



Ending domestic abuse

England, Wales and Northern Ireland Covid-19 Marac Survey

About SafeLives

We are SafeLives, the UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.

We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We want what you would want for your best friend. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking 'why doesn't he stop?' rather than 'why doesn't she leave?' This applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator and whatever the nature of their relationship.

Last year alone, nearly 11,000 professionals working on the frontline received our training. Over 65,000 adults at risk of serious harm or murder and more than 85,000 children received support through dedicated multi-agency support designed by us and delivered with partners. In the last three years, over 1,000 perpetrators have been challenged and supported to change by interventions we created with partners, and that's just the start.

Together we can end domestic abuse. Forever. For everyone.

About the survey

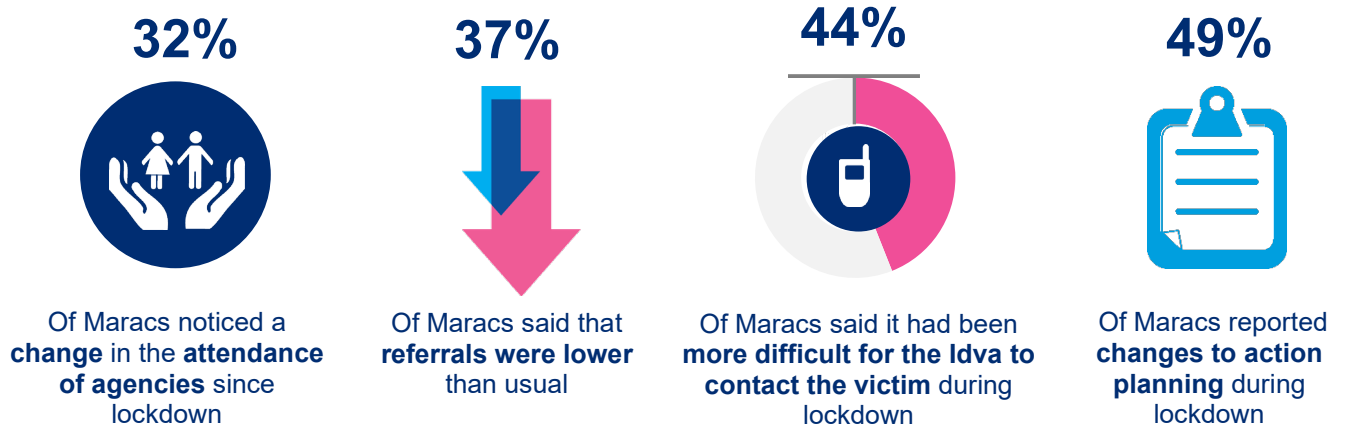
In this unprecedented crisis, we recognise that governments have had to introduce emergency measures to protect those who are vulnerable and to ensure that services can function in the event of public services being overwhelmed. The UK went into lockdown on 23rd March 2020.

Given that Maracs are held in person with a number of different agencies involved and that they serve the victims at highest risk of harm or homicide, it is important to assess the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted them.

SafeLives sent out a survey to each Marac in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and asked them to fill it out. The survey was open from the 2^{1st} April. Almost half (49%) of all Maracs responded to the survey at the time of analysis on the 10th June 2020. Given the difference in time period between responses this does not provide a uniform snapshot of the conditions Maracs were experiencing throughout the COVID-19 period and beyond.

There were some duplicate responses, where more than one person from the same Marac had responded to the survey, and some responses accounted for more than one Marac. Some respondents did not state which Marac they were responding on behalf of, and so are not included in this analysis. Of the Maracs who responded 88% were from England, 10% were from Wales, and 2% from Northern Ireland.

Key findings



Headlines

It is clear from this data and the responses that many Maracs have remained robust, integral and have adapted quickly to lockdown.

Additional challenges have arisen from lockdown, namely the lack of coherent IT infrastructure across all agencies and the difficulties in reaching victims. However, other problems such as poor action planning or poor engagement from some agencies were long-standing challenges for some Maracs before Covid19.

