



Ending domestic abuse

February 2021

Capacity and demand – the impact of Covid-19 on domestic abuse services

(1) Many domestic abuse organisations have told us that demand for their services has further increased since the outbreak of Covid-19. (2) Various data sources indicate this has not been the case for all services consistently throughout the year - demand has been influenced by Covid-19 restrictions. (3) Referral demand doesn't tell the whole story - service capacity is affected by multiple factors including staff health, funding limitations and the increased complexity of client need.

(1) Increased demand for services

At the outset of the pandemic, the domestic abuse sector was already under strain from a lack of resourcing¹ and increasing demand for services, for example Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (Maracs)². Our initial assessment of crises such as health pandemics, suggested that violence against women and girls would increase.³ Following the announcement of the first lockdown, SafeLives launched several surveys to explore what challenges were being experienced across the sector. The responses from frontline services highlighted concerns about increasing caseloads, a result of more demand for their services:

- Two in five services (38%) had seen an increase in caseloads due to Covid-19 when surveyed after the first lockdown. Usually this was attributed to an increase in actual referrals coming into the service (83%).
- A quarter (24%) of services were concerned demand would increase once lockdown restrictions eased.

Source: [SafeLives DA frontline Covid-19 survey \(Open 20th April – 15th June, 63 services\)](#)

During Autumn 2020, SafeLives launched our annual Practitioner Survey giving us a picture of the shape of provision across the sector. With some newly added Covid-19 related questions, this provided a clearer picture of demand on domestic abuse services across the year.

- 90% of specialist services (approx. 150) said there had been an increase in demand for their services since the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Our services are forever growing and the need for our specialist support in this area, and the wider community has increased significantly since lockdown. If we could obtain more funding, this would enable us to be able to deliver on a further geographical remit.”

- When asked if they currently had the resources and staffing to deliver their service, two in five (40%) respondents said they were unable to keep up with demand.

“At present, yes but demand is increasing. We have our highest waiting list since the service opened in April 2021 which amounts to 1.0 FTE caseload. I think more responsive funding for the provision of front line caseworkers should be readily available for those services who can demonstrate effectiveness of provision and need to increase provision.”

Source: [SafeLives Annual Practitioner Survey 2020 \(to be published\)](#)

¹ SafeLives Annual Practitioner Surveys: <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/practitioner-survey>

² SafeLives Five Year Marac Case Trend Analysis:

<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Marac%20cases%20%E2%80%93%20Five%20year%20trend%20Analysis%20to%20September%202020.pdf>

³ SafeLives policy briefing:

https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Key%20issues%20for%20domestic%20abuse%20victims%20in%20the%20Coronavirus%20Bill_0.pdf

External sources of data from our partners and other sector stakeholders, including the police, also indicated increases in demand for services across the year. The following data is published on the Office for National Statistics domestic abuse data release from November 2020⁴:

- A Women's Aid survey of services published in June indicated that the majority of services had seen an increase in demand since the pandemic started. This included 58% of 26 refuge services, 80% of 30 community-based services, 91% of 22 online support services and 81% of 31 telephone support services.
- There were increases in demand for helplines between April and June 2020, such as a 65% increase in calls and contacts (not necessarily individual victims) to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline compared with the first three months of 2020.
- Police recorded data showed 259,324 offences (excluding fraud) were flagged as domestic abuse-related in the period March to June 2020. This represents a 7% increase from 242,413 in the same period in 2019. However, as domestic-abuse offences have been increasing in recent years, it is not possible to determine the impact of Covid-19 on the rise.

(2) Fluctuating demand for services

As outlined in the evidence above, many data sources indicate that demand for services has increased since the Covid-19 pandemic began. However, during the first lockdown some services said that referral numbers had not increased, and in some cases, they had decreased.

- Up to June 2020, almost a third (30%) of services had seen a decrease in caseloads since Covid-19 restrictions began and a quarter (24%) said caseload levels had remained the same.
- Some services said referrals into their service had decreased. Comments showed a concern that this could be due to survivors not being able to ask for support during this time, and that it would lead to an increase in referrals post-lockdown.
- A quarter (24%) of services were concerned demand would increase once lockdown restrictions eased.

