



Baroness Finlay of Llandaff
BY EMAIL ONLY

10 March 2021

Dear Ilora,

Domestic Abuse Bill: Alcohol and mental health support

I am writing to reiterate our commitment to tackling substance misuse issues and domestic abuse.

We intend to reflect the importance of joining up the issues of domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health problems in the statutory guidance that will be issued under clause 73 of the Bill.

Whilst the guidance to be issued under clause 73 relates to the effect of the definition of domestic abuse, one of the central functions is to provide clear information on what domestic abuse is and how to identify it, including the behaviours that amount to domestic abuse, the impact of domestic abuse and links to other forms of abuse. That is why in the draft guidance we published last July we make specific reference to alcohol and drug misuse increasing the likelihood and severity of domestic abuse. We are clear that there is not a simple causal relationship between substance misuse and domestic abuse, but that there is a frequent coexistence between them. We also acknowledge that some victims may also use alcohol and drugs as a response, as well as the consequences such abuse may have on children.

We know domestic abuse can have a long-lasting effect on victims. It can lead to the development of lasting health problems, such as mental health issues including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. We also make express reference to this, as a central function of the guidance is to support to frontline professionals who have responsibilities to safeguard and support victims of domestic abuse.

A chapter of the draft guidance is dedicated to the agencies' response to domestic abuse, including identifying best practice. I would like to assure you that the guidance has been subject to extensive engagement with expertise from the sector, Commissioners, academics and those on the frontline. There will be a formal consultation following Royal Assent, and we would welcome any feedback and comment you may have ahead of its final publication.

In terms, your amendment seeks to extend the definition of domestic abuse support in clause 55(2). As part of the new duty in Part 4, tier one local authorities will be expected to

assess the accommodation-based support needs of all domestic abuse victims and their children, and within the statutory guidance that will accompany Part 4 we describe the support within 'relevant' safe accommodation and this includes support designed specifically for victims with unique and / or complex needs such as, mental health advice and support, drug and alcohol advice and support, including sign posting accordingly.

We expect authorities to ensure the appropriate and adequate support within safe accommodation that meet the needs of all victims including those with multiple complex needs and who's support needs may not be able to be met within generic domestic abuse safe accommodation, such as victims who identify as those presenting with complex needs (including those with mental health and/or substance misuse needs).

There is also ongoing work within the healthcare system to address this issue in a strategic way. The ongoing work to create new Integrated Care Systems will see NHS organisations, in partnership with local organisations take collective responsibility for managing resources, delivering NHS care, and improving the health of the population they serve. This offers a real opportunity to improve the join-up between different services to provide truly integrated care.

In addition to this, Clinical Commissioning Groups and other local partners also produce a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment that should include consideration of victims and survivors. This ensures local Health and Wellbeing strategy and commissioning of mental health and substance misuse services meet the needs of the local population.

The Bill also gives the Domestic Abuse Commissioner a wide remit in relation to tackling domestic abuse. The Commissioner's role description states that she must adopt a specific focus on the needs of victims from groups with particular needs, which could include those with substance misuse or mental health issues. However, as an independent office holder, it will be for the Commissioner to determine her priorities which will be set out in a strategic plan.

We have always been clear that the provisions in the Bill must be viewed alongside the significant number of preventative measures we are implementing which do not require legislation. The forthcoming Domestic Abuse Strategy will build on the work of the Bill to transform our response to domestic abuse. The strategy too will provide a comprehensive framework for responding to and supporting victims, and will be published later this year.

I am sympathetic to the aims your amendment and I understand that importance of offering support to victims and perpetrators that suffer from substance misuse and mental health issues. However, given the ongoing work in healthcare and the ability for the Commissioner and local authorities to address these issues as they see fit, we do not believe it is necessary to incorporate this amendment in the Bill. I hope you will see the measures already in the Bill and the commitment to address this in the statutory guidance as a signal that this is a priority for the Government.

I am copying this letter to Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe, Baroness Burt of Solihull and Lord Ribeiro and placing a copy in the library of the House.



Baroness Williams of Trafford