- **Maracs have found it more difficult for the Idva to contact the victim.** Even outside of the current pandemic, we would expect that all agencies fully engage with safety planning for victims rather than solely relying on police and Idvas. Prior to lockdown, some Maracs remained too reliant on the criminal justice system and Idva services to support the actions around safety planning, and this has continued and in some cases been exacerbated throughout the Covid epidemic
- **Half of Maracs reported challenges when action planning.** It is unclear how much of this is related to the lockdown and how much is a continuation of the previous problems: reliance on too few agencies, too few actions, over emphasis on information sharing at the cost of action planning (all concerns prior to Covid19)
- **Running Maracs virtually has both challenges and opportunities.** 30% of Maracs interviewed in the survey said they were not meeting virtually, with some opting for a reduced attendance (in some cases without even the Idva service in attendance). Some Maracs reported multi-agency working improving but well over half reported IT issues. Maracs sitting virtually should strive for full attendance for all nine core agencies as detailed in our Guidance for Multi-Agency forums released at the start of COVID-19¹.
- **A third of Maracs reported a drop in referrals** and this may reflect the fact that some police forces saw a drop in the number of victims at the highest risk being in contact with police forces who are the main referring agency. Even though all agencies have found it difficult to engage with domestic abuse victims during lockdown, the fact that victims have been finding it even more difficult than usual to reach out to services requires that agencies should double their efforts to identify and refer victims at the highest risk into Marac.
- **Referrals during this period continues to under-represent victims with protected characteristics** (e.g. LGBT, BME and victims with disabilities) but this was an issue prior to the pandemic and hasn't changed during it.

¹ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Marac%20guidance%20-%20COVID%2019.pdf>

Additional Evidence

Voices of Maracs

- Maracs explained a range of barriers during lockdown, with common ones including IT, multi-agency working, and concern around victim safety.
- Maracs identified several things that were working well during lockdown, with common themes including improved efficiency of Marac and multi-agency working.

Referrals

- Over two thirds (37%) said referrals are lower than usual.
- Almost four out of five Maracs (79%) said lockdown had not changed referrals for groups which can often be 'hidden', such as LGBT+, BME and those with disabilities

Running the Marac

- No Maracs are currently being run in person. The most common method of meeting during lockdown is teleconference (70%). This is a change for all Maracs compared to pre-lockdown.
- Nearly all Maracs (79%) are still being run at the same frequency as before lockdown.
- Almost one in ten (9%) are being run more frequently.
- Almost a fifth (17%) of Maracs have seen a change in who acts as the Chair
- The majority (83%) of Maracs had not changed who was invited to attend the Marac.
- Five Maracs have paused invitations to the Idva service and the police.
- Almost a quarter (22%) of Maracs said that at least one invited agency was unable to provide a representative during lockdown.

Supporting the victim

- Almost half (44%) said that it has been more difficult for Idvas to contact victims prior to Marac.
- Almost half (49%) have noticed changes in the kinds of actions put forward at Marac.
- Over half of Maracs (53%) said there had been no change in the use of Domestic Violence Protection Orders. However, 10% said there had been a decrease and 8% said there had been an increase.

Voices of Maracs

Barriers

Maracs identified several barriers they had come across in delivering Marac since the start of lockdown. Responses were coded into themes. Where multiple comments were given, these were separated out and coded separately. This was done for all the following open-ended questions.

Technical/IT issues

Over half (57%) of comments stated that technical limitations were impacting Marac delivery. This included: not all agencies being able to use the same software to attend meetings; virtual information sharing being less effective as agencies can't always see all the information; and meetings taking longer and being less efficient:

“The virtual meetings are stressful to manage and co-ordinate. They are longer than usual and also beset by technical issues to various members. The lack of face to face interaction hinders effective communication (in my view)”

“Ensuring all partners have access to the same virtual platforms.”

Multi-agency working

Almost a fifth (17%) of comments identified issues relating to multi-agency working, such as information sharing, or research not being done as effectively and some agencies not being able to attend Marac:

“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.”

“We are currently asking agencies to submit information via email, which is shared ahead of the meeting. Getting this information from all agencies by the deadline has been difficult...”

Concerns around safely contacting victims

The next most common answer (16%) was that Maracs were concerned about victim safety. Most commonly this referred to the lack of face to face support available, as well as how to safely contact victims when they live at home with their perpetrators:

“The ability for agencies to have face to face contact with victims and speaking with victims away from perpetrators”

“The safety planning around the victim - all done on the phone and no face to face visits...”

No issues or improvements to Marac

Some comments (11%) stated that there had been no issues with the Marac process, or that virtual delivery had improved things:

“No barrier identified - the use of tech has improved accessibility and it runs as normal”

“No barrier - Microsoft Teams works well.”

