



**domestic
abuse
commissioner**

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Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Caxton House, Tothill Street,
London, SW1H 9NA

Dear Secretary of State,

I would like to warmly congratulate you on your new role as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Since my appointment as the first Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales in September 2019, I have had the privilege to act as an independent voice for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, drawing on my 30 years' experience in domestic abuse services, policy and intervention. I have used my statutory powers, which are set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to hold both agencies and government to account in tackling domestic abuse and to raise public awareness.

I have worked with the previous Ministers and officials at DWP to help improve the support provided to the 2.1 million victims and survivors of domestic abuse every year and to hold perpetrators to account. I very much look forward to continuing this work with you and your new Ministerial team in your new role, particularly in light of the Government's ambitious cross-Departmental mission to halve VAWG in a decade.

I note with interest the importance you place on early years and child development and anticipate that your professional experience at the (then named) Maternity Alliance will prove most valuable in your Department's work to address the barriers that vulnerable people face in getting back to employment and accessing the Welfare system. Many victims of domestic abuse and their children face extreme poverty, economic uncertainty, unstable housing arrangements and mounting debt. The DWP has a critical role to play to support them in their time of need. I look forward to working with you closely to ensure that adult victims and survivors and their children are able to access the welfare support they need, at the right time.

The impact of domestic abuse

Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on victims and their families, and by the Home Office's own assessment, it cost society approximately £81bn in a single year¹. The monetary impact of domestic abuse is also felt by victims and their families, with a Women's Aid survey finding that 50% of survivors were prevented from fleeing by the stark reality of not being able to financially

¹ Based on 2016 analysis, adjusted to 2023/24 prices.

support their children, 52% were prevented from fleeing due to debt, and 48% of survivors were prevented from leaving due to concerns that benefits wouldn't cover increased living costs.

Responding to domestic abuse is everybody's business; every part of the local community and every statutory agency has a role to play, in partnership with specialist services. In the same way, an effective national response to domestic abuse requires a multi-disciplinary approach which utilises the whole of the government's apparatus. As set out in your Manifesto's 'mission led' approach, tackling domestic abuse must be a genuine cross-Departmental priority for this new Government - working together to fully harness levers of change, overseen by robust governance and accountability and driven from the very heart of Government.

Opportunities for change

The Department for Work and Pensions has a critical role to play in the response to domestic abuse and has the potential to make crucial, long-lasting improvements to the lives of victims and their children. I was pleased to see that in your first few days in Office, alongside the Secretary of State for Education, you have already set up a taskforce to tackle child poverty, and have committed to reviewing Universal Credit to tackle poverty in your Manifesto. I was also pleased to see the Employment Rights Bill in the King's speech which will look to improve rights on sick pay and unfair dismissal. These changes will significantly improve the experiences of victims and survivors of domestic abuse. I am grateful that these will be delivered by this new Government and look forward to discussing them further with you and your Officials.

I would however urge you to build on these commitments and go further with your Department's support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. To this end, I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the recent briefing I shared with Officials in your Department, which sets out my key issues, priorities and recommendations for the Department. This is attached to this correspondence for your reference.

The briefing highlights the need for victims and survivors to be fully supported by a welfare system that recognises their specific needs and helps them to reach their full potential with financial independence. My mapping exercise undertaken in 2022 underscores the need for this type of support. I heard from over 4,000 victims and survivors about what type of support they wanted to access over the last 3 years, versus what they received. 50% of survivors wanted help with money problems or debt, but of those who wanted it, only 27% were able to access it. Similarly, 33% wanted help to stay in work or get a new job, yet only 23% were able to access that community-based support.

To improve the system, I put forward a number of recommendations:

To support victims experiencing economic abuse:

- The DWP should identify and share best practice to support victims of domestic abuse in, or returning to, the workplace;
- The DWP should extend the [Flexible Fund](#), and fund flexible, short-term payments for victims to enable them to leave abuse;
- The DWP should enable victims in employment to access refuge accommodation without having to leave employment in order to access Housing Benefit.

To improve the Child Maintenance Service, of which latest available figures show that domestic abuse victims made up 55% of users:

- The DWP should upskill the CMS workforce to identify domestic abuse, handle cases appropriately, and signpost to support, including through sector led and accredited training;
- Provide minimum payments for victims and survivors to avoid them incurring debt and recover missed payments through stronger enforcement;
- Expand the use of single named caseworkers for cases of domestic abuse;
- Consider legislative options to prosecute perpetrators who make use of the CMS for controlling and coercive behaviour.

There are also a number of opportunities to repurpose existing funding streams, for programmes such as Ask for Ani and Reducing Parental Conflict to fund safer interventions or address more pressing concerns. I would recommend reinvesting this funding into supporting children subject to domestic abuse and identifying and sharing best practice in supporting victims to return to the workplace following abuse.

I urge you to read this document in full and give my recommendations your careful consideration. I believe that they are an imperative step towards achieving ambitious change in the welfare system that victims and survivors both need and deserve. If my recommendations were to be taken on board in full, we would expect employment to increase for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, with children properly financially supported through an effective, efficient and domestic abuse-informed Child Maintenance Service.

Working together

As an independent Commissioner, my team and I are here to support, advise, and challenge. My small team of domestic abuse experts develop policy, conduct research, and collect practice insight to ensure that we can be at the forefront of thinking and understanding of what victims and survivors need. I would warmly welcome the opportunity to engage regularly with you in your new role, and remain available to you and your colleagues across Government to engage and advise on all issues relating to domestic abuse – as well as to facilitate, wherever needed, invaluable connections to the specialist sector and to victims and survivors themselves.

I would like to take the opportunity of a new Government to deepen my engagement with the DWP's Ministers, given the priority needed to improve support and systems for victims of domestic abuse. If your team could please advise my Office of your upcoming availability, I would warmly welcome a discussion at your earliest convenience on all of these important issues.

Yours sincerely,

Nicole Jacobs



Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales