



The Hidden Harms Summit Action Plan

Purpose	Briefing to inform the Hidden Harms action plan, outlining Surviving Economic Abuse's (SEA) key calls for the Government in response to the impact of COVID-19 on victims of economic abuse
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Key points:

- Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) welcomed the Government's Hidden Harms summit and its drive to tackle domestic abuse and other social issues that must be addressed within its response to COVID-19.
- Awareness of economic abuse, as a form of domestic abuse, must be increased across all sectors so that instances of it can be identified and victims can be supported and seek justice.
- The restrictions in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 present abusers with an opportunity to start or escalate economic abuse and limits victims in their ability to safely seek help.
- It is vital that the current and anticipated needs of victims of economic abuse in the context of COVID-19 are identified so that these can be met; SEA is about to commence a rapid review of these and is keen to work with the Government and other stakeholders to share findings and develop policy and practice responses.
- Emerging needs of victims are being identified in connection to access to: an income; the internet for information on finances; safe spaces to access financial information; legal advice; emergency accommodation, and; support to deal with debts accrued as a result of experiencing economic abuse during the pandemic. It is key that these are quickly addressed through concerted action and SEA is keen to work with stakeholders to support this.
- SEA is calling on the Government to:
 - Set out a full COVID-19 cross-Government strategy on domestic abuse (including economic abuse) which covers both full lockdown and the stages of easing when need for support is likely to be acute.¹
 - Undertake a national evidence gathering exercise into economic abuse and to work with stakeholders across sectors to integrate the findings into the refreshed violence against women and girls strategy, and accompanying action plan, as well as other relevant strategies.

Introduction

SEA is the only UK charity dedicated to raising awareness of economic abuse and transforming responses to it. We welcomed the Government's Hidden Harms Summit

and its recognition of how the measures introduced to tackle COVID-19 have inadvertently created a conducive context for domestic abuse as well as other harms such as sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and modern slavery.

We believe that the action plan that will follow the summit is a vital opportunity to make a number of important commitments to ensure that victim-survivors safely get the help and support they need, at the points they need it most. This includes victims of economic abuse, and below are the three key areas we are calling for action on.

1. Awareness of economic abuse and the needs of victims in light of the COVID-19 pandemic must be increased so that effective responses can be developed

Whilst social distancing and lockdown measures have been vital in limiting the spread of COVID-19, they have increased the power of abusers. The restrictions in place provide them with an opportunity to introduce or escalate domestic abuse (including economic abuse) and, trapped at home with the abuser, victims have fewer opportunities and avenues to safely access the help and support they need. Given one in five women in the UK report having experienced economic abuse from a current or former intimate partner,² this is a pressing issue which requires urgent and coordinated action.

It is vital that victims are able to access advice and practical support throughout the pandemic from all of the services they need and that it is tailored to these new circumstances. As such, it is important that awareness of economic abuse, as a form of domestic violence, is increased across all sectors and amongst the general public so that it can be recognised and COVID-19 appropriate responses developed.

SEA is supporting this by promoting awareness through its communications channels, including traditional and social media work. We have also recently commenced a six-month rapid review of the current and anticipated future needs – as social measures ease – of victims of economic abuse throughout the pandemic and beyond. Funded by the Standard Life Foundation, this will include research with victims of economic abuse themselves, along with front-line professionals, and will result in recommendations for stakeholders across sectors as to how they can meet the needs and support the economic resilience of these women.

We are keen to work with Government and other stakeholders throughout this rapid review into the needs of victims of economic abuse in the COVID-19 pandemic so that we can share findings as they emerge and support the shaping of tailored responses across sectors.

2. Action on meeting the emerging needs of victims of economic abuse must be prioritised across sectors

As a picture of the needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse emerges in the context of COVID-19, it is imperative that action is prioritised so that they can access tailored help as soon as possible to halt or reduce any further damage to their economic safety.

Through SEA's work with victims and front-line professionals during the pandemic, we have identified the following areas as those of emerging need:

- Victims need access to the internet for information on finances but, as a result of the abuse, do not have broadband or phone credit to do so
- Victims need safe spaces to access information on finances
- Victims need access to an income they can use to meet their basic needs
- Victims need access to free legal advice and support around finances
- Victims need support to deal with debts accrued as a result of economic abuse during the pandemic
- Victims need to be able to access emergency accommodation should they need or want to flee the abuser.

We are also aware that the present circumstances have exacerbated the need to separate the single payment made to joint claimants of Universal Credit so that this is paid into two bank accounts to ensure that each claimant has access to an independent income. As such, we will be continuing to press for this.

With these needs already clearly identified, we will be calling on relevant stakeholders across sectors to work with us to develop policy and practice in response to them.

3. Coordination is vital in ensuring that the ongoing needs of victims of economic abuse are met across sectors

Whilst the needs of victims of economic abuse have been heightened and altered by measures to stem the spread of COVID-19, economic abuse is not a new issue and it will, sadly, continue to be an issue after the pandemic is under control. As such, whilst a tailored response to it is much needed throughout the pandemic, this must be part of a wider, enduring, and coordinated response to it.

As such, **we are calling on the Government to:**

- **Set out a full COVID-19 cross-Government strategy on domestic abuse (including economic abuse) which covers both full lockdown and the stages of easing when need for support is likely to be acute**
- **Undertake a national evidence gathering exercise into economic abuse and to work with stakeholders across sectors to integrate the findings into the refreshed violence against women and girls strategy, and accompanying action plan, as well as other relevant strategies (i.e. the Cross-Government Debt Policy and Strategy coordinated by the Cabinet Office).**

SEA is keen to support the development of this work however we can.

¹ See also:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/184/home-office-preparedness-for-covid19-coronavirus/>

² *Sharp-Jeffs, N. (2015) Money Matters: Research into the extent and nature of financial abuse within intimate relationships in the UK London: The Co-operative Bank/Refuge*