Things working well

Maracs identified several things that were working well during lockdown.

Improved efficiency

Almost half (47%) of comments related to how Marac processes had become more efficient because of time saved, it being easier to chase up agencies for information, improved agency attendance in some cases as agencies can attend virtually, and action planning being improved:

“We have also noticed that we are now having better attendance from Social Workers, Probation and schools being able to 'dial in'.”

“Impact on working day as there is no travel time, no vehicle use, no need for payment to hire buildings to hold MARAC”

Multi-agency working

The next most common answer (37%) was comments around improvements being made to multi agency working including agencies continuing to be resilient and prioritise Marac, consistent levels of engagement, and agencies being prompt when providing information on cases:

“Research from all agencies was received in every case - this is really rare in particular in relation to Children’s Social Care, but research was received from all social workers in all cases”

“This has resulted in stronger partnership working than ever before...”

No significant change

Several comments (16%) state that there had been no change, or that it was too soon to tell, but that Marac was still delivering the same level of service.

What else?

Things being done well

Over a third (37%) of comments related to things that Maracs perceived to be positive about lockdown. This included strengthening of partnership working, improvement in Marac attendance, Maracs adapting quickly and services continuing to operate:

“This has been a challenging time, but it appears all agencies are adapting to changes in working practices well and have even given positive feedback regarding MARAC.”

“The continuation of support from partners for Marac has been very positive ensuring that the very best safety planning can be put in place. Police have been very positive and have further capacity to support”

Supporting victims

One third (31%) of comments related to supporting victims safely. These most related to the lack of face to face support available from agencies, or how to contact victims when they live with the perpetrator. Two Maracs also commented on how it had been difficult to find refuge accommodation. Three Maracs also discussed how Covid-19 was specifically being built into risk assessments and eight highlighted how there could be an increase in demand for services post lockdown:

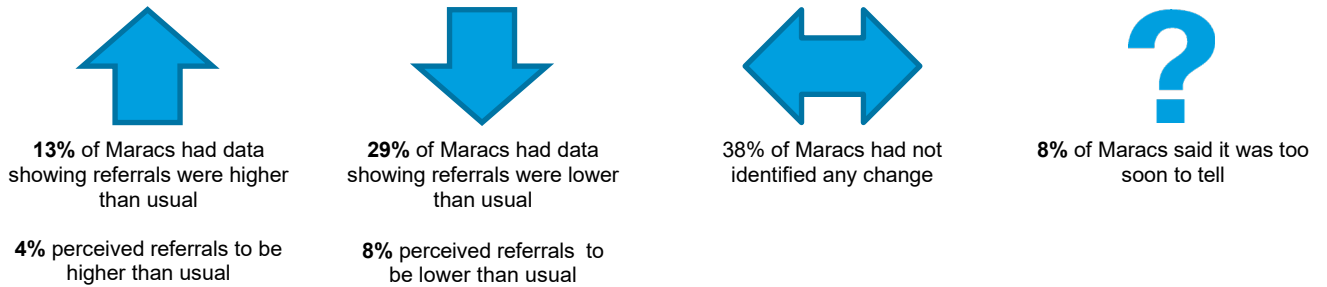
“Access to refuge and alternative housing have been reduced.”

“Supporting victims has been more complicated as there is potential the victim and perpetrator are locked down together....”

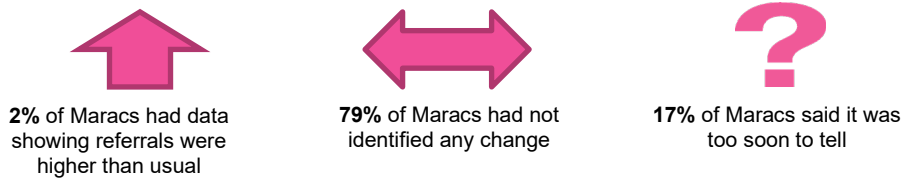
“I have concerns about the demand and situation when lock down is lifted and the impact this will have on services.”

Referrals

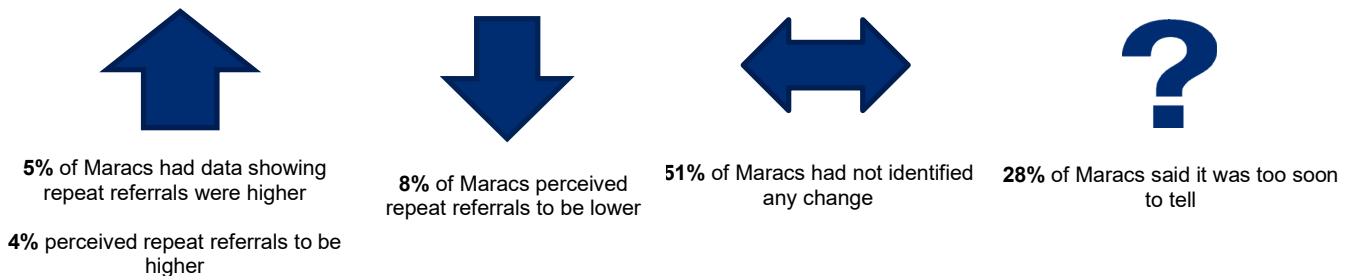
Nearly two fifth of Maracs (38%) said they had not identified a change in the number of cases they were seeing:



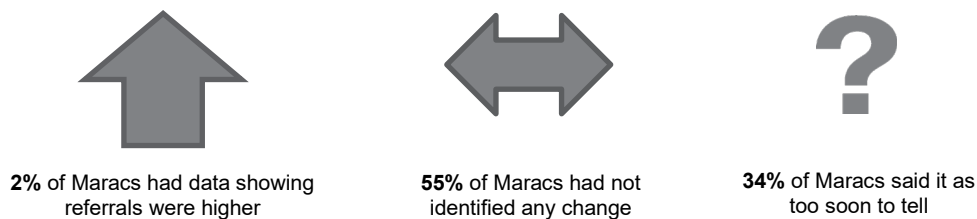
Almost four out of five Maracs (79%) said lockdown not changed referrals for groups which can often be 'hidden', such as LGBT+, BME and those with disabilities:



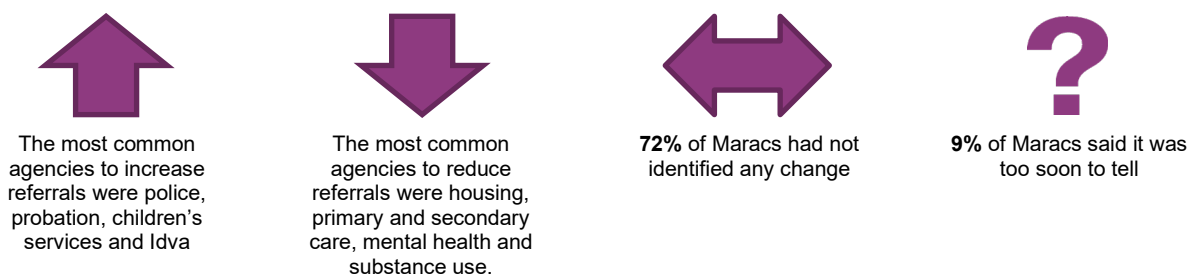
Over half (51%) of Maracs reported no change in the number of repeat referrals since the introduction of lockdown:



Over half of Maracs (55%) said they had not seen a change the number of serial perpetrators being discussed:



Almost four out of five Maracs (72%) had not detected a change in the referral route of cases during lockdown. Almost one in ten (14%) had data showing changes and 5% perceived there to be changes.



Running the Marac

The majority of Maracs (70%) said that they are currently being run by teleconference, with 18% being run by video conference. Over one in ten (12%) said the Marac was being delivered in a different way such as by email and core agencies meeting remotely, and other agencies sending in updates electronically. All Maracs responded that this was a change in how they would usually deliver Marac.



70%
of Maracs are
being delivered by
teleconference

We do not yet have enough evidence about the effectiveness of Maracs operating in a virtual setting to make recommendations about the future of Marac meetings in a virtual context. However, SafeLives will be undertaking a further review of Maracs and their operation virtually during COVID to understand key lessons for the future.

Almost half of Maracs (48%) are currently being run fortnightly, 26% monthly, 15% weekly and 7% daily. For the majority of Maracs (79%) this is the same as before lockdown. Eleven Maracs (9%) are meeting more frequently. 13 Maracs did not provide a response to this question.

The majority of Maracs (83%) have not changed who chairs the Marac. For the remaining 17% this was either due to the police chairing more of the Maracs (27%), the role of chair now being shared by multiple agencies (59%), or there being no chair due to the new format of the meetings (14%).

