



# Coronavirus (COVID-19) Supplementary National Violence Against Women Guidance



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# Cosla/Ministerial Spokesperson Foreword

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The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures now in place to control the spread of the coronavirus,<sup>1</sup> are no excuse for the perpetration of violence against women and girls (VAWG). However, they may create an environment whereby the risks to women, children and young people suffering or recovering from domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG are heightened in local communities across Scotland.

Across Scotland, we know that professionals within local authorities and other key community planning organisations are working incredibly hard to reduce risks to, and help safeguard, people within their local communities. Despite the challenging environment they are operating under, local authorities and other key public sector and third sector partners are continuing to play a vital role in ensuring that women, children and young people's needs are met now and throughout this period of heightened risk.

As co-owners of [Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls](#), COSLA and the Scottish Government have developed this supplementary guidance for local authorities and other key community planning partners to support them with this important task. The guidance has been developed in partnership with the Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland and has been informed by a wide range of specialist VAWG organisations working across Scotland, as well as key professional bodies.

Specifically, this guidance aims to ensure that a sustainable, joined-up approach to safeguarding the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during COVID-19 is embedded at a local strategic level. It is intended to support the strong leadership already being demonstrated by Local Government and other key community planning partners across Scotland in ensuring effective protection and provision of support for people experiencing VAWG.

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1 The Scottish Government introduced [measures](#) as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak requiring people to stay at home and away from others to help protect the NHS and save lives. The [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\)\(Restrictions\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#) ("the Coronavirus Regulations") (implemented 26th March) contain the lawful basis for these measures and are reviewed at least once every 21 days. In addition, supporting guidance to the Coronavirus Regulations for circumstances where there may be domestic abuse may be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-domestic-abuse/pages/overview/>.

Ultimately, the guidance is intended to be a useful resource that can support local decision-makers across a wide range of organisations and partnerships. As a live and adaptable resource, it aims to ensure collaborative responses to women, children and young people affected by VAWG continue to be prioritised as part of our wider strategic response to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the significant challenges posed by the coronavirus, we firmly believe that, by continuing to work together to deliver on our shared commitments, we can realise our shared ambition of making Scotland truly Equally Safe.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Parry".

Councillor Kelly Parry  
Community Wellbeing  
Spokeperson, COSLA



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christina McKelvie".

Christina McKelvie MSP  
Minister for Older People  
and Equalities

# Introduction and Aims of the Guidance

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## Background

Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls was launched in 2014 and revised in 2016. The strategy sets out the Scottish Government and COSLA's joint vision for a strong and flourishing Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected, and where women and girls live free from all forms of violence and abuse – and the attitudes that help perpetuate it.

At a local level, Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) are recognised as the multi-agency mechanism for delivering Equally Safe. In 2016, the Scottish Government and COSLA, with the support of the Improvement Service, published updated guidance for VAWPs, which clarifies the roles and responsibilities of these strategic partnerships in coordinating the responses of the key public sector and third sector organisations working locally to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women and children affected by violence and abuse.

In recognition that VAWG damages health and wellbeing, limits freedom and potential, and is a fundamental violation of human rights, the 2016 guidance highlights the importance of collaborative working between VAWPs and other relevant thematic community planning partnerships wherever possible. This includes (but is not limited to): Adult and Child Protection Committees; Community Justice Partnerships; Community Safety Partnerships; Alcohol and Drugs Partnerships and Health and Social Care Partnerships.

## Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Children and Young People

In communities across Scotland, women, children and young people experiencing VAWG are at significant increased risk of harm during the COVID-19 pandemic. International evidence reviews<sup>2</sup> highlight that increased levels of domestic abuse during lockdown phases of the pandemic have been reported in China, Italy, Spain, France and Australia, with evidence from other epidemics and disasters suggesting

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2 [UNFPA, \*Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage\* \(April 2020\)](#)

that the risk of harm from all forms of VAWG will continue to increase post-disaster. This includes domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), trafficking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

The current social restrictions on movement in communities across Scotland create new risks to those suffering or recovering from domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG. These include perception that statutory services, such as police and homelessness services are not operating; the lack of physical access to normal social networks such as friends and extended family; reduced reach of interventions such as specialist VAWG and universal support services; sickness of frontline specialist service providers; barriers caused through increased use of digital or telephone enabled services; financial dependencies and increased access by perpetrators to women, children and young people because of social distancing and lockdown measures.

While all women and children may be at increased risk of harm during the pandemic, it is important to note that women and children with protected characteristics may face additional barriers to support and be at increased risk of exploitation and coercion during the duration of the pandemic response over the coming weeks and months. This includes: minority ethnic women and girls; refugees and asylum seekers; disabled women and girls (including those with learning disabilities); LGBTI people; and women at different ages and stages of life (including older women). Women and children experiencing poverty and deprivation are also likely to experience additional challenges, as are women migrants with no recourse to public funds.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, women, children and young people with complex needs including substance misuse, a history of offending behaviour and/ or mental health issues and trauma who are experiencing VAWG may experience additional challenges and support needs during the pandemic. It is vital that local authorities and other community planning partners ensure they are considering this during all stages of their COVID-19 responses.

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3 <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding-adults> includes useful information on safeguarding vulnerable adults.

## Aims of the Supplementary VAW Guidance

The overall aim of this supplementary guidance is to ensure that a sustainable, joined-up approach to safeguarding the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during COVID-19 is embedded at a local strategic level. Specifically, it aims to:

- Ensure local decision-makers are aware of the suite of COVID-19 guidance that has been developed nationally that will be relevant to supporting women, children and young people affected by VAWG, and tackling perpetrators of that abuse;<sup>4</sup>
- Highlight risks to women, children and young people affected by VAWG in the:
  - Short term (during periods of lockdown and other social restrictions);
  - Medium term (as restrictions are lifted and we move towards recovery); and
  - Long term (as partners transition to a ‘new normal’);
- Support local decision-makers to identify short-, medium- and long-term actions to mitigate risks to women, children and young people as a result of COVID-19 and begin to support early planning for the post-pandemic period in order to ensure women, children and young people’s recovery needs are recognised and addressed at a strategic level.

While aimed primarily at local authorities, the guidance recognises that a joined-up approach across a wide range of public sector and third sector partners will be needed locally in order to ensure women, children and young people are protected during the pandemic, and that tackling and preventing VAWG is embedded in broader medium- and long-term recovery strategies. This includes (but is not limited to) Councils, Police, NHS, Women’s Aid organisations, Rape Crisis services, housing providers, SCRA and other key third sector partners. It is intended to be a ‘live’ document that can be updated to respond to changing challenges and opportunities facing decision-makers over the coming months.

An overview of key risks and mitigating actions for decision-makers to consider is outlined in the table below. More detail on each of these risks and actions is available in the remainder of the guidance.

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4 A list of the [key guidance that has been developed to date](#) has been included as an appendix to this guidance.

## Key Risks and Mitigating Actions for Local Decision-Makers to Consider as Part of Their Wider Strategic Responses to COVID-19

SHORT-TERM: DURING PERIODS OF LOCKDOWN AND OTHER RESTRICTIONS TO SUPPRESS THE SPREAD OF COVID-19	
Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Domestic abuse, sexual violence and abuse, FGM and forced marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home is not a safe place for many women, children and young people (WCYP)</li> <li>• There are increased barriers to accessing support and emergency housing during lockdown, particularly for WCYP with protected characteristics</li> <li>• Perpetrators of domestic abuse may increase levels of control, surveillance and violence during periods of lockdown whether living with or apart from WCYP</li> <li>• Women face increased risk of economic dependency because of economic crisis</li> <li>• Vulnerable CYP are particularly at risk as are less visible to agencies/services</li> <li>• There may be increased risk of sexual violence, exploitation of children, online abuse/grooming, FGM and forced marriage because of social isolation</li> </ul>
Prostitution and other forms of Commercial Sexual Exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are at increased risk of being targeted to sell sex online</li> <li>• As a result of financial desperation and lack of financial support, women may be forced to sell sex at reduced prices during periods of lockdown, either online or in-person</li> <li>• Women engaged in selling sex in-person are at increased risk of contagion from COVID-19</li> <li>• Regular safety mechanisms and support might not be available to women involved in prostitution and other forms of CSE, increasing risk</li> </ul>
Women with complex needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social isolation may exacerbate existing mental health issues for survivors</li> <li>• Access to reproductive, abortion and sexual health services reduced; higher risk of abuse going undetected for pregnant women/new mothers; perpetrators may intensify control over reproductive health, so higher risk of unwanted pregnancy and STIs</li> <li>• Women in the criminal justice system released from prison during lockdown may face increased safety risks and reduced access to support</li> <li>• Decreased access to services for women with problem alcohol/drug use</li> </ul>
Perpetrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perpetrators in the criminal justice system released from prison during lockdown may pose increased safety risks to their families</li> <li>• Challenges in ensuring perpetrators remain engaged virtually with programmes/support and continue behaviour change</li> <li>• Perpetrators may use current situation to justify non-compliance &amp; avoid challenge</li> <li>• Emergency provisions in prisons and those related to CPOs may create specific risks</li> </ul>

**Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions**

1. Ensure MARACs continue to function to identify and ensure safety plans are in place for WCYP at greatest risk of harm
2. Develop a COVID-19 domestic abuse housing policy based on good practice guidance
3. Develop strategy for effective multi-agency communication & data sharing to monitor impact of emergency COVID-19 legislation and other suppression responses
4. Consider how to support and enhance capacity of specialist services. Wherever possible, this will include ensuring that any local funding and contractual expectations are flexible to support service delivery and the changing needs of WCYP
5. Encourage community planning partners to work together to ensure a consistent approach to meeting the needs of WCYP, particularly in adult protection, child protection and criminal justice responses
6. Ensure strategic partnerships work in close collaboration with members of VAW Partnerships, including specialist VAW support services
7. Use digital technology to ensure risks to WCYP are identified and managed early and effectively and encourage flexible, digital communication to support safeguarding processes where appropriate
8. Use social media and other communication channels to highlight local services & support available to WCYP, and ensure different sectors of the workforce know the role they can play in reducing risks
9. Update risk assessment & management plans for convicted perpetrators & intervene directly with perpetrators face-to-face or virtually to support them to change negative behaviours
10. Ensure Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are undertaken when developing any new policies/ responses to COVID-19, to reduce any unintended negative consequences to WCYP experiencing VAWG and ensure they meet the needs of people with protected characteristics

**MEDIUM TERM: ONCE RESTRICTIONS ARE LIFTED AND WE MOVE TOWARDS RECOVERY**

Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Increased demand for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of prolonged, intense trauma during lockdown, and long-term mental health issues for survivors could have been exacerbated by restrictions</li> <li>• Long waiting lists, lack of person-centred support and lack of support for WCYP with complex needs, all of which could exacerbate issues</li> <li>• WCYP with protected characteristics may face increased barriers to accessing support</li> <li>• Lack of access to support could contribute to some WCYP engaging in harmful or offending behaviours</li> <li>• WCYP leaving perpetrator after lockdown at highest risk of serious physical harm and murder</li> </ul>
Funding and capacity constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased challenges for services to meet surge in demand because of capacity and budget constraints</li> <li>• Potential for multiple lockdowns, leading to significant strain on specialist services</li> </ul>

**Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions**

11. Regularly consult with WCYP with lived experience of VAWG and ensure that the recovery systems and services put in place locally recognise and respond to their specific needs
12. Ensure local needs assessment and recovery plans are inclusive to the needs of WCYP affected by VAWG with protected characteristics and/ or complex needs
13. Ensure local workforces have capacity and capability to provide trauma-informed support and services for all WCYP who require it
14. Adopt a whole-systems, child-centred approach to working with families experiencing domestic abuse & ensure children are involved in decision-making where appropriate
15. Ensure perpetrators are held to account through robust use of criminal justice process and resumption of programmed interventions
16. Support specialist VAWG services to identify anticipated levels of demand for crisis, recovery and other support in the coming year, and ensure resources are available to meet these
17. Explore opportunities to lever additional resources to support systems and services to respond to increased levels of demand

**LONG-TERM: AS PARTNERS TRANSITION TO A 'NEW NORMAL'**

Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Long-term effects of crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instances of VAWG could go undetected/unreported for many months and years</li> <li>• Economic crisis could exacerbate WCYP's experiences of VAWG</li> <li>• Gender inequality could be further entrenched in social and economic systems</li> <li>• Local recovery does not take into account gender equality and VAWG and the links between the two</li> </ul>
<b>Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions</b>	
<p>18. Emphasis on tackling gender inequality and embedding primary prevention programmes, and a focus on prevention &amp; early intervention of VAWG</p> <p>19. Embed a whole-systems, gendered approach to tackling VAWG as part of wider local recovery responses</p> <p>20. Capture and build on good practice from crisis response</p> <p>21. Encourage multi-agency, collaborative working</p> <p>22. Promote commitment to tackling VAWG and promoting gender equality at a leadership level</p>	

## Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Data in Order to Inform Strategic Planning

Timescale	Why capture data on WCYP experiencing VAWG?	How can data be collected?
Short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pandemic and restrictions are compounding existing risks and inequalities for WCYP</li> <li>• Need to monitor impact of local and national COVID-19 responses on the safety and wellbeing of WCYP, in order to identify and reduce any risks of unintended harm.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police, victim/ survivor organisations and other key partners are collating statistics</li> <li>• Government and statutory agencies are identifying impact of COVID-19 across vulnerable people and communities</li> <li>• Maximising use of data collection processes agreed by SOLACE and COSLA, which include Public Protection datasets</li> </ul>
Medium and long term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collecting data on gender and equalities will help partners understand the long-term impact of COVID-19 on WYCP experiencing VAWG and gender inequality, and support in future strategic planning</li> <li>• Consistent approach to data collection will ensure risks for WYCP are identified and responded to at earliest possible stage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revisit mechanisms for collecting and analysing data to identify any areas for improvement</li> <li>• Set up systems to combine data from a number of sources using a relational database</li> <li>• Develop systems in partnership with VAW Partnerships &amp; Equality Leads</li> <li>• Integrate VAWG data collection with broader recovery data and intelligence systems currently in development</li> <li>• Ensure the highest standards of ethical data collection &amp; storage, given needs for sensitivity and anonymity around VAWG data</li> </ul>

## Promoting Consistent Messaging to Highlight Support for Women, Children and Young People (WCYP) in Local Response to VAWG

Timescale	Why capture data on WCYP experiencing VAWG?	How can data be collected?
<b>KEY MESSAGES LOCAL AUTHORITIES CAN PROMOTE TO SUPPORT WOMEN, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (WCYP) DURING ALL STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. WCYP experiencing VAWG are not alone and a range of specialist support services are available locally and nationally during and after lockdown;</li> <li>2. The lockdown is not an excuse for perpetrating abuse, and that perpetrators will be identified and held to account for their behaviours; and</li> <li>3. Tackling VAWG is everyone's business and professionals across a wide range of local workforces have a key role play in safely identifying and responding to risks that WCYP may be experiencing</li> </ol>		
<b>KEY AIMS OF COMMUNICATION PLANS LOCAL AUTHORITIES CAN SUPPORT AS PART OF THEIR WIDER STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19</b>		
Raising awareness of impact of pandemic and restrictions on WCYP experiencing VAWG	Ensuring professionals are aware of the range of tactics perpetrators might use during the pandemic to increase their control and abuse of WCYP	Ensuring that women with no recourse to public funds can access support and they know how to access this support
Encouraging women not to delay in seeking support	Signposting local and support available for WCYP	Recognising the impact of vicarious trauma and supporting the wellbeing of frontline workers
Encouraging women not to delay in seeking support	Signposting local and support available for WCYP	Recognising the impact of vicarious trauma and supporting the wellbeing of frontline workers

# Identifying and Responding to Increased Levels of Risk to Women and Children During Periods of Lockdown and Other Social Restrictions

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Local authorities, in collaboration with specialist third sector and public sector partners, have a key role to play in identifying women, children and young people who are at risk of and experiencing VAWG at an early stage and ensuring effective safeguarding measures are put in place. However, there will likely be increased challenges in both identifying women, children and young people at risk of VAWG during periods of lockdown and other social restriction measures and in ensuring that women, children and young people who need support are able to access it at the earliest possible stage.

This section of the guidance highlights particular risks that women, children and young people affected by different forms of VAWG may experience during periods of lockdown. It also identifies actions that key decision-makers within local authorities may want to consider taking to help mitigate these risks in the short term, as part of their wider strategic response to COVID-19.

## Increased risks to women, children and young people during periods of lockdown and other social restrictions

### Domestic abuse

Even prior to the pandemic, home was not a safe place for women and children experiencing domestic abuse in local communities across Scotland. Women already faced complex decisions and a wide range of barriers preventing their ability to safely escape an abusive partner. During the COVID-19 lockdown, when mobility is constrained and vulnerabilities increase, challenges facing women in escaping abusive partners have increased.<sup>5</sup>

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5 <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/0441-Domestic-Abuse-guidance-V1-003.pdf>

### **Perpetrator behaviour**

Perpetrators may feel more confident in increasing levels of control, violence and harassment during periods of lockdown with the belief that they are less likely to be detected and held to account. They may use the lockdown and shielding measures as an opportunity to increase surveillance of, and control over, women's access to phones, internet and communication with family, friends and professionals, and many survivors will change their safety plans because of changes to perpetrators' behaviour, service responses and family circumstances. Changes in perpetrators' patterns of abuse can result in a detrimental impact on the survivor's parenting – from an increase in poor mental health and use of alcohol as a coping mechanism to an interference with the day-to-day routine and how the family functions.

