



Ask and Take Action: Briefing for Report Stage by Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk July 2020

“The question was life changing.” – Andrea

The status of the Bill

The Domestic Abuse Bill was reintroduced in March 2020. The bill received its second reading in the House of Commons on Tuesday 28 April 2020, and was sent to Committee on Thursday 4 June 2020.

Agenda welcomes the new provisions made in the bill, including banning cross-examination by perpetrators in court and the new powers given to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner. Agenda also welcomes amendments moved at Committee stage, including an amendment to modernise the law and ensure effective legal defences are available to all those whose offending is attributable to their experience of domestic abuse, and the new amendment tabled by the Government to include children in the statutory definition of domestic abuse.

However, there were some important omissions at Committee stage that must be highlighted at Report stage. For this bill to truly transform the response to domestic abuse, Members of Parliament must bring the following points to the attention of the whole House at Report stage:

- **All public services have a role to play in the response to domestic abuse.** With the exception of several references to the police, at Committee stage “the frontline” was almost entirely considered in relation to domestic abuse organisations, women’s specialist services and social workers. Women experiencing abuse are more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes including homelessness, poor mental health and issues with drugs and alcohol and so to be in touch with a range of public services. *All* public services that come into contact with survivors are at the frontline of tackling domestic abuse – from GPs to Jobcentre staff, and all have their role to play in spotting abuse and taking action.
- **Early intervention and prevention must be more survivor-focused.** “Early intervention / prevention” was discussed almost only in relation to perpetrators at Committee stage. While a perpetrator-focused strategy is essential to addressing what drives abuse, we must not overlook the power of survivor-focused upstream intervention in preventing further harm at the earliest opportunity. This starts with asking survivors about their experiences of abuse.
- **We need a statutory duty on public authorities to train frontline services staff to Ask and Take Action on domestic abuse.** “Routine / Targeted enquiry” was not mentioned once at Committee stage, despite best practice and success in Wales highlighted several times in oral evidence and debate in relation to ‘[Ask and Act](#)’. We must draw on the immense strength of the public sector, and train frontline services staff to ask those at risk about their experiences of abuse and respond appropriately to survivors with pathways into support. As Agenda’s research shows – guidance isn’t enough. We need a duty on public authorities to ensure this training is taking place.



“The most powerful place to intervene and help is the frontline.”

- Julie Marson MP, [Committee Debate, Tenth Sitting](#)

“Frontline staff are worth their weight in gold”

- Jess Phillips MP [Committee Debate, Tenth Sitting](#)

Summary

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, are calling on Members of Parliament to grasp the opportunity at Report stage to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to require public authorities to make trained enquiries about domestic abuse.

We are calling for the Government to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to:

- a) Ensure there is a statutory duty on public services to ensure relevant staff are making trained enquiries about domestic abuse.
- b) Support this duty through appropriate training and funding so that staff are equipped to ask the question, and there are services available and ready to support women when they do disclose.
- c) Accompany the duty with robust data collection and training standards, which allow regulation and reporting of the success of the policy.

Read the [full briefing for Committee Stage](#), which includes more details about the [Ask and Take Action](#) campaign, led by Agenda and supported by over 20 charities, practitioners and other leading experts.

Our research

Agenda’s report, [Ask and Take Action: Why public services must ask about domestic abuse](#), found **staff in mental health services across England are failing women by not asking about experiences of domestic abuse**.

Routine enquiry - whereby trained practitioners routinely ask patients about experiences of abuse - is already recommended by NICE guidance in services including mental health, drug and alcohol treatment, and maternity.

Yet our research found that this often doesn’t happen in practice: a third of mental health trusts who responded to an FOI did not even have a policy on routine enquiry. Where trusts did have policies on routine enquiry the effectiveness of these policies varied considerably, with one trust **asking just 3 per cent of patients about experiences of domestic abuse** – when they should be asking everyone.

Agenda estimates the cost of training frontline public services to Ask and Take Action on domestic abuse to be just [£3.6 million](#). A full breakdown of the methodology and details of the training programme is available upon request.

Chlo’s story: Chlo is a survivor and campaigner, a peer researcher for the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage and now works for a domestic abuse charity. She was a teenager when she first started to experience domestic abuse.

She says: *“I was in mental health services when it started, but no one talked to me about my relationship or picked up the warning signs. It was police that first suggested what I was experiencing was domestic abuse. It hadn’t even occurred to me that’s what it was until then, I didn’t know about emotional abuse or coercive control. After that, I was referred to victim support and eventually he was convicted.”*

Campaigns Agenda supports

- [Age UK's](#) call for data collection about domestic abuse for adults aged 74 and over.
- The [Violence Against Women and Girls Sector's joint calls](#) for the Bill.
- SafeLives [#Invest2EndAbuse](#) campaign which calls for a fully funded range of domestic abuse support services for children, adults and perpetrators.
- The [joint children and domestic abuse sector's calls](#) for children affected by domestic abuse.
- The [Step Up! Migrant Women Coalition](#), led by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS).
- Imkaan's '[Alternative Bill](#)', which outlines a response to VAWG that is gendered and intersectional.
- [Prison Reform Trust's](#) call for legal protection for those driven by domestic abuse into offending.

Agenda supports calls for the Bill to include a provision establishing safe reporting mechanisms and ensure all survivors of domestic abuse have equal access to welfare systems and legal tools, regardless of their immigration status. We support calls for a firewall separating migrant women survivors' rights from immigration enforcement. We support campaigns to extend eligibility for the Domestic Violence (DV) Rule and Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) to all migrant women experiencing domestic abuse, and an end No Recourse to Public Funds conditions, which exclude migrant women from accessing support.

Where survivors choose to make disclosures it is vital that there are properly funded gender and trauma-informed local services that women can be referred to. This includes specialist services run by and for the communities they serve.

What can you do?

We would be grateful if you would **raise the important issue at Report stage** of the need to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to include a statutory duty on public authorities to train frontline services staff to ask service users about their experiences of abuse and respond with appropriate pathways to support.

One survivor said: *"No one even bothered, even when I went to hospital when my tooth got knocked out, even then they never even bothered to refer you."*

About Agenda

[Agenda](#), the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction