



Responding to domestic abuse during COVID-19

ACC Duncan Sloane on Police Scotland's response

Podcast transcript

Key:

US – Unknown Speaker

LM – Lucy McDonald

DS – Duncan Sloan

US

We know that the current coronavirus situation, and lockdown measures being taken, will cause particular difficulty and potential increased risk for people living with domestic abuse. In this podcast, Lucy McDonald speaks to Assistant Chief Constable Duncan Sloan, of Police Scotland, about how the Police in Scotland are responding to domestic abuse during the current crisis.

ACC Sloan is responsible for major crime and public protection, which includes public protection, local crime, and forensics in major crime.

LM

Hi, Duncan – thanks so much for joining me today. With the current coronavirus pandemic, we know that self-isolating and quarantine measures will present specific risks and challenges for those being abused by a partner/an ex-partner, and we'd like to explore how Police Scotland are shaping their response to respond to these additional challenges.

Can I ask you, first of all, to set out what particular risks that social isolation and distancing might create for families living with domestic abuse?

DS

Absolutely, yes. Thanks, Lucy. As we know, these are unprecedented times, and we're acutely aware that there is an increased risk of domestic abuse as people observe isolation and social distancing guidance. I must stress that we will continue to respond to *all* calls regarding domestic incidents. Quite simply, Police Scotland will not tolerate domestic abuse. Tackling this abuse is an absolute priority for us, and that's not changed because of COVID-19. We know because victims and survivors tell us that isolation is often a tactic that the perpetrators – the actual abusers – use, to restrict victim's opportunities to seek help and support from friends and family, or websites and social media.

We know that domestic abuse is not just physical or sexual abuse; it includes abusive behaviours such as isolation, verbal, financial and psychological abuse too. And often, perpetrators dress up their actions, claiming to be protecting victims by keeping them away from others, and even with the current government advice is to keep away from others ... you know... my message to victims is clear, and ... you know... whilst isolating, you must also be safe from abuse whilst doing that.

Victim safety planning is a priority at all stages of police involvement, as you would imagine, and we work productively every day with partners across Scotland to ensure that we're referring and signposting victims and their families for help and support, throughout the criminal justice process. And it's important that people know that these service organisations remain in business, like ourselves, and those referrals can still be made, even in our current climate.

So, I want victims to be reassured that... that they know they're not alone, and my message is this; that this is *everyone's* business ... you know... if you, or anyone you know, is being abused ... you know... if you're a neighbour, living in a street, and you know someone... then *please* contact the Police on 101, or indeed, if there's an immediate threat, obviously call 999. I've got to provide that reassurance that we will respond accordingly. Let me be clear that those breaking the Law will be dealt with appropriately, to ensure that people and the public are kept safe from any risk and harm.

LM

Thanks very much, Duncan, for those messages, and setting out the absolute priority around domestic abuse. Can I ask if you have seen any change yet, or... on the ground, in Police Scotland around domestic abuse and how it's being reported?

DS

So, we're seeing a decrease in domestic abuse incidents, actually, in comparison to the same period last year. However, it's important to say it's just too soon to say why this might be the case. But we're *very* aware that this decrease does not necessarily reflect what might be happening behind closed doors. You know... we don't *know*... people don't always report – if you like – people don't always report abuse immediately – it sometimes can be weeks, months or even years before domestic abuse is reported, to either support services or indeed to us in the Police. Therefore, it could be *months*, or indeed years, before we have a clear picture of the effect that enforced isolation has had because of COVID-19.

But equally, we recognise that whilst we're seeing a decrease in domestic abuse incidents ... you know... there is information coming through from other countries, and for obvious reasons, we think where people are isolated there is an increased risk and potentially ... you know... there is an increase in domestic abuse that is currently ongoing. That's why it's so important for me ... you know... that people understand that we're here to help ... you know... we will continue to treat reports of domestic abuse as a priority. We'll listen – we want to listen, and we want to investigate. People and ... you know... victims' safety is our priority.

So, again, just reiterating my message here ... you know... to anyone out there listening; if you know of anyone you know is at risk of domestic abuse, then please call Police Scotland – call us on 101, or 999 in an emergency, or indeed the National Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline – where help is available 24/7 on that line, also.