Perpetrators may also use the lockdown as a tactic to increase their control over their ex/partner's economic situation. This may involve interfering with her ability to work by preventing her from accessing resources to work from home or insisting she is solely responsible for childcare. The perpetrator may force his ex/partner to spend less money on essentials, take out new forms of credit/run up debt in her name, or may prevent her from accessing financial support, such as rent/mortgage holidays.

Women experiencing abuse in their home will find it more difficult to leave their abuser if they are living in poverty, and the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic will exacerbate these difficulties for many women.<sup>6</sup> Women in households making a joint claim to Universal Credit for the first time during lockdown may be more at risk of economic abuse because their benefits will almost certainly go to their partner.

### **Accessing support**

The ability of women, children and young people living with domestic abuse to disclose and access support from specialist and universal services may be dramatically reduced during this period. These challenges may be exacerbated by factors such as geography and intersecting identities. For women and children living in rural communities, there may be few/no neighbours or volunteers to seek support from, further exacerbating isolation and risk. BME women may find it more difficult to seek support and language barriers could increase these challenges, while different cultural pressures may make it more challenging for BME women to disclose experiences of abuse.

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<sup>6</sup> As women are more likely to be in precarious and low-income work than men, they are particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty due to the labour market disruptions caused by COVID-19.

### **Impact on children and young people**

With schools and early years settings no longer operating as normal, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are less visible to statutory and third sector services during periods of lockdown and thus at a significantly increased risk of neglect and harm. This is particularly true of children and young people who may not already have been identified as 'vulnerable persons' by local authorities, as they may find it more difficult to access/ know about support from specialist services and spaces in education hubs that have been put in place locally. Even where a child/young person has been identified as vulnerable, these challenges may still remain. Perpetrators may limit, remove or monitor use of technology for children and young people, making it harder for them to access support. During the lockdown, children may find themselves left in the unsupervised care of the perpetrator if their mother is a key worker and/ or becomes ill due to the virus.

### **Stalking and harassment**

There are also heightened risks for women, children and young people who do not live with the perpetrator. Lockdown means that perpetrators know where survivors are and there is a risk that online and in-person harassment/surveillance from ex-partners will intensify during this period. Perpetrators may use the lockdown restrictions as a tactic to keep children and young people with them and interfere with child contact arrangements away from their mother, citing health/quarantine reasons.<sup>7</sup> Perpetrators may also use virtual means of child contact as another tool for surveillance and harassment of the non-offending parent. Services also report increased anxiety and safety concerns among survivors around the court process, including postponed hearings and the increased use of bail.

### **Sexual violence and abuse**

Social isolation means there is an increased risk of sexual violence and abuse for some women, children and young people. This could include rape and sexual assault, as well as online grooming and intimate image abuse. Children and young people living in isolation with sexually abusive family/household members are at increased risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

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<sup>7</sup> The Lord President has issued [guidance on compliance with contact orders](#) during the pandemic, which covers both court ordered contact arrangements and more informal arrangements.

## Women involved in selling or exchanging sex and other forms of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Women who are at high risk of poverty, homelessness and destitution face an increased risk of sexual exploitation, coercion and violence during the lockdown. As a result of COVID-19, women in local communities across Scotland may be forced to sell sex at vastly reduced prices because of financial desperation, and in many cases will have no recourse to emergency financial support from the government. Evidence from other countries indicates that demand for direct contact sexual services is as high as before COVID-19, which means women face increased safety risks because regular safety mechanisms and support services might not be available, as well as increased risk of COVID-19 infection. Increased demand for women in the online industry puts single mothers, unemployed women, students without income, women being released from prison, and migrant and refugee women at particular risk of being targeted. They are also at risk of stalking, blackmail and harassment, which incurs future risks as men could use contact information in the future to pressurise for direct physical sex. Women involved in selling sex may not be known to local services and unfamiliar with engaging with them. They may have never accessed support, may experience/perceive stigma when accessing non-specialist support, and may struggle/ not wish to access benefits, including Universal Credit. Women involved in selling sex may also be at higher risk of poor mental health, problem alcohol/drug use and suicide.

## Forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM)

### **Forced marriage**

While the impact of COVID-19 on forced marriage in the UK is not yet known, evidence from other emergencies indicates that when basic services and social networks are restricted, incidence of forced marriage increases. While lockdown may prevent some marriages from taking place, there may be an increased incidence of forced marriages being planned. In addition, some perpetrators may take the opportunity of schools being closed to travel abroad to carry out a forced marriage either before or after lockdown is lifted.

### **FGM**

Perpetrators often wait until school summer holidays to commit FGM. While some perpetrators prefer to travel abroad to engage in FGM, some families may choose to travel despite the lockdown and risks of COVID-19. The closure of schools also provides increased opportunity for perpetrators to commit FGM undetected in the home. Support

for girls who have experienced FGM is normally triggered by a change in behaviour observed in schools. Closure of schools will make it harder to identify and support young survivors, while in turn also making it harder to prosecute perpetrators.

### Women, children and young people with complex needs<sup>8</sup>

Women, children and young people experiencing VAWG who also have complex needs (including physical or mental health issues, problem drug or alcohol use or a history of offending behaviour) already faced additional risks and challenges prior to the pandemic and are likely to experience increased risks and difficulties in accessing support during lockdown. It is likely that the effects of social isolation may exacerbate existing mental health issues for women, children and young people who are experiencing / have experienced VAWG. Survivors of past trauma could find that the lockdown triggers stress and anxiety at a time when it is more difficult to access support. Perpetrators' behaviours may cause or exacerbate women's problem alcohol/ drug use or mental health issues and/ or perpetrators may prevent them from accessing support for these issues.

In terms of physical health, pregnant women and new mothers are at high risk of domestic abuse, but access to universal services may be reduced during lockdown, meaning a potentially higher risk of abuse going undetected and women and babies unsupported. Control over women's reproductive and sexual health is often part of a perpetrator's course of control. However, with reduced access to reproductive health, sexual health services and vital abortion healthcare during lockdown, women may be at heightened risk of unwanted pregnancy and STIs.

Women in the criminal justice system are disproportionately likely to have complex needs and histories of trauma and abuse. Imprisonment during the crisis may have exacerbated some women prisoners' mental health issues, while early release because of the pandemic may see women prisoners re-entering the community with reduced access to support. When released, women prisoners could be forced to return to places of trauma and abuse, which increases their safety risks and could affect their long-term outcomes.

While offenders with a history of perpetrating domestic abuse will not be eligible for early release during the pandemic, women and children may still face increased harm from men released as part of this process if their abusive behaviours have not been

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<sup>8</sup> Where someone has additional support needs, it is important for practitioners to consider whether they are an adult at risk of harm in terms of Adult Support and Protection. Practitioners are advised to follow their local Adult Protection Committee guidance with regard to making decisions in this regard.

previously identified through the criminal justice system. Additionally, there may be less supervision of perpetrators on a scheduled release from prison during lockdown due to services being reduced or unable to continue as normal. There will also be challenges in ensuring perpetrators remain engaged virtually with behaviour change programmes which cannot be delivered in person. Some perpetrators may use the current situation to avoid challenge, justify non-compliance or to reinforce a tendency to blame or criticise their partners. The restrictions on accessing support services and criminal justice partners will inhibit women's opportunities to engage with these partners around safety concerns.

## Responding to the risks for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during lockdown

Despite the challenging period that local authorities and other key community planning partners are currently operating in and the multiple priorities they are managing, it is vital that:

- Local authorities and other community planning partners continue to ensure a joined-up, strategic approach is taken to safeguarding women, children and young people affected by VAWG within local communities across Scotland, and this is embedded within local resilience responses;
- All staff that come into contact with women, children and young people during lockdown are aware of the vital role they can play in identifying those affected by VAWG and ensuring that referrals are made to specialist services safely and effectively; and
- A robust and sustainable approach to tackling VAWG is embedded in local authorities' responses to COVID-19 at a strategic and operational level across all relevant departments. Ensuring Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are undertaken when developing any new policies/ responses to COVID-19, will help to reduce any unintended negative consequences to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG and ensure responses meet the needs of people with protected characteristics.

Specific actions that local authorities may want to consider taking during lockdown include:

## Promoting a joined-up approach for improving outcomes for women, children and young people across different community planning areas

A significant amount of guidance is currently being issued to, and by, local authorities to inform their responses to the pandemic. To date, this has included guidance for social workers, housing providers, education leads and child protection and public protection groups. Much of this guidance has the potential to have a significant impact on how local authorities respond to women, children and young people affected by VAWG during the lockdown, and it is vital that wherever possible partners across different areas of community planning work together to ensure a consistent approach is taken to ensuring their safety and wellbeing needs are met. For example, there are benefits in decision-makers within community justice and VAW working together to address any heightened risks to women, children and young people as a result of offenders being released from prison during the lockdown. Where any risk of domestic abuse is identified, CJSW teams should proactively contact court advocacy/ and or support services to identify any women, children and young people affected by the release. For women offenders who may be released during the lockdown into homes where domestic abuse occurs, it may be useful to examine whether throughcare plans could carry out routine enquiry.

Local authorities and HSCPs can play a key role in ensuring joined-up work by encouraging departments/ partners (including adult protection, child protection, community justice, education, health services [mental, substance and primary], housing, financial inclusion and community safety) to work in close collaboration with VAW Partnerships over the coming weeks and months. These departments/partners' participation in tackling VAWG is crucial as they provide services that have direct contact with families. Through the GIRFEC approach, those services can contribute to early intervention by being aware of the risks of VAWG to women, children and young people by tailoring their responses and reporting concerns as early as possible.

## Ensuring robust processes are in place to identify and protect women, children and young people affected by VAWG who are at greatest risk harm of during lockdown

Local Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), alongside other multi-agency arrangements in place locally, will play an increasingly important role in ensuring that women, children and young people at the highest risk of harm during the lockdown can be identified by partners at an early stage in order for safety plans to be

put in place. Local authorities and other key community planning partners have a vital role to play in ensuring these arrangements continue to function during lockdown and beyond, in order to prevent additional lives being lost to domestic abuse during the pandemic. [Guidance for multi-agency forums](#) (including MARACs) on responding to the challenges posed during COVID-19 has been developed by SafeLives, which outlines key actions that local authorities and other partners may want to consider in relation to: (i) responding to staffing issues; (ii) holding meeting via virtual platforms; (iii) identifying and managing risk to women and children; and (iv) developing safety planning that maximises opportunity for safe communication between vulnerable families and service providers and recognises and documents perpetrators' patterns of behaviour.

## Ensuring local domestic abuse housing policies meet the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG

Local authorities have a key role to play in ensuring local housing policies meet the needs of women and children affected by VAWG, and that people at risk of domestic abuse are able to move to safety. This includes putting in place a local response to the [CIH and SWA housing guidance](#), continuing with the allocation system to minimise voids, ensuring a flexibility with refuge voids and ensuring Women's Aid groups are not penalised for void rates.

## Supporting the work of local specialist VAWG services

Third sector organisations, including Women's Aid and Rape Crisis centres, play a critical role in supporting women, children and young people who are experiencing VAWG. In response to the lockdown, many specialist services have rapidly transformed their delivery models to offer critical support via telephone and digital platforms. Local authorities have a key role to play in supporting the capacity of frontline specialist workers and in promoting the specialist services available locally. Wherever possible, if specialist VAWG services are funded by local authorities, they can ensure grant-holders know that funding can be used flexibly during the pandemic to enable services to better respond to the changing needs of women, children and young people. They can also ensure that contractual expectations for the delivery of services are managed in a flexible way so that specialist services can continue to deliver support both now and in the future.

## Supporting women, children and young people migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

As part of their wider public health duties, local authorities have key roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding women, children and young people experiencing VAWG who have NRPF. This may include providing emergency accommodation to women, children and young people with NRPF who are homeless or 'rough sleeping' during the pandemic, as well as ensuring they can access financial support, food and other emergency assistance. COSLA has developed [guidance for local authorities on supporting people with NRPF during COVID-19](#).

## Maximising capabilities of social media and digital tools

Many local authorities and other key partners have significantly increased their use of social media and digital tools in their responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and there are opportunities to build on this to help ensure women, children and young people affected by VAWG are able to access information and support during lockdown. Specialist services are quickly adapting their delivery models to provide support remotely and there are a number of apps survivors can use to safely document abuse and access support. Much of the additional guidance being issued to local authorities around public protection highlights the need to use digital technology to ensure concerns and risks are dealt with early and effectively. Local authorities and key community planning partners have a vital role to play in encouraging flexible, digital communication to support safeguarding processes where appropriate. Social media remains a key method to communicate with local communities about available services and support and raise awareness of the increased risks of VAWG to women, children and young people.

However, given that many women, children and young people may not have access to devices or the internet because of affordability or because of perpetrator control, local authorities and partners should consider how to provide practical support for families in this area. In assessing vulnerability and need for technology in delivering educational materials, local authorities should also be aware of and plan for the possibility that some households may prioritise some children over others based on gender, age and/or other characteristics.

# Identifying and Responding to Increased Levels of Risk for Women and Children as Restrictions are Lifted and we Move Towards Recovery

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Local authorities, in collaboration with specialist third sector and public sector partners, have a key role to play in ensuring the needs of women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG are identified and addressed when restrictions are lifted and we move towards recovery. Emerging research from other countries and past pandemics indicates that there will likely be a surge in women, children and young people requiring support with violence, abuse and trauma once restrictions are lifted. It is vital that local authorities and other partners begin planning now to ensure systems and services are in place locally to respond to this anticipated increased demand.

This section of the guidance aims to highlight particular challenges that both women, children and young people affected by VAWG and the organisations that support them may experience as we move towards recovery. It also identifies actions that key decision-makers within local authorities may want to consider taking to help mitigate these risks, as part of their wider strategic response to COVID-19.

## Identifying risks to women and children experiencing VAWG during recovery

While it is likely that incidences of VAWG will continue to be significantly under-detected and under-reported in Scotland and other parts of the world for the foreseeable future, it is widely expected that the numbers of women, children and young people requiring crisis and recovery support with VAWG will significantly increase as restrictions are lifted. Research highlights that women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are at highest risk of serious physical harm and murder when they leave the perpetrator, with it being anticipated that a number of women will be waiting until lockdown is lifted to do so.

Long-term mental health challenges as a result of experiences of VAWG may well have

been exacerbated during the pandemic, and many women, children and young people may have experienced prolonged, intense trauma during the lockdown. Not having access to high-quality, person-centred support could impede their recovery and have a serious long-term impact on their outcomes. A lack of access to support could also contribute to some women's offending behaviours, as many women who offend do so from a background of trauma, mental health, problem alcohol/drug use or financial exclusion.

Prior to the pandemic, the capacity of community planning partners to respond to the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG within local communities was already limited as a result of budget pressures and austerity measures. It is highly likely that partners will face increased challenges in meeting demand once lockdown ends. There is a real risk that specialist support services may not be able to cope with increased demand because of funding and capacity constraints while having to work within a radically different delivery landscape. This may result in lengthy waiting lists, not enough person-centred support and a lack of support for women, children and young people with protected characteristics and those with complex needs. During this crisis, there remains the potential for multiple scheduled lockdowns. Future lockdowns will add to the negative impact of the first, as services will still be managing the additional demand from earlier restrictions, leading to an accumulative effect, which if not planned for will likely lead to further significant strain on services.

Specific actions that local authorities may want to consider taking to ensure high-quality systems and services for women, children and young people are in place as restrictions are lifted include:

### Ensuring robust pathways and processes are in place locally to identify and respond to women, children and young people affected by VAWG

Local authorities and other community planning partners can play a key role in ensuring robust pathways are in place locally that identify and respond to the specific needs that women, children and young people experiencing VAWG are likely to have once lockdown is lifted. It is vital that decision-makers consult with, and listen to, women, children and young people who have experienced VAWG to ensure that the systems and services in place locally respond to their specific needs. It is crucial that local needs assessments and recovery plans are inclusive and recognise the different ways in which women, children and young people's identities will affect the type of violence they experience and that the crisis will have exacerbated inequalities across health, housing,

employment, education and justice for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG and other forms of discrimination.

### Ensuring that trauma-informed systems, practices and workforce support are embedded at a local level

At a time of increased risk of trauma for women, children and young people, local authorities and other community planning partners have a key role to play in ensuring that local workforces understand the impact of trauma and VAWG and have the skills and confidence to ensure that women, children and young people receive/ are signposted to appropriate support at the earliest opportunity and receive consistent communication and messaging. It is also crucial that local authorities and services develop plans to mitigate the impact of increased workloads and reduced staff numbers due to stress, illness, vicarious trauma and bereavement, ensuring that the workforce is able to continue their work safely and effectively. It is worth examining what lessons can be learned from other countries emerging from lockdown before Scotland to identify good practice.

### Adopting a child-centred, rights-based approach to working with families experiencing domestic abuse

Despite added pressures that are likely to be placed on both public sector and third sector partners over the coming year, it is vital that local authorities continue to support professionals within child protection, adult protection and criminal justice social work to adopt a whole-system, child-centred approach when working with families experiencing domestic abuse. This approach should be underpinned by a commitment to improving outcomes for women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse, ensuring perpetrators are held to account for their harmful behaviours and ensuring practitioners have the capacity and capability to work with survivors, perpetrators and children. It is imperative that children are listened to, informed and involved in decision making about their lives, and that local authorities and partners support children and young people to express their views about their experiences of multi-agency responses during and following the pandemic.

### Supporting local specialist VAWG services

A number of specialist VAWG services were already operating waiting lists in local authority areas across Scotland prior to the pandemic and, without adequate and sustainable funding, it is unlikely they will be able to respond to increased levels

of demand from women, children and young people once lockdown is lifted. Local authorities have a key role to play in helping specialist services to identify anticipated levels of demand for crisis, recovery and other support in the coming months, as well as collaboratively developing ways to ensure women, children and young people are able to move from crisis to recovery support (e.g., from refuge to tenancy). Local authorities also have a vital role to play in being flexible with local funding wherever possible, and exploring opportunities to lever in additional resources to ensure that organisations are able to adequately respond to increased demand.

# Ensuring the Safety and Wellbeing Needs of Women and Children Affected by VAWG Continue to be Met as we Move Towards the 'New Normal'

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## Strengthening collaboration

Recovering from the social and economic effects of COVID-19, and mitigating the long-term effects of trauma and abuse experienced by women, children and young people during the crisis, will require the engagement of the full range of community planning partners. Adopting a whole-systems, gendered approach to tackling VAWG at a local authority level will help to ensure that individuals and organisations/ agencies all understand the role they have to play in tackling VAWG as we transition to the 'new normal'.

Since March 2020, local authorities have overseen a rapid period of transformation in terms of how systems and services respond to people and communities facing the highest levels of risk in Scotland and it is important that any good practice that emerges from this response is captured and built upon in the years to come. Crucially, this period has also highlighted the importance of third sector and public sector partners working closely together to meet the needs of women, children and young people.

It is vital that public and third sector partners continue to build on collaborative approaches with women, children and young people with lived experience of VAWG. Services, systems and processes should be developed with women, children and young people who are experts in their situations and experiences, and responses to the long-term effects of the pandemic on VAWG and gender equality must be safely co-developed with survivors.

## Prevention and early intervention

The COVID-19 pandemic has, and will continue to, place women, children and young people experiencing VAWG at increased risk of harm for the foreseeable future. However, it has also helped to make that harm more visible and has highlighted the

need to ensure that systems and services better recognise and respond to the needs of women, children and young people in the future. It is crucial that the emphasis in local policy and practice continues to be on early intervention, so that survivors are identified and supported as early as possible and perpetrators are held to account for their behaviour.

Equally Safe is underpinned by the understanding that VAWG is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Research shows that the pandemic is likely to exacerbate gender inequality. For example, research shows that women have been disproportionately affected economically by the restrictions and the crisis has further entrenched unequal gender roles, such as unpaid care.<sup>9</sup> To reduce levels of VAWG in the long-term, it is vital that there is a robust commitment to strengthening gender equality and supporting the implementation of primary prevention programmes across all partner organisations and universal and targeted services.<sup>10</sup>

## Leadership

Leaders and senior decision-makers have a key role in ensuring that improving gender equality and tackling VAWG is mainstreamed in their local authority's recovery response and beyond. It is crucial that these stakeholders continue to communicate their commitment to supporting women, children and young people experiencing VAWG in their local communities. This may include:

- Highlighting the need for joined-up approaches for responding to the specific challenges and risks the crisis has created for women, children and young people;
- Communicating the benefits of adopting trauma-informed policy and practice; and
- Encouraging individuals, organisations and multi-agency partnerships to collaborate and work toward wider system change in tackling VAWG and gender inequality both during the current crisis and beyond.

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9 <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-briefing-on-women-caring-responsibilities-and-furloughing.pdf>

10 For more information on developing effective local strategies and activities to embed gender equality, please see [VAWG: Primary Prevention Guidance for Community Planning Partners](#) (Improvement Service, National Violence Against Women Network and Zero Tolerance, 2019)

# Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Data in Order to Inform Strategic Planning

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Local authorities and other community planning partners have a key role to play in ensuring appropriate data is captured at all stages of the pandemic response in order to understand the impact of the crisis on local communities and ensure responses meet local need. As the pandemic progresses it is clear that, whilst anyone can be at risk of contagion, it is disproportionately impacting on some communities and, in particular, highlighting and compounding existing risks and inequalities women, children and young people experience.

## Collecting data to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the short term

One consequence of the public health measures to suppress transmission of COVID-19 has been increased risk of VAWG for women, children and young people.

At a national and local level, there are efforts to track the immediate impact of COVID-19 restrictions on women, children and young people experiencing VAWG, with statistics being collated from police, victim/ survivor organisations and other key partners. For example, data sharing arrangements have been developed by Community Justice Scotland and the Scottish Prison Service to assist with local planning for people being released from prison. Additionally, there are efforts across government and statutory agencies to identify the impact of COVID-19 across people and communities experiencing risk more generally, to highlight where there are gaps in evidence and to support strategic development to recover from the crisis. Ensuring that gender and VAWG are embedded into such efforts is a prerequisite of effective planning.

