



The Cost of Covid-19: Economic abuse throughout the pandemic Briefing three – Finances

***'He tries to control my finances all the time.'* (Victim-survivor)**

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Standard Life Foundation has supported this project (reference 202005-GR000021) as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. The Foundation funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable foundation registered in Scotland (SC040877).

Key points:

- Measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus have brought new and increased opportunities for perpetrators to interfere with victim-survivors' finances — a form of economic abuse.
- 72% of UK women who took part in the survey reported that, as a result of the perpetrator's actions during the outbreak, their financial situation had either significantly worsened (39%) or slightly worsened (33%).
- Two out of three women (66%) reported an income of £20,000 or less each year, with 9% of these women reporting no income at all.
- One in five (21%) women reported that the shift towards contactless payments during the pandemic had negatively impacted them, with reliance on cash often driven by safety and/or budgeting needs.

- Eight out of ten women (79%) reported that the perpetrator had attempted to control their finances during the pandemic; 68% said the perpetrator had been successful and 11% that they had been unsuccessful. Methods here included withholding child maintenance payments, building up debt in their names, and controlling or denying access to financial products.
- Of the professionals surveyed, 15% reported that victim-survivors has raised concerns about being refused payment holidays, and 25% were concerned about paying off debt when payment holidays ended.
- The needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse must be met through implementing the following recommendations:
 - The Government must ensure that essential services, without question, accept cash as payment throughout the pandemic so that victim-survivors reliant on it for safety and/or budgeting are able to continue using it.
 - Banks and creditors must ensure that staff are trained in domestic abuse, including economic abuse, so that they can effectively respond to cases – including within the pandemic.
 - Banks and creditors must ensure that victim-survivors have safe and reliable ways through which to contact them throughout the pandemic and beyond.
 - Banks and creditors must ensure that policies and processes take into account the needs of customers experiencing domestic abuse, including economic abuse, and reflect specific needs arising during the pandemic.
 - The Government must reform consumer law so that coerced debt is recognised, victims can seek redress and perpetrators are held accountable.
 - Government funding must be provided to local authorities so that they can provide local hardship funds and emergency grant schemes to victim-survivors and promote these to residents and front-line professionals.
 - Local authorities must ensure that any emergency grant or hardship fund schemes they provide are flexible to meet the needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse.

1. The background to the Cost of Covid-19

In early 2020, the new coronavirus arrived in the United Kingdom. Now some time into the pandemic, it is clear that the virus itself, as well as the measures introduced to stem its spread and protect the economy, have negatively impacted on members of society. This includes increased risk of domestic abuse – of which economic abuse is a form.

To explore the experiences and needs of victim-survivors facing economic abuse from a current/former partner throughout the pandemic, Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) launched a project to research these and develop recommendations for policy and practice. Funded by the Standard Life Foundation, *The Cost of Covid-19: Economic abuse through the pandemic* started with a survey of both victim-survivors and the front-line professionals who work with them, followed by interviews.

The research explored a number of domains of everyday life linked to economic resources to see how victim-survivors had been impacted by the perpetrator's actions during the pandemic. These were:

- Employment and education
- Housing and accommodation

- Finances
- Welfare benefits
- Child maintenance
- Access to help and support
- Access to core necessities

SEA is preparing briefings on each of these areas. This briefing focuses on the impact of the perpetrator's actions throughout the pandemic on victim-survivors' finances; please note findings on welfare benefits are covered in a separate briefing, and mortgages are explored in more detail in the project briefing on housing and accommodation. It includes both findings and recommendations which, if implemented, would ensure that victim-survivors are supported as best as possible throughout the current pandemic and any further ones that may arise in the future.

2. What is economic abuse?

***'I am in the early stages of wanting to leave but have no clue how I would be able to and how I could afford to.'* (Victim-survivor)**

Economic abuse is a form of domestic abuse where perpetrators seek to reinforce or create economic dependency and/or instability. This, in turn, limits women's choices and their ability to build or access safety. The term 'economic abuse' recognises that it is not just money and finances that can be controlled by an abuser (known as 'financial abuse' — explored below) but also the things that money can buy, like food, clothing, transportation and housing.ⁱ Given it does not require physical proximity, economic abuse can continue, escalate or even start after separation and be experienced for many years.ⁱⁱ

Further, it rarely happens in isolation, with 86% of those reporting economic abuse also having experienced other forms of abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ 95% of domestic abuse victims experience economic abuse.^{iv}

Economic barriers to leaving can lead to women staying with an abusive partner for longer and experiencing more harm as a consequence.^v In this way, economic abuse underpins physical safety. Women who experience it are five times more likely to experience physical abuse^{vi} and are at increased risk of homicide^{vii} and suicide.^{viii} Further, lack of access to economic resources post separation is the primary reason women return to an abusive partner^{ix} and it makes the process of rebuilding an independent life challenging. One in four women reports experiencing economic abuse after leaving the abuser,^x and 60% of domestic abuse survivors are in debt as a result of economic abuse.^{xi}

Financial abuse

Financial abuse is a form of economic abuse whereby perpetrators seek to control a victim-survivors' ability to acquire, use or maintain money and finances through behaviours which include restriction, exploitation and/or sabotage. This includes financial products such as bank accounts, mortgages, credit and loans. Financial abuse

is therefore a sub-category of economic abuse, which includes all economic resources.^{xii}

Access to money, and the ability to have independent control of money, is vital for women in building economic safety. Perpetrators are, unfortunately, well aware of this, and look to destabilise women's finances by way of seeking or maintaining control over them. Through restricting access to money and finances, women can be left with little or nothing and, for those whose money and finances are exploited and/or sabotaged, they can be left with a significant amount of debt. In both scenarios, victim-survivors face limited options in terms of being able to access safety and build economic independence.

Women may be aware of loans and credit in their name that the perpetrator has coerced them into taking out or done so in their name. This is known as 'coerced debt' and, within the context of coercive control, victim-survivors feel they have no option other than to comply with demands as they are aware from previous experience that there will be negative consequences if they do not.

3. Who took part in the research?

The research began with an online survey. This was aimed at victim-survivors and front-line professionals who work with them, with tailored questions for each group. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were offered the possibility to register their interest in an interview. A total of 560 people responded to the survey — 360 victim-survivors and 200 front line professionals — and a total of 47 interviews took place. This briefing is based on the findings of both the survey and interviews.

Because of the scope of the research, the first survey question for victim-survivors asked whether they were currently experiencing abuse. Whilst 83% (n=293) answered 'yes', 17% said 'no' (n=59) and were redirected out of the main survey to a page that invited them to share their experiences of past abuse and the pandemic. Fourteen victim survivors did so and over a third of these responses indicated that the victim-survivor was, in fact, still experiencing abuse. Responses from those not currently experiencing economic abuse showed its long-term impact. For example, three responses indicated that they were still dealing with the effects of the debt that the perpetrator had built up in their name, and another wrote about being unable to access credit due to the perpetrator's actions. This highlights the need for further awareness of economic abuse amongst the public and financial services.

The survey for victim-survivors was open to all genders and residents of all countries, however the findings in this briefing are from responses that were provided by 253 women living in the UK who identified as currently experiencing abuse.^{xiii} It also covers the findings from 173 front-line professionals based in the UK who responded to the survey. It is important to note that the majority of questions were optional and so responses will not always add up to the total number of respondents. Furthermore, as percentages are rounded, they may not always equate to 100.

Whilst full demographics information is in the briefing paper 'Cost of Covid-19: Demographics and Research Design', it is important to note that 90% of respondents were separated from the perpetrator, and 90% were no longer living with the perpetrator. This is unsurprising given that those in a relationship with, or living with, the perpetrator are likely to have felt less safe to respond; this is why we also engaged front-line professionals, as they were likely to have been in touch with women less able to safely participate in the research.

As such, it is vital to recognise that some of the people most affected will have been unable to take part and that the sample size of this group is limited. Therefore, it is not necessarily representative of all victim-survivors who are still in a relationship or living with the perpetrator. Similarly, given the number of respondents, nor are the findings necessarily generalisable for all victim-survivors who have left the perpetrator. However, they do offer an important insight into the experiences of those who were able to take part in the research.

4. Finances, economic abuse and the Covid-19 pandemic

***'Many victims do not have economic freedom to start with - made more difficult with lockdown.'* (Professional)**

The pandemic, and the measures to control it, have destabilised the financial situations of many. A number of people have lost income as a result of impacts such as job losses and furloughing, and at a point where many have faced the increased costs associated with spending more time at home. Furthermore, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlights that the pandemic arrived at a time where households were still dealing with repercussions of years of austerity.^{xiv} It also reports that there has been an interplay between historic inequalities and the outbreak's economic impact.

Whilst the numbers of women in employment was at an all-time high before the pandemic,^{xv} research demonstrates that 81% of mothers need formal childcare provision in order to access work and how the pandemic has hindered this with school and nursery closures.^{xvi} Furthermore, HMRC data shows that more women have been furloughed during the outbreak than men.^{xvii}

***'The economic impact of lockdown — for example job losses — will make it easier for abusers to de-stabilise any economic stability that the victim had before lockdown and also make it easier to entrench instability that was present before.'* (Professional)**

These developments will undoubtedly have impacted on a number of women's incomes and are set against a wider backdrop where women are already at a disadvantage in accessing economic resources. Women are more likely to be in low-paid and insecure employment, and are in the majority of those living in poverty, with female-headed households more likely to be poor.^{xviii} Black, Asian and minority ethnic, disabled, low-income women and single mothers are in a more disadvantaged economic position, and the outbreak has been found to have a disproportionate impact on these women.^{xix}

'I tried to budget by having cash for food, etc., but we are all at home. I have to eat lunch if my kids do but when I was at work I could have nothing or 25p noodles. Now they want me to have lunch with them and I worry.' (Victim-survivor)

Given that many victim-survivors of economic abuse are already in precarious financial positions, it is likely — as evidenced by the findings of this research — that they will have been further disadvantaged by the outbreak.

