

4 November 2021

Sent by email

Copies sent to Baroness Barran MBE, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education and Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education.

Dear Secretary of State for Education,

A warm welcome and congratulations on your new role, I very much look forward to working with you to support children and families. I am writing to welcome the commitment made in the Chancellor's speech last week to increase the spending allocation to the Department for Education. As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, I am particularly pleased to see the £500 million committed over the next three years to transform 'Start for Life' and family help services through Family Hubs in half of the council areas across England.

We know that children are far too often the hidden victims of domestic abuse, with this crime being gravely underreported. Even so, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimates that one in five adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced at least one form of child abuse, whether emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or witnessing domestic violence or abuse, before the age of 16 years. This accounts for 8.5 million people.

In the year ending March 2019, Childline delivered 19,847 counselling sessions to children in the UK where abuse was the primary concern; around 1 in 20 of the sessions resulted in a referral to external agencies. Unsurprisingly, the long-term impacts of this are severe. Around half of adults (52%) who experienced abuse before the age of 16 years also experienced domestic abuse later in life, compared with 13% of those who did not experience abuse before the age of 16 years.

The Domestic Abuse Act made real strides in recognising children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right through the new statutory definition of domestic abuse. It is crucial to recognise this change within the funding allocation. Children are finally entitled to specialist and targeted domestic abuse support and may present through Family Hubs and wider services. Furthermore, issues of teenage relationship abuse, adolescent-to-parent violence and child sexual (and often criminal) exploitation all need to be understood and embedded across all of these services.

A victim or survivor's first experience with front-line services is likely to shape their decision to disclose and seek support in the future. It is therefore imperative that these new services have a clear understanding of the dynamics and complexities of domestic abuse, and that they respond sensitively and effectively when abuse is identified. I strongly recommend that all practitioners have specific, robust and well-evaluated training in domestic abuse, work closely with specialist domestic abuse services in their local area, and have robust policies, procedures and protocols in place to respond to domestic abuse. Information sharing will also be critical, and investment must be made so that crucial information is not lost between agencies.

We know that fully funded support targeting the early years and those facing multiple disadvantages is key for an effective response to domestic abuse, and this can be delivered by no single agency alone. It requires a Coordinated Community Response (CCR), a truly multi-agency effort that draws on the resources, expertise and power across the spectrum of statutory and specialist agencies and organisations. This response understands the system as a whole and the needs of victims and their children - as well as the needs and risks posed by perpetrators - as diverse, multi-layered and intersecting. The CCR sits at the heart of the local response, but must also be embedded, understood and promoted at the national level. The 'Start for Life' and Family Hub services have the potential to drive forward this effective and coordinated community response to domestic abuse, and support children to reach their potential.

I have attached my full representation to the Spending Review, which has also been shared with teams at the Department for Education and outlines these proposals in more detail, with full costings.

Consistency will be crucial. All victims and their children should be supported no matter where they live. As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, I have specific statutory powers which can be brought to bear to better understand local provision and requires public agencies to respond to my recommendations. I would be happy to make use of such powers to support your Department's work to ensure all children affected by domestic abuse receive the support they're entitled to.

I would like to thank you again for the Department for Education's dedication in supporting children affected by domestic abuse. We have an opportunity to break the cycle of abuse and I will do all that I can to support your Department to protect children most at risk.

I would very much welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals in more detail at the earliest convenient opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicole Jacobs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nicole Jacobs