LM

Thanks very much. And exactly what you're saying, that we will expect the incidents of domestic abuse to increase over time; can I just ask if there are any operational adjustments happening at the moment, in Police Scotland, with regards to this area of business?

DS

Yeah, I mean... the crucial role of the Police Service – particularly at this time – is to support and protect the vulnerable, and that's across the board, here, that's domestic abuse victims and *anyone* who's vulnerable, living alone, who's not got that support and family and friends at this time. And it's important that ... you know... I say that we're going to continue to do that – to support them – so, we're maximising our own resources, if you like, to ensure that we protect frontline policing to do just that. We've prioritised our frontline response, and continue to provide a policing service *right* across the country, and that means regardless of where you live, in Scotland.

It's true to say this time ... you know... there are benefits to having a single service to respond to a national emergency like this. It means we can make decisions very quickly – we can quickly move people to where they're needed, to respond to *any* given situation, and also address any of those gaps that are opening up elsewhere, due to any illness or extra demands of local circumstances. We've got officers across our Specialist Crime Division, including our own Domestic Abuse Task Force, who continue to provide the highest standard of investigation and support to the local divisions for all serious crimes. However, in these unprecedented times, we may have to review and alter some of our traditional practices; but I've got to, again, say that will not impact on our response to domestic abuse.

LM

Can I ask you about the multi-agency response; are Police Scotland still participating in multi-agency risk assessment conferences and multi-agency tasking and co-ordinating these things at this time, for domestic abuse?

DS

In simple terms, yes, but – as I previously said – we've had to review and alter some of our traditional practices. However, we're still actively participating in the MARAC and MATAC processes for victims and perpetrators, and that... that obviously, that work goes along the multi-agency model, alongside our key partners. Protecting victims and their families whilst taking appropriate actions ... you know... including robust enforcement measures to prevent and reduce the harm caused by perpetrators remains an absolute priority for us.

LM

The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act came into force last year; since 2018 Police Scotland have been working with ourselves at SafeLives, and also other key organisations across Scotland, to implement Domestic Abuse Matters (Scotland) – a large-scale training programme to prepare police officers and staff for the implementation of that legislation. Do you have any reflections, Duncan, on this programme, now that it's almost coming to an end, and also in light of the current coronavirus crisis?

DS

Yeah... I think ... you know... recognising within the law ... you know... the full range of behaviours that are used by abusers to control, and coerce and ... you know... instil fear in their victims – that's been the most ... you know... for me, the most significant step in our efforts to tackle domestic abuse in Scotland. You know... we're fully committed to training up our officers to support the implementation of the new domestic abuse offences, and we've been ... you know... working with SafeLives, as you say, to tackle the myths of coercive and controlling behaviours, highlighting tactics that abusers use, and to develop and truly ... you know... to embed that workplace culture that there's absolutely *no* tolerance for domestic abuse.

I can tell you ... you know... in relation to the training with yourselves, more than 14,000 of our officers and staff have now been trained to recognise domestic abuse, number one, it isn't always violent or physical, as we know, it's often psychological. It's... disempowering, and isolating for victims, and removing them from the support of family and friends, which can have the most *devastating* impact. As the number shows, I've said ... you know... over 14,000... we've provided that training for a wide variety of ranks and roles across the whole organisation, and that includes the Force Executive, and even the Chief Constable. That reflects how seriously we take the need for enhanced organisational understanding, and the feedback from the training we've had is *hugely* positive, from staff and officers.

We've got Domestic Abuse Champions now – we've got more than 700, force-wide – and that's across all 13 local policing divisions. We've got them in control rooms, and the criminal justice divisions, and that will be the legacy, if you like, for who will continue to embed and develop that learning ... you know... to keep this momentum going. And alongside Domestic Abuse Matters training, we've completely revised our other domestic abuse training provisions, and that includes right across ... you know... if we're bringing new people into the organisation – from probational training to the specialist investigators' training within ... you know... with specialist investigator development programme for specialists in that area of work.

LM

What advice do you have for victims and survivors of domestic abuse in Scotland?