At a local level, mitigation measures have been put in place to address homelessness, destitution, increased poverty and unemployment, poorer mental health and problem alcohol/ drug use. Alignment with data collection processes that have been agreed by SOLACE and COSLA to support local resilience and recovery planning responses to COVID-19 is essential, particularly in relation to datasets that have been agreed within Public Protection.

## Collecting data to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the medium and longer term

As local authorities move to the recovery phase of their COVID-19 responses, it is crucial that a gender and equalities perspective is embedded in local data collection and analysis processes.<sup>11</sup> This will help partners to better understand the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on women, children and young people in terms of VAWG and gender inequality and support future strategic planning. Wherever possible, data should also be collected on, and analysed by, ethnicity, disability and other protected characteristics to help identify heightened risks that different people and communities may be experiencing.

Local authorities may want to revisit existing mechanisms for collecting and analysing data to identify any shortcomings in accessibility and utility of agency data and determine how these might be improved upon in the future. It is important to recognise that no single agency will be able to collect all of the data elements required, and partners may wish to consider setting up systems that will combine data from a number of sources (e.g., health, police, social work, welfare records, etc.) using a relational database.

Developing a consistent approach to data collection, which allows for local flexibility but contributes to a wider national picture, will assist local authorities in ensuring risks for women and children are identified and responded to at the earliest possible stage. Ideally, these data collection systems should be developed in partnership with VAW Partnerships and Equality leads and should be integrated with data and intelligence systems being developed more broadly to support long-term recovery post COVID-19.

These systems must meet the highest standards of ethical data collection and storage given the need for anonymity and confidentiality around VAWG.

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11 <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Covid-19-Gathering-and-using-data-to-ensure-that-the-response-integrates-womens-equality-and-rights.pdf>

# Promoting Consistent Messaging to Highlight Support for Women, Children and Young People in Local Responses To VAWG

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During all stages of the pandemic, local authorities have a vital role and responsibility to promote key messages to support women, children and young people, including:

1. Women, children and young people experiencing VAWG are not alone and a range of specialist support services are available locally and nationally during and after lockdown;
2. The lockdown is not an excuse for perpetrating abuse, and perpetrators will be identified and held to account for their behaviours; and
3. Tackling VAWG is everyone's business and professionals across a wide range of local workforces have a key role to play in safely identifying and responding to risks that women, children and young people may be experiencing.

To support this, local authorities may want to consider including clear messages about VAWG as part of any local campaigns in response to COVID-19. Key aims of campaigns could include:

- Raising awareness for staff, agencies, local organisations and the public of the types of crimes that women, children and young people may be experiencing due to the pandemic and the increased risk of VAWG intensifying due to lockdown/ social distancing measures. VAWG includes: domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, child sexual abuse, FGM, exploitation through prostitution and CSE, stalking and harassment and other forms.
- Highlighting that home is not always a safe place and encouraging women not to delay seeking support due to lockdown. This includes promoting information on how to access appropriate and safe accommodation;
- Identifying perpetrator behaviour, emphasising it will not be tolerated and how to report to police;
- Ensuring professionals are aware of the tactics perpetrators might use during the pandemic to increase their control and abuse of women, children and young people;

- Highlighting where women, children and young people's support is available locally and signposting how they can access this;
- Highlighting that survivors of trauma, violence and abuse may experience adverse effects of social isolation, such as increased anxiety, control and violence, and the increased challenges in accessing support
- Ensuring that women with no recourse to public funds can access support without safety concerns and know where to seek support; and
- Supporting a response to vicarious trauma and the wellbeing of frontline workers during and after the pandemic.

Local authorities can also help to ensure that information on key national helplines available to women, children and young people affected by VAWG is promoted locally, alongside details about local services/ support that are available. Key national helplines include:

[Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline](#): 0800 027 1234

[Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline](#): 08088 01 03 02

[Childline](#): 0800 11 11

[CLiCK Helpline](#) (for women selling or exchanging sex): 0300 124 5564

A full directory of the national support services available to women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG is available on the [Scottish Women's Right Centre](#) website.

A toolkit of resources that can be used locally to raise awareness of support available to survivors of domestic abuse and intimate image sharing is available on the [Safer Scotland](#) website.

# Appendix 1 – Other Relevant Guidance to Support Community Planning

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## Adult Protection and Child Protection

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): adult support and protection guidance](#)

[Supplementary Child Protection guidance](#)

[Children's Hearings Update & Coronavirus practice guide for panel members](#)

[British Association of Social Workers: Domestic abuse and child welfare: A practice guide for social workers \(including COVID-19 preface\)](#)

## Domestic Abuse

[Safe Lives guidance for multi-agency forums, including MARACS](#)

[Safe and Together Model COVID-19 Quick Guide](#)

[National procurator fiscal for domestic abuse](#)

[Scottish Courts guidance on complying with family court orders](#)

[Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance: safe and ethical social work practice](#)

[Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance: domestic abuse](#)

## Housing and Homelessness

[Guidance for social landlords – domestic abuse and COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Allocations Advice and Information for the Housing Sector](#)

## Poverty and Inequality

[Poverty, Inequality and COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Response Planning: Supporting Migrants with no Recourse to Public Funds](#)

[Child Poverty and COVID-19](#)

## Community Justice

[Prisons guidance](#)

Caledonian Guidance [Notes 1 and 2](#) & [Caledonian Advice for areas without Caledonian](#)

Caledonian: Technology, tips and techniques for working safely with women (please contact Community Justice Scotland to access)

[Community Justice Scotland: Working with men who abuse their partners in the context of the COVID-19 crisis](#)

[COPFS Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): information for those due to attend court](#)

## Education

[Scottish Government: school and early learning closures – guidance about key workers and vulnerable children](#)

## National COVID-19 Framework

[Scottish Government COVID-19 Decision-Making Framework](#)

## Data Collection and Analysis

[Engender 'COVID-19: Gathering and using data to ensure that the response integrates women's equality and rights](#)



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