"In lock down it is difficult make contact with clients - I am concerned victims aren't able to call during this period."

"We believe that we will see a massive increase after lockdown as people are struggling to access us at the moment - we have seen a 50% increase in traffic to our website so we know people want support."

Source: [DA frontline Covid-19 survey](#) (Open 20th April – 15th June, 63 services)

Where referrals to domestic abuse services decreased, we heard concerns that this did not mean less abuse was happening, but rather survivors were unable to reach out for support. SafeLives conducted a [survey of survivors](#) during the first lockdown and as restrictions eased:

- Two thirds (61%, n=44) of respondents to the help-seeking questions, added to a later iteration of the survey, had not asked for any help during lockdown restrictions.
- Some of these survivors said the reason was that they were already receiving support and that is why they hadn't reached out during lockdown. Other reasons for not reaching out for support were feeling let down previously by professionals, Covid-19 restrictions and safety, fear of the perpetrator, or not knowing what to ask for.
- Three-quarters (76%, n=148) of all survey respondents had mental health needs.

"His emotional and verbal abuse is escalating the longer we're isolated and I'm concerned that mentally I won't survive this. I'm afraid that he will hurt himself or me, but in this situation, we can't go anywhere or calm down."

"Psychological and emotional abuse will be relentless and there's nowhere to go if my workplace shuts"

"I am not believed. He is extremely manipulating and seems to turn everyone to believing him."

⁴ Accessed at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwales/overview/november2020#latest-figures-for-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

“I’m currently 26 weeks pregnant, stuck in a bedsit with my ex-partner. I have no money, or nowhere to go. I cannot call a helpline for support as my partner will be able to hear me, plus I have telephone anxiety.”

Source: [SafeLives Survivor survey \(20th March – June 2020\)](#)

SafeLives also spoke with various professionals and survivors and published a series of podcasts to shed further light on the impact of lockdown on survivors and their ability to reach out.

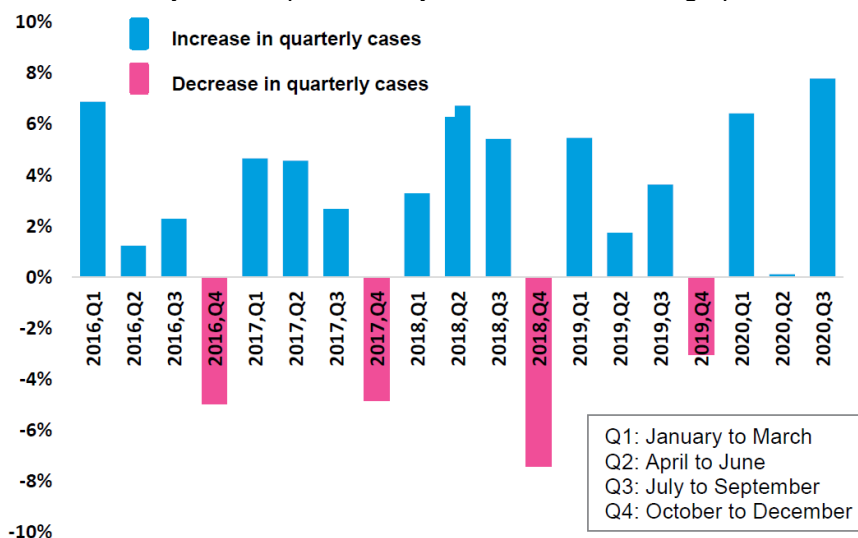
- [In her podcast](#), SafeLives Pioneer Rachel Williams highlighted why some victims may feel lockdown is not the time to flee or reach out. Many may be looking at best managing the unsafe home environment and attempting to manage the perpetrator and pacify them.
- As Zoe Williams from Aurora New Dawn [discussed in her podcast](#), lockdown for victims amounts to “state-mandated isolation with perpetrators”. A lack of access to usual support networks and information has a big impact on survivors’ safety and their ability to reach out for support. For domestic abuse professionals, it’s like “watching your clients through a window” – you can see them but not get to them as usual.

Podcasts available at: <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/domestic-abuse-and-covid-19>

Research on the changing patterns of domestic abuse during the Covid-19 lockdown by the Centre for Economic Performance was published in November 2020⁵. The discussion paper provides useful analysis to consider alongside data from some services indicating fluctuating or decreasing demand during lockdown. It considers mixed findings from international studies on whether domestic abuse increased or decreased during lockdown, and then provides analysis of Greater London police data highlighting some changes in domestic abuse reporting during lockdown.

The paper shows that there was a shift in domestic abuse up to June 2020 with less crime perpetrated by ex-partners and more by current partners and families. Alongside this, the nature of reporting changed and where there were increases in calls to police this was driven by third party reporting. The paper concludes that victims were trapped with their abusers during lockdown and potentially less able to report, whilst at the same time the greater and sustained proximity between households during lockdown led to more police reports from other parties, i.e. neighbours. This is pattern was also reflected in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline run by Refuge in England which saw a drop in in-person victim calls and an increase in third party calls including family and neighbours. Further analysis of the patterns of domestic abuse during the pandemic will continue to add insight to any fluctuations or changes in demand for domestic abuse services.

SafeLives Marac [trend data](#) provides another example of how demand for some services might have fluctuated over the year. Quarter 2 (April to June 2020) data showed a lower-than-expected case change compared with previous years. Then in quarter 3 (July to Sept 2020) there was the largest quarterly increase in the five-year time period analysed, as shown in the graph below.



Source: [SafeLives Five Year Marac Case Trend Analysis](#)

⁵ Ivandic, R. et al. Centre for Economic Performance (2020) Changing patterns of domestic abuse during Covid-19 lockdown. Accessed at <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1729.pdf>

However, the average overall case change across these quarters was in line with previous years. This means that the case increase between April and September 2020 was in line with previous years but this year it was more concentrated between July and September. This data suggests that lockdown led to delays in some cases being referred into Maracs.

Another survey conducted by SafeLives following the first lockdown explored the impact of restrictions on Maracs. In June 2020, many Maracs were telling us what we now see highlighted in the data.

- About half of all Maracs were represented in the responses to the Covid-19 survey. Over a third (37%) at that time said referrals to Marac were lower than usual. (17% said they were higher and 38% said there was no change).
- Some Maracs suggested that lower police referrals were a factor due to police in some forces receiving less reports of high-risk abuse. Some highlighted that agencies across the board were finding it harder to contact victims over the lockdown period. Agency attendance at Maracs had changed for a third (32%).

“Getting agencies engaged with the process. The Police are no longer attending - but sending updates before the meeting. Housing are not attending, and Education are not attending. Agencies who make a referral and usually attend in person to present it are now not phoning in.”

[Marac Covid-19 survey \(Open April 21st – June 2020\)](#)

(3) Service capacity and case complexity

Referral demand doesn't tell the whole - service capacity is affected by multiple factors including funding limitations, staff and partner availability, and increased complexity of client need. Every two weeks throughout the pandemic, SafeLives has convened a call with CEOs and service managers of frontline domestic abuse services with participation around thirty each time. Along with our survey data, this has provided an opportunity for us to hear about the impact of Covid-19 on services direct from the frontline, as well as hear about innovation and future challenges.

Many domestic abuse services are insecurely funded and therefore unable to reliably recruit staff to adequately meet demand, before considering the additional pressures of Covid-19.

- Respondents to our Annual Practitioner Survey were asked about their biggest concerns during Covid-19. A quarter (27%) of comments concerned staff capacity, recruitment, and funding.

“The increasing demand based on staffing levels. One local authority gave funding for a full time outreach worker, however this is fixed term for six months and the concern is that when this resource is no longer in place, the increased demand will remain and put the service under significant pressure.”

Source: [SafeLives Annual Practitioner Survey 2020 \(unpublished\)](#)

“At the moment we can manage the workloads because we have additional capacity from the funding we have received. We will have problems by the end of March if we do not get more additional funding.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

On top of this, staff absence due to self-isolation has meant that any face-to-face work has had to be covered by fewer staff. The first version of our frontline survey in March 2020 highlighted practitioners' concerns about service capacity at the outset of the pandemic.

- A third (31%) of services had seen a decrease in staff levels due to self-isolation or childcare issues. One in ten (9%) services said they had unsafe staffing levels.
- A quarter (22%) of services had seen an increase in caseloads at this point, usually (73%) due to increased client numbers but often due to staff absence (46%).
- The first lockdown resulted in a reduction in service delivery with three quarters (76%) of responding DA services telling us they had reduced delivery.

[DA frontline Covid-19 survey \(Lockdown 1, 24th March – 27th March, 119 services\)](#)

One implication of the reduction of delivery is that work takes longer to do. While previously a lot of client contact was done within group settings which was cost effective, there is now much more one-to-

one work. Although this can be very beneficial to a client, it is much more time intensive. Furthermore, the nature of the support needed and how it is remotely delivered could lead to longer case lengths.

“Caseloads are longer than normal during this season, due to more emotional support offered mainly around contact rules and regs with COVID used as excuses around children, moving between houses, etc, and working from home, gives them added support in sessions on telephone when needed.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

One service in our network told us that while their work with children and young people was continuing, they were less able to do recovery work or follow-on sessions with children in school because of Covid-19 restrictions on after school activities. This organisation also commissions youth groups to work with young teenagers, but because they aren't meeting at the moment, there is nowhere for these young people to go after initial domestic abuse support. Several services said that they had waiting lists for children needing to access specialist support.

“The waiting list for children is long and they are just for internal clients.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

A second version of our frontline survey published as lockdown restrictions started to ease showed safe staffing levels was an ongoing issue for services.

- One in ten (13%) services said they had unsafe staffing levels and over half (52%) had had to reduce service delivery during Covid-19 restrictions.
- Staff absence was often a factor (29%) for the two thirds (38%) of services who had seen an increase in caseloads, i.e. this was about having less staff not necessarily more referrals.

Source: [DA frontline Covid-19 survey](#) (Open 20th April – 15th June, 63 services)

This was again confirmed by service managers in November 2020, who told us that individual Idvas were coping with caseloads of 35-50 clients at a time. SafeLives recommends Idvas do not carry caseloads of more than 80-100 in the space of a whole year. While no service in our support network was operating a waiting list before assessment, one service said that their caseload levels were dangerously high and that they may not have any other option but to consider waiting lists.

“Increased referrals to triage, which results in an increased amount of clients on placement caseload. We have some hours now for an IDVA Triage worker to help with admin etc but this service will massively struggle when this funding ends.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

Service managers also told us that increased complexity of need, related to reduced support from partner agencies, has also impacted on service capacity. In particular housing, drug and alcohol and mental health services were all cited as having less engagement with clients since Covid-19. One service in our network told us they were receiving more calls from victims saying they are suicidal but local mental health services were not accepting referrals unless a suicide attempt had been made.

“We are turning into more complex workers – cases far more complex.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

“There are so many issues! Our Children's Social Care have drastically cut back their services. Their thresholds were already high but now they are only dealing with Section 47 cases - a massive gap for us. Safely reaching victims/survivors is a key concern - we believe that risk levels are rising.”

Practitioner answering frontline survey in June

Delays to court cases and perpetrators manipulating Covid-19 restrictions as an excuse to prevent child contact taking place were also highlighted as adding to the complexity and length of cases.

“We need those running the courts to understand the impact that the cases not being heard is having on victims and staff. It is so impactful on these victims and we have to try and support them through it and keep them on board with the process. It adds to them not having control over their lives and being able to move on.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

“We have waiting lists for allocation (not triage) in our sexual violence service. In a large part due to even greater delays within CJS and nowhere to refer on to for emotional/mental health support.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020

Increasing caseloads and case complexity has a huge knock-on effect on staff wellbeing. Service managers have told us that, on top of experiencing increased isolation due to working from home, staff are close to burnout, struggling to switch off at evenings or weekends, with signs of vicarious trauma.

“IDVA's are close to burnout.”

Manager on SafeLives frontline support call, November 2020