'The economic impact of lockdown will lead to redundancies, job loses, evictions... In that context, abusers will find it a lot easier to manipulate the economic resources available to women and use the wider economic picture as justification for their actions. Banks, creditors, financial institutions must be alive to the reality that the economic harm caused by lockdown will disproportionately fall on women.' (Professional)

'They use anything to take your money away from you, in whatever circumstances they can do it and they will use COVID or anything else to their advantage.' (Victim-survivor)

5. What were the findings?

***'He tries to control my finances all the time.'* (Victim-survivor)**

SEA's Cost of Covid-19 research generated a significant amount of evidence in relation to women's experiences of controlling their money and finances during the pandemic. This section explores: victim-survivors' income level; access to cash; the methods used by perpetrators to control victim-survivors' finances; the impact of economic abuse on victim-survivors; experiences of contacting banks and creditors and accessing time-limited measures; and accessing emergency funds and hardship grants.

Overall, 72% of UK women in the survey reported that, as a result of the perpetrator's actions during the outbreak, their financial situation had either significantly worsened (39%) or slightly worsened (33%). A further 27% said their financial situation had stayed the same, and 2% reported that it had slightly improved (1%) or significantly improved (1%). This demonstrates the significant impact of the abuse experienced by victim-survivors during the pandemic on their money and finances and why it is key that their experiences are heard and responded to in policy and practice.

5.1. Income level

For context, SEA asked victim-survivors what their annual income was (Table 1). Two out of three women (66%) reported an income of £20,000 or less each year, with 9% of these women reporting no income at all. With the average income in the UK totalling £30,800,^{xx} this highlights the precarious financial situation that victim-survivors of economic abuse are already facing, and how any disruption to their income can be hugely damaging.

Table 1: Victim-survivors' income level (n=202)

Income level	Percentage of women reporting
No income	9%
Up to £10,000	24%
£10,001 - £20,000	33%
£20,001 - £30,000	12%
£30,001 - £40,000	8%
£40,001 - £50,000	6%
Over £50,000	3%
Prefer not to say	4%

5.2. Access to cash during the pandemic

***'I was using cash so that he couldn't track me on my bank statements... Then of course COVID came along, all got to pay by credit cards... I've been using this credit card to shop at the local shop so he can't track me from my bank statements and find out where I live.'* (Victim-survivor)**

As a number of victim-survivors of economic abuse rely on being able to access and use cash for safety and budgeting purposes, this area was explored within the research. Here, one in five (21%) of the women who responded to SEA's survey reported that the shift towards contactless payments during the pandemic had negatively impacted them.

Whilst the reasons for reliance on cash varied, survey comments highlighted how it was often connected to safety and/or budgeting. In terms of safety, SEA heard from one victim-survivor who had previously been given an allowance in cash by the perpetrator, and how the shift to using cards had been problematic as it had given the perpetrator more oversight of their spending.

'Prior to the outbreak, I worked with cash that I was given on a weekly basis for the budget. Now he can see and scrutinise every penny in spending because I'm using the bank card.' (Victim-survivor)

For women who are separated from the perpetrator, cash can be used to keep their location, or their spending, hidden if they fear or believe the perpetrator has access to their bank account information. One victim-survivor reported that that the pandemic and its push toward contactless payments had impacted on them as *'cards are traceable to location and I am hiding.'* Another explained that despite being separated from the perpetrator, she relied on cash as the perpetrator was able to access her bank statements:

'I cannot purchase using credit cards or contactless because the court have given him access to my bank statements.' (Victim-survivor)

'I operate almost entirely in cash... I budget. Throughout the month. Literally penny for penny. I know exactly what I'm doing. And I don't want him knowing where I've been what I've spent my money on where I'm spending money, it's none of his business but the court says it is.' (Victim-survivor)

Other victim-survivors reported that their reliance on cash was driven by the need to tightly budget and that being pushed to spend on cards has had a negative impact.

'I have found it harder to manage my money. Due to previous financial abuse, I hide from online banking and statements and lose track of my finances. I use cash to avoid this issue.' (Victim-survivor)

From these findings, it is clear that access to cash is vital for some victim-survivors of economic abuse in order to remain safe or to manage a tight budget. As such, it is key that they are can access and use cash throughout the pandemic.

5.3. Methods used by perpetrators to control victim-survivors' finances in the pandemic

'It is a nightmare I live with daily, the threat of the unknown.' (Victim-survivor)

Eight out of ten women (79%) who responded to SEA's survey reported that the perpetrator had attempted to control their finances during the pandemic; 68% said the perpetrator had been successful and 11% that they had been unsuccessful. Women highlighted a range of ways in which perpetrators had done this, from withholding child maintenance payments and building up debt in their names, to controlling or denying access to financial products and refusing to pay bills.

Withholding or reducing child maintenance payments

'[The perpetrator] refused to pay child maintenance because he wanted to see me suffer as he believes the small amount he pays is what I live on.' (Victim-survivor)

A large number of women who responded to SEA's survey reported that the perpetrator had been interfering with their finances during the pandemic through withholding child maintenance payments. These payments can be vital for victim-survivors in meeting the essential needs of their child or children and so any deviation from agreed payments can be acutely felt. Unfortunately, perpetrators are aware of this, and interfering with payments is a common form of post-separation economic abuse.

'Refuses to pay child maintenance unless I beg.' (Victim-survivor)

'Not paying maintenance then reducing maintenance. Now I will have to ask him for money for my rent.' (Victim-survivor)

'He is now months in arrears with maintenance, which limits my ability to properly provide for our children. Coronavirus is such an easy excuse for him (self-employed), but follows on from years of trauma during which he kept withholding payments.' (Victim-survivor)

Several victim-survivors told us that the perpetrator had dishonestly sought benefits during the pandemic and had then used this to get their child maintenance payments stopped or reduced.

'By falsely claiming benefits whilst working (self-employed) full time because it would not be questioned during pandemic.' (Victim-survivor)

'The perpetrator is self-employed but tells the inland revenue he does not work in order to claim benefits and avoid paying child maintenance.' (Victim-survivor)

It is key that victim-survivors of economic abuse are able to access child maintenance payments throughout the pandemic so that they are able to meet the basic needs of their children. For the Cost of Covid-19 briefing on child maintenance that explores this area more fully, please visit SEA's [website](#).

Perpetrators building up coerced debt in the victim-survivor's name

'He is seen as vulnerable so he capitalised on that, asking me to buy him all sorts of luxury foods in the shops because he shouldn't go shopping.' (Victim-survivor)

Of the professionals who responded to SEA's survey, 41% reported that victim-survivors had raised concerns with them about the perpetrator taking out credit or loans during the pandemic without their knowledge, and 38% said that victim-survivors had raised being pressured into taking out loans or credit (Table 2).

Concern	Percentage reporting
Getting into debt	77%
Perpetrators taking out loans or credit in the victim-survivor's name without their knowledge	41%
Perpetrators pressuring victim-survivors into taking out new loans or credit	38%
Being unable to get in touch with their bank or creditor	31%
Paying off debt when payment holidays end	25%
Being refused payment holidays	15%

In terms of victim-survivors, 3% reported that the abuser had successfully taken or unsuccessfully attempted to take out loans or credit in their name through coercion or without their knowledge during the outbreak. One in three (35%) were unsure as to whether the perpetrator had done this or not.

'I have discovered that [the perpetrator] has run up extensive debts on my credit card. He is threatening to not pay the monthly payments leaving me to face fines and a bad credit rating.' (Victim-survivor)

'He set up new accounts in my name and set user IDs, passwords and memorable info without my knowledge.' (Victim-survivor)

'[Victim-survivors are] manipulated into buying expensive items such as laptops and mobile phones – including TV packages.' (Professional)

'Although not specific to lockdown... it is common that debts are accrued by the perpetrator and will coerce the victim to take out loans in order to clear his debts.'
(Professional)

It is hugely concerning that women have been coerced into spending or taking out loans or credit during the pandemic. These findings also highlight the uncertainty and fear that many victim-survivors live with. Abusers commonly keep their partner 'financially blind' leaving them unsure as to whether debt is being built up in their name and what the consequence of this may be if they have. The impact of such debt on women's finances can be hugely damaging; it can destroy their credit ratings and, in turn, limit their choices and ability to access credit and build economic safety.

'I was trying to contact several solicitors about this situation, waiting list is long or cancelling dates, or are not able to help me as loans are in my name.' (Victim-survivor)

'Longer term, I think it's the fact that for want of a better word, he stole my credit history. He took my perfect credit history, which means my credit history is horrific now' (Victim-survivor)

Controlling or denying access to financial products and refusing to pay bills

***'He controls everything.'* (Victim-survivor)**

A number of respondents reported that perpetrators of economic abuse had created financial pressure during the pandemic through either restricting their access to money or financial products or refusing to pay bills.

In terms of restriction, some victim-survivors told SEA that they had no unconstrained or safe access to money or financial products without the perpetrator granting or monitoring this, with professionals also reporting this.

'He has had money put into his bank accounts, and given me a card, but then put the app on his phone so that I cannot spend without his approval. I have to ask for money to cover bills, which are all in my name.' (Victim-survivor)

'He can view everything I've spent on our weekly budget. I've been getting into trouble for how much I spent on food.' (Victim-survivor)

'All monies are held by the perpetrator, there is total financial dependency.' (Professional)

Other victim-survivors explained that they had been exploited through being made largely or solely responsible for finances as the perpetrator had stopped, or was unreliably contributing to, payments during the pandemic. This included bills for liabilities such as mortgages and utilities, and in instances where these they were held jointly. One victim-survivor even explained they were being left to pay for assets that they had no access to: *'I'm paying the mortgage and all bills but I'm not living in the house.'*

'[The perpetrator] no longer has his salary paid into our joint account and has threatened not to pay the mortgage or utilities. Some payments have defaulted. He is continually asking for details of my new bank account.' (Victim-survivor)

'I pay all the house bills and he doesn't pay me back.' (Victim-survivor)

'He stopped paying the mortgage again.' (Victim-survivor)

'He emptied the joint account we had plus he stopped paying bills.' (Victim-survivor)

'[I] have a lower salary, but I hold all the debt... my partner decided to move all the joint utilities and financial products and mortgage into... a bank account with just his name on so I have no access to knowing whether the mortgage has been paid I have no control over it.' (Victim-survivor)

These findings again demonstrate the uncertainty that many victim-survivors of economic abuse live with, whereby the perpetrator may unreliably contribute to, or pay for, household bills, and leaving victim-survivors worried about the repercussions of this. If bills are in women's names, non-payment can mean that they lose assets, such as homes, or access to services such as the internet. As noted above, this can also damage their credit rating, and create a further barrier to their ability to build economic security.

5.4. Impact of financial issues

'I am making major sacrifices, such as keeping the children out of nursery while working from home and reducing my expenses in any other possible way.' (Victim-survivor)

A number of victim-survivors told SEA of the serious repercussions they were experiencing as a result of the perpetrator's actions in connection to their finances during the pandemic. Many explained that this had come at a time when they were already facing increased food and utility costs as they and their children were at home more in line with Government 'stay at home guidance' and school closures.

'I am facing significant additional costs having my child at home all the time. I used to receive £35 child maintenance, so losing this money on top of the additional costs has really hit hard.' (Victim-survivor)

'I have been left with all costs for his child, all food, which [is] significantly more money than before lockdown.' (Victim-survivor)

Two victim-survivors told SEA that they were having to skip meals so that they could feed their children as a result of their financial situations, and professionals reported helping women to access support from foodbanks.

'I'm now missing meals so my children can eat properly.' (Victim-survivor)

'I tried to budget by having cash for food, etc., but we are all at home. I have to eat lunch if my kids do but when I was at work I could have nothing or 25p noodles. Now they want me to have lunch with them and I worry.' (Victim-survivor)

Another victim-survivor explained that they were having to use all their savings to avoid homelessness: *'By not contributing anything he has left me no choice but to use all my savings to pay bills to keep the roof over our heads.'* In addition, 17% of victim-survivors reported that they had needed to take out new loans or credit during the outbreak.

Victim-survivors reported reduced costs in some areas (for example, in petrol or transport costs) but higher outgoings in other areas (for example, in energy and food bills), and were concerned that they would not be able to manage financially once the pandemic ended without money from the perpetrator:

'When we return to normal, my outgoings will naturally increase (I have saved on some costs at this time), so without financial support from [the perpetrator], my children and I will quickly fall into difficult circumstances.' (Victim-survivor)

Together, these findings demonstrate the stark reality for some victim-survivors of economic abuse and the choices that they are forced to make in order to provide for themselves and their children. Perpetrator's actions can push women into poverty; unable to eat and struggling to maintain their homes.

5.5. Contacting banks and creditors during the outbreak and accessing time-limited pandemic measures

'Debt management line was closed by the bank during [the] outbreak so I had no way of being able to contact them.' (Victim-survivor)

As shown in Table 2, 31% of professionals reported that victim-survivors had raised concerns about their ability to contact banks or creditors during the pandemic. When explored with victim-survivors, whilst 57% had not needed to make this contact, 36% had and had been successfully able to and 5% had been unable to. A further 1% reported not having a bank account.

Victim-survivors who were unable to make contact with their bank or creditor were invited to leave a comment. These tended to relate to staff not responding to contact, such as unanswered phone calls, however one victim-survivor told SEA that the perpetrator had denied them access to their bank or creditor, and another explained they had not made contact as they were worried they would be overheard:

'Difficulties due to reduced bank service and fear of perpetrator hearing me on phone.'
(Victim-survivor)

SEA also heard from a victim-survivor who had not contacted their bank or creditor as they did not want to use the remote options to do this: *'I feel unable to contact them to have a discussion about my needs. I would prefer to do this in person.'* In terms of the impact of being unable to get the support needed from banks or creditors, one victim-

survivor reported that this had meant the perpetrator had been successfully able to financially abuse her:

'My partner has successfully moved joint payments like the mortgage into a sole named account which I can't access. My complaint to the mortgage company was not upheld and because of the virus situation and less people working there, my requests for information have not been answered.' (Victim-survivor)

Whilst it is not possible to directly compare the results from those not living with the perpetrator and those who were due to the significant difference in sample size, the findings for each are below in Table 3 in terms of their ability to contact their bank or creditor.

Whether contact was made	Victim-survivors <i>not</i> living with the perpetrator (n=183)	Victim-survivors living with the perpetrator (n=18)
Had not needed to make contact	56%	67%
Needed to make contact and were able to	38%	17%
Needed to make contact and were unable to	4%	17%
Did not have bank account	1%	0%

In terms of accessing time-limited pandemic measures, 15% of victim-survivors told SEA that they had sought a payment holiday for non-mortgage debt, with 2% of these women unsuccessful in seeking this. Of the professionals surveyed, 15% reported that victim-survivors has raised concerns about being refused payment holidays, and that 25% were concerned about paying off debt when payment holidays ended (Table 2).