DS

Quite simply, we're here to help. We will listen – and I can't stress that enough – we *want* to listen. We

understand how difficult it can be, to report abuse, but advice and support is *always* available from us. And clearly, if people are not ready to speak to the Police, or they want to speak to someone else about it, I would *absolutely* encourage that ... you know... and *please* – again, the message is ... you know... if it's not to us, in the Police – if it's not the right time – speak ... you know... call the National Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage helpline, where that help and assistance can be given ... you know... to start the journey, if you like, and potentially thereafter coming to the Police.

LM

Thank you. And to reiterate the Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage helpline number; 0800 027 1234. What about victims who need a police response; what is the best number to contact, and how can victims do this safely, during lockdown?

DS

Call us on 101, right, and clearly, if it's an emergency ... you know... 999. Call 999, as traditionally people would. If victims... if they have access to ... you know... to the internet ... you know... information's available on our website, just now, you can view that very quickly. But equally – and I do say this, because I understand the nervousness around potentially looking at that – but you can quickly navigate away from those pages, if you need to. So, a victim who is under stress, or in a situation, and were looking at that, they can come away from it very quickly.

LM

And can I ask, if a member of the household *has* coronavirus, will this affect the police response?

DS

So, again, I need... really emphasise; we will still respond. The Police will respond to domestic abuse – it's a high priority for us. But we will dynamically assess those circumstances, and respond appropriate to whatever the circumstances are at the time. So, that may mean, quite simply – for people to understand how police respond – it may mean that some of our officers may attend in protective equipment – in PPE, as it's now getting commonly referred to – and taking that ... you know... the appropriate measures to minimise risk – and that's to the victims themselves, to their partners, to our officers, just to manage that situation. But our response to domestic abuse will not change; we will attend, and we will take action.

LM

Duncan, do you have a message for those who use abuse to control their partner and children, or those who find themselves becoming increasingly controlling and abusive during isolation measures?

DS

Absolutely. Abusers need to understand, we will – as I've said – respond to *all* reports of domestic abuse. We will delve into their histories – and the abusers' histories – and we will speak to previous partners, and we'll use all of the powers at our disposal to ensure that they face the full consequences of their behaviour. Put it simply – there's *no* excuse they can offer us, and we are not... we will *not* tolerate domestic abuse.

LM

And what can we do, in the domestic abuse sector, to raise awareness of the specific risks and needs for those affected by domestic abuse during the coronavirus pandemic; how can we best work with Police Scotland and others to maintain a robust response for families subjected to domestic abuse?

DS

I suppose... it's recognising that this is *everyone's* business ... you know... no single agency can address this. We all need to keep working together and supporting each other, so that we can remove or at least reduce the threat, the risk, and the harm that's caused by domestic abuse, especially ... you know... what we're faced with in these unprecedented times. By working together, we can offer victims the advice and support that they need to achieve better outcomes for themselves, and the families – the kids that are affected by this – and to ensure that those who perpetrate abuse, that they face the consequences of their actions. No-one should feel unsafe in their own home, after all.

So, if they ... you know... again, as I say, it's *everyone's* business – if anyone knows... if you know of anyone who's at risk of domestic abuse, then they should call the Police. Call us on 101, call us on 999 in an emergency situation, or indeed contact Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage helpline, on the number 0800 027 1234, where again that help is extended throughout 24/7 cover.

LM

Thank you, Duncan. Any final messages you'd like to share?

DS

I suppose, I... we just want people to feel safe, you know, in their own homes and their own communities. We – Police Scotland – we want to prevent harm by identifying people who may be at risk, and by identifying those who are the abusers, to try and prevent and reduce that risk. Domestic abuse – and I'll say it again – it's not just one agency's responsibility – this is *everyone's* business. Domestic abuse is *not* acceptable, and it's not inevitable, so my message, again, is if you – if it's yourself as a victim, or you know anyone – if your neighbour... particularly in these times of isolation, if you think something's going on behind closed doors, and you think someone's at risk of being abused, please contact us. Please phone Police Scotland on 101. Call us on 999 if it's an emergency, or if you need that support please contact the Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage helpline on the number 0800 027 1234, where that support is there for everyone, 24/7.

LM

Ok. Thank you so much for your time, Duncan.

DS

No, thank you. I really appreciate it, thank you.

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