The majority of Maracs (83%) have not changed which agencies are currently invited. For the remaining 17% common agencies whose invitation had been paused included; substance use (33%), mental health (29%), voluntary sector (29%), and police, Idva, education and adult social care (all 24%). Eight Maracs identified police, Idva and the Marac team (such as coordinator and chair) were meeting to discuss cases with information provided from external agencies.

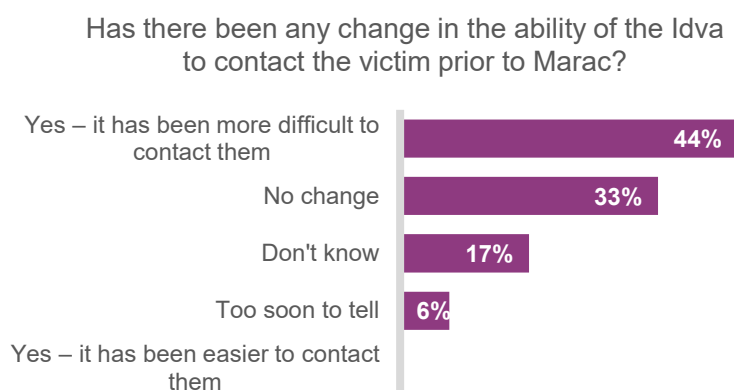
Almost two thirds of Maracs (60%) had not identified any changes in the attendance of invited agencies since the beginning of lockdown. Of the remaining 32% that had noticed changes in attendance, the most common answers were that probation, education, primary and secondary care had reduced their attendance

Please indicate any agencies whose frequency of attendance has reduced:	Number of Maracs
Probation	27
Education	25
Secondary Care/ Acute trust	17
Primary Care Service	15
Housing	12
Adult Social Care	12
Substance Abuse	7
Children's Social Care	6
Mental Health	6
Police	3
Voluntary Sector	2
Idva	0

For three quarters (75%) of Maracs, there were not any invited agencies who said that they would not be providing a representative. Of the Maracs that said yes (22%), the most common answers were probation and primary care, however four Maracs specified Idva and three specified the police.

Supporting the Victim

Almost half (44%) of Maracs said that it had become more difficult for the Idva to contact the victim prior to Marac:



Almost half of Maracs (49%) said that there had been changes to the type of actions put in place to support victims. These Maracs went onto describe these changes; their answers are coded into themes given below.

Actions around different agencies

The most common theme (40%) discussed was agencies having to operate in different ways because of lockdown. This included offering a reduced service, such as not offering face to face appointments, as well as agencies increasing partnership working to maximise opportunities to contact survivors:

“More partnership working to utilise opportunities to have contact with victims who may be living with perpetrators...”

Half of these comments mentioned the police. These comments varied from extra responsibility being placed on the police to contact victims, to them being unable to carry out actions:

“The Police Early Intervention Team have been unable to complete actions to engage with victims who are not engaging with the IDVA due to differences in their working practices following the lockdown”

Actions around survivor contact

Just under one third (30%) of comments discussed difficulties around contacting survivors in a safe way. Comments ranged from concerns around the lack of face to face support, to agencies having to find more creative ways to contact survivors:

“Having to be more creative in terms of social distancing and how agencies can safely contact victims, i.e. safer for the schools where there are children”

Effectiveness of action planning

Over a quarter (28%) of Maracs mentioned that action planning was less effective because of lockdown restrictions:

“Joint meetings that were often used to introduce IDVA to a victim are not possible currently. Some other actions to disrupt the perpetrator are also not currently possible.”

Recommendations for Maracs

- While the pandemic has created specific pressures on Maracs, many of the challenges remain the same as pre-COVID-19 - in particular the need for Maracs to implement the Ten Principles of an Effective Marac².
- All Maracs should strive to ensure the nine core agencies are represented around the table whether that is virtual or in person.
- The input of education as an agency has been important particularly during a period when many adult and child victims are not visible to other agencies.
- It is essential during this period that Marac governance structures are robust and fully support the operational implementation of the virtual forums. We do not have enough evidence to make a recommendation about the use of virtual tools to run Marac but will be doing further assessment about lessons for the future.
- There are challenges in chairing a virtual meeting which can be assisted by implementing a structure. Please refer to the guidance for [Effective Chairing a Marac](#).