'So I had to stop the [credit card] payment, because that minimum payment is £200 a month. And I did the payment holiday on that but they now want that sort of you know, to start paying, It's just all those. It's just all those things add up. And it's just stress.' (Victim-survivor)

'I've got payment holidays for basically everything I've got with the bank, my mortgage, my credit cards... so yeah, in some ways I am a bit of a crisis waiting to happen.' (Victim-survivor)

One victim-survivor reported that they had not sought payment holidays as they were worried it would impact their credit rating: *'I didn't take any payment holidays because I didn't want my credit rating to be affected. I was still paying it off during COVID. And that was tight.'* This suggests that more needs to be done by lenders to ensure customers are aware of the terms and conditions of payment holidays.

Whilst mortgage debt is explored in a separate briefing (The Cost of Covid-19: Housing and accommodation), one victim-survivor explained to SEA that the perpetrator had

attempted to sabotage their attempt to seek a mortgage payment holiday during the pandemic:

'He has not paid the mortgage for years but is still on the mortgage, he contacted my mortgage provider to say that he did not agree to the mortgage holiday and that he believed that both parties should have to agree, he asked that the mortgage holiday be denied for the future months it had been agreed. [The bank], who know about the domestic violence issues, told him they would not do that.' (Victim-survivor)

These findings show the importance of victim-survivors being able to reliably and easily contact their bank or creditor in order to seek help and challenge the perpetrator's actions with regard to joint financial products. They also demonstrate the importance of ensuring that time limited measures in place within the pandemic, such as payment holidays, cannot be used by perpetrators as a way in which to continue to control victim-survivors.

5.6. Accessing emergency funds or hardship grants

Hardship grants and emergency grants can prevent victim-survivors from falling into further poverty whilst ensuring that they are able to meet their basic needs. As such, respondents were asked whether they had applied, or supported their clients to apply, for help in the form of hardship grants or emergency funds during the outbreak.

Here, 14% of victim-survivors had applied for grants or funds, with 5% of all women having done so unsuccessfully. The majority of professionals had supported victim-survivors to access schemes (Table 4), with 57% having been successful in accessing money from a charity or trust and 41% from a local authority.

Table 4: Whether professionals had supported victim-survivors to receive an emergency grant or hardship fund during the pandemic (n=90)	
Where applications were made to and outcome	Professionals reporting
Yes, successfully from a local authority	41%
Yes, successfully from a charity or trust	57%
No, we applied but were unsuccessful	3%
No, we have not applied*	30%

*NB not all professionals will have had this activity within their roles

In terms of issues connected to accessing schemes, it was reported that it would be helpful if there was more information available on hardship grants and emergency fund schemes so that professionals could use this within their role. One professional also explained that the inflexibility of local authority grants meant that they were unable to support all victim-survivors who needed them:

'Local authority grants have no flexibility – makes it really difficult that you can't apply again if you've applied before. Obviously, circumstances change, especially at the moment. We had a client... the perpetrator broke many of her possessions and the local

authority wouldn't provide funding as they had provided it previously. No consideration of context.' (Professional)

Another professional explained that restrictions on another grant scheme made it difficult to use:

'We randomly got some money through [a funder] which was really good, except for the fact it was so bizarrely specific, so it was for women within a specific postcode, and with children under the age of six. That was it... and it's so frustrating for us because we've got clients in other postcodes desperate for that money.' (Professional)

The findings here highlight how hardship fund and emergency grant schemes are a key source of economic support for those in financial difficulty, and how they have been accessed by many in relation to economic abuse during the pandemic. It is vital that these schemes continue to be in place and that they are set up to be able to respond flexibly and in a timely way to meet the needs of victim-survivors.

6. Conclusion: What action needs to be taken to ensure that victim-survivors can access money and manage their finances throughout the pandemic?

6.1. Cash as a payment option throughout the pandemic

6.1.1. The Government must ensure that essential services, without question, accept cash as payment throughout the pandemic so that victim-survivors reliant on it for safety and/or budgeting are able to continue using it

It is vital that essential services continue to accept cash as a method of payment throughout the pandemic so victim-survivors are able to continue using it where this supports their safety and/or ability to budget money. The Government must ensure that any guidance issued to businesses on operating throughout the outbreak that provide essential services (such as food retailers, petrol stations and post offices) mandates this.

To support the implementation of this policy, it is imperative that essential service providers do not challenge any customer seeking to use cash, for example through asking them why. It is vital that businesses also make clear that cash is accepted within their communications.

'Fortunately, the big supermarkets around me are taking cash but it's a question I have to ask before I can unload my shopping on the conveyor belt, do you, are you okay to take cash?' (Victim-survivor)

6.2. Banks' and creditors' customer support throughout the pandemic

6.2.1. It is vital that staff in all banks and creditors are trained in domestic abuse, including economic abuse, so that they can effectively respond to cases — including within the pandemic

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of training for relevant staff on domestic abuse, including economic abuse, so they understand: the different forms that economic abuse takes; how to spot the signs; and how to respond safely and effectively to customers. Appropriate training includes skills in how to speak to victim-survivors so that they are able to effectively and sensitively draw out all of the details they need in order to understand the situation and provide support, adopting a trauma-informed response. Training must also explore how perpetrators can take advantage of financial service policy and procedures (such as not agreeing to close joint accounts) to perpetrate abuse so that staff are aware of this and how to identify and mitigate it.

Many firms are already implementing such training having signed up to the Code of Practice on Financial Abuse introduced by UK Finance in October 2018. However, refresher training should be accessed specifically to address the pandemic – exploring how this has led to increased opportunities for perpetrators to abuse victim-survivors, along with how the bank or creditor can adapt pandemic-specific policies to safely support the needs of women during the outbreak.

6.2.2. Banks and creditors must ensure that victim-survivors have safe and reliable ways through which to contact them throughout the pandemic and beyond

It is key that victim-survivors can easily and reliably contact their bank or creditor so that they can discuss their needs and any issues arising from the abuse. Given that the safety needs of women can vary depending on their circumstances (such as whether they live with the perpetrator or not, or if they know or believe that the perpetrator is accessing their phone, emails or post), there must be a range of communication options so that women can choose the best one for them at any given point. Whilst this flexibility is always important, it is particularly so within the pandemic where individuals' situations can change quickly.

'[I want to] be able to communicate by email rather than always by phone. Due to a mental health condition, I find it very difficult to control emotions when communicating by phone if I am anxious.' (Victim-survivor)

'I would need a way of contacting them not going through my ex-partner.' (Victim-survivor)

These contact methods should take women through to customer vulnerability teams and, where they exist, specialist domestic abuse teams, so that they can quickly find the support they need from professionals trained in this area who are able to respond safely and appropriately. Women should be able to access these services 24/7 throughout the pandemic and beyond via the phone and safe online options; several victim-survivors told SEA they would like to see the latter, with one commenting they wanted to be able to access *'live chats with knowledgeable people/experts who can actually help.'* It is also vital that banks and creditors follow the Code of Practice and ensure that women can safely, quickly and easily change their postal address, and that this is effective immediately to support their safety.

It is key to acknowledge that, for some victim-survivors, the option of face-to-face communication with their bank or creditor is needed as they feel unable to speak about a matter that is so deeply personal in any other way. As such, where banks are staffed and it is possible to do in a way that adheres to Covid-19 safety measures, it is important that appointments are made available to customers in branches, including victim-survivors of economic abuse. Video call options could also be offered where this is safe for the victim-survivor and is preferable for them.

'Identify that people need time, that not everything is business, putting people first builds relationship and respect.' (Professional)

Again, as part of this service and in line with the Code of Practice, banks and creditors must ensure that they have a comprehensive and secure case management system that meets the needs of victim-survivors. This should include processes whereby women do not need to repeatedly recount their experience of abuse to different members of staff, as this can be incredibly upsetting for them.

One victim-survivor told us how their bank had done this by giving her *'the same employee to deal with to save explaining the circumstances repeatedly to different employees of the bank.'* Such continuity is especially important during the pandemic, when women may have little privacy away from the perpetrator and where repeating their experience will take away from the time they can then spend on discussing help and solutions.

6.2.3. Banks and creditors must ensure that policies and processes take into account the needs of customers experiencing domestic abuse, including economic abuse, and reflect specific needs arising during the pandemic

'[Banks and creditors] need to be [domestic abuse] savvy and have advice on their website for victims of coercive control and financial abuse and have their call centre staff trained.' (Victim-survivor)

An understanding of the real-world experiences of women who have faced economic abuse is vital for banks and creditors so that they are able to support the needs of victim-survivors. This can be achieved through ensuring that relevant staff access training. Without this understanding, women can go through the upset of revisiting their experiences when explaining them to their bank or creditor, only to then feel let down and worried by the response:

'My bank says on their website that their customers should contact them if they are the victims of financial abuse. I spoke to them at length and they said there was nothing they could do in practice except freeze the account, which would have meant that none of my bills or mortgage would have been paid. The bank was extremely unhelpful and it made me feel very desperate that they would do nothing.' (Victim-survivor)

'When I spoke to the mortgage company, they understood why I had a complaint and they understood that I wasn't able to have access to my product and I wasn't able to know that my bills would be paid... And they did understand that but they didn't because they haven't done anything wrong in terms of taking instructions... they didn't address the

fact that actually, in my eyes, that they were being complicit in them enabling me not to have any control over [my finances].' (Victim-survivor)

It is vital that banks and building societies signed up to UK Finance's Financial Abuse Code of Practice (currently 24) follow the principles set out within it, and that financial institutions that are yet to sign up do so. The Code highlights the importance of victim-survivors being able to de-link from financial products they hold with the perpetrator easily to stop the abuser exerting ongoing control.

Underpinning responses during the pandemic and beyond is the need to ensure recognition of both the hardship many victim-survivors experience and the opportunity that banks and creditors have to support them in building economic safety, so that they can work towards economic independence.

'I think to expect that everybody's going to go back to normal as soon as this six-month payment break thing is over is unrealistic. So, we will have probably a fair percentage of customers who are going to reach the end of their breaks and be unable to resume their normal payment. So we will need forbearance measures to continue.' (Professional)

Banks and creditors should explore supporting victim-survivors with tailored measures depending on their circumstances, including consideration of: writing off debt stemming from the abuse; interest-free, or reduced interest, loans; and payment holidays — without penalties — to afford breathing space.

'Last year when all this happened... I had gone to my mortgage company and said can I have a holiday because I've got a solicitor to pay to try and get out of this relationship, which they said no... When COVID hit, they [gave] everyone a holiday. But actually, whether it was a national crisis or a personal crisis, there's an unfairness there because had they've helped me in the same vein, I wouldn't have been under the stress I was.'
(Victim-survivor)

SEA's work to support banks and building societies implement the Code (funded by the Home Office) highlights the importance of working with specialists in domestic abuse. The impact that banks and creditors can have on women striving to find safety whilst — or following — abuse cannot be downplayed. The right response can transform victim-survivors' lives.

'[My bank] has been amazing and once they had all the evidence of the control they repaid the charges and closed down account so my perpetrator could not access it or make me in debt again on that account.' (Victim-survivor)

'[The bank] were fantastic. Last week they phoned me up and I sent in paperwork and they actually quashed the debt. They said we can see that, you know, he's run up this. So they were brilliant, they actually have recognised economic abuse. That's the only bank that has.' (Victim-survivor)

6.3. Coerced debt

6.3.1. The Government must reform consumer law so that coerced debt is recognised, victims can seek redress and perpetrators are held accountable

***'My bank doesn't recognise coerced debt.'* (Victim-survivor)**

Coerced debt is not recognised in consumer law, so unless the debt arises from fraud there are currently no formal mechanisms available through which to address it. SEA has been working in partnership with Money Advice Plus to appeal to the goodwill of creditors to write off debt that has been coerced and, whilst positive steps are being taken by some here, responses can be inconsistent within and across firms and only one in four cases are resolved in this way.

Given the prevalence of coerced debt seen in the pandemic, as evidenced by SEA's research, it is now more pressing than ever that the Government pursues this reform of consumer law so that women can access justice and perpetrators are held to account. Creditors must also explore preventative measures they can put in place to make it more difficult for perpetrators to use products within the abuse so that as few instances of coerced debt occur as possible.

This issue was also explored by the independent Challenge Groups established to support the Money and Pensions Service in implementing the UK Financial Wellbeing Strategy and was addressed within the 13 urgent Covid related recommendations made by the Group Chairs. Creditors are being urged to help finance and take part in the piloting of an Economic Abuse Evidence Form, developed by SEA and Money Advice Plus. Modelled on the Debt and Mental Health Evidence Form, this is a tool that enables debt advisors and creditors to access clear and comprehensive information in a standard form, and also supports efforts to minimise how often victim-survivors need to recount their experiences.

6.4. Hardship funds and emergency grant schemes

6.4.1. Government funding must be provided to local authorities so that they can provide local hardship funds and emergency grant schemes to victim-survivors and promote these to residents and front-line professionals

Each local authority must receive Government funding to provide a local financial grant scheme for victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Such payments would enable victim-survivors to have access to essential items; enabling them to deal with the consequences of the abuse, whether that is replacing essential furniture broken as part of ongoing abuse or helping them to flee the abuse and build independence.

For victim-survivors to benefit from hardship funds and emergency grants, they and/or the front-line professionals they work with must be made aware of schemes and how to access them. This particularly important in the context of the pandemic where victim-survivors may be under even greater financial pressure as a result of the perpetrator's actions.

It is key that local authorities ensure this information is available, easy to find and covers schemes from statutory sources as well as from the voluntary sector, such as local charities.

'We are in the process of making some applications. Though we could do with more information about this.' (Professional)

Without this, not all victim-survivors who would benefit from these funds or grants will be able to do so; as one professional told SEA: *'I do not know enough about these types of funds or how to help them apply to offer this.'*

6.4.2. Local authorities must ensure that any emergency grant or hardship fund schemes they provide are flexible to meet the needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse

It is important that local authority emergency grant and hardship fund schemes are facilitated so that they meet the needs of victim-survivors of economic abuse. As such, they must be developed with a sound understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse, including economic abuse, such as how the perpetrator may consistently destroy the victim-survivor's property leading to numerous replacements. Schemes must also ensure that victim-survivors have ongoing access to specialist domestic abuse support.

Through understanding and responding to domestic abuse, financial institutions, as well as national and local Government, can support victim-survivors of economic abuse throughout the pandemic to manage their money and finances to the best possible level, in turn contributing to their economic safety.

Surviving Economic Abuse

Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) is the only charity in the UK dedicated to raising awareness of economic abuse and transforming responses to it. All our work is informed by Experts by Experience – a group of women who speak about what they have gone through so they can be a force for change.

For more information on SEA, the Cost of Covid-19, or the information in this briefing, please contact Holly Cameron, Head of Policy and Influencing, at holly.cameron@survivingeconomicabuse.org.

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