that was covering... kind of increase of domestic abuse ... you know... in the context of the crisis, and he literally just packed a bag and left his house, and went to the radio station, because of his home environment and the abuse at home, and just feeling unsafe. And the radio station then, of course, called the right services, and then... I mean, it does... it is a really stark example of how people will be feeling ... you know... 'I don't have any other option; I've just heard this on the radio – I'll go to the radio station'.

And one of the things that really struck me on the call yesterday, that I will be working on this week, is what I mean by that wider, co-ordinated response. So, my first thought last week was very focussed – or the weeks before – was the Police, helplines, frontline services, contingency planning and all of that is going on – but I *do* think, now, we have to think about housing ... you know... do we have enough bed space, or places for people to go – including perpetrators who might be ousted through, say, a DVPO or

something like that, in coming weeks... you know. Social Care – do they have the kind of equipment they need to be doing home visits, checking in on families where they know that there is domestic abuse and other vulnerabilities? And so, we will have to be *much* more proactive.

But there are some opportunities, like ... you know... yesterday, the Department of Health, on the call, were talking about the opportunities to get out to the... I think it's like 700-plus thousand, now, NHS volunteers, just because they will be the eyes and the ears in the community. So, we have to think about where are the opportunities where people will be interacting, where there could be some opportunities just to provide support or alert people that something's not quite right? Sorry, I know that was quite long-winded, but...

JS

No, no!

NJ

...but I think... it's not ever – with domestic abuse – ever going to be just one thing, is it?

JS

Of *course* not.

NJ

It's going to have to be a number of things, yeah. So, I think we have to just have a... have a cross-governmental work plan – which is another thing we were talking about yesterday – how important it is to really be clear on what the programme of work should be, to kind of get where we need to go in any number of these areas.

JS

And lastly, the broader co-ordinated response, and how employers fit into that; I think it would be really useful to talk about home working – and that *is* a link...

NJ

Mm-hm.

JS

...for families, isn't it? So, how could they help?

NJ

Yeah. I mean [laughs wryly] that's one area where I think you could quickly invest a little bit more resource to have a huge impact, because we *do* have the Employers' Initiative, which has 350 employers – some are quite huge – and they do have tools and all sorts of resources. They don't really have like a proactive kind of... they are emailing out to their members and things like that, but they don't really have kind of a helpline facility or something like that. And employers who are checking on people working at home, in any number of ways, for any number of reasons, could play a really critical role. If they fully understand that employees at home may not be working in a safe environment – may have concerns – and obviously ... you know... you're going to be allowed to speak to your employer – or *most* of the time...

JS

Mm-hm.

NJ

...so, I think... employers have a *huge* role to play here. And I think we need to think very quickly about how we can take the resources we have – which are quite good ones – but really amplify that as much as possible.

JS

Thanks, Nicole. And ... you know... what I have started the call with, saying that your role has pulled the domestic abuse experts and the Government experts together, and it's very, very early days, but we are ... you know... overwhelmed, really, by everyone trying to do the best that they can. And we know, for domestic abuse victims, isolation is hard and there is no easy answers, but we are all working to find how we can support you and your children in this situation. And what I would like to say is, perhaps we could come back in a month or so, to see... and update people with what is out there – what we have

learnt and what we are doing to co-ordinate a response – so that victims don't feel trapped in isolation, with no way out – that we are proactively engaging with those that can't access the internet, and that we've worked out a way just to let people know they're not on their own.

NJ

Mm. Mm-hm.

JS

If you could sum up, Nicole, I wonder if you could speak to any survivors that might be listening to this, what you would say, to finish?

NJ

I guess what I would say is just how much... I spend my time thinking about... about you, individually, and thinking about people who might be at home experiencing domestic abuse and feeling so alone, and what I would want *you* to know is just how much people are working behind the scenes – and there's *incredible*, inspiring work happening – and that none of us will ever feel we're doing enough – including me – and while I can't, obviously, work individually with people in the same way that I would have done in the past, *everything* I'm doing is about trying to mobilise as much support and as much work and attention in the direction of this issue as possible, because I *do* realise that this is critical, and it's *incredibly* important that we raise this at the highest levels of government, to do as much as we can. So, I will try to do that. I can't imagine I'll go to sleep any time in the next few weeks feeling like I've done enough each day, but I will be trying every day to do as much as I can for you.

JS

Thank you, very much. And we are appreciating the work that you are doing, and just looking forward to seeing how much of a difference this new Domestic Abuse Commissioner role makes on the ground, when we're all up and running. So, thank you very much, Nicole, for your time.

NJ

[Chuckles warmly] Thank you. Thank you, and thanks for all the work *you're* doing, Jo.

End of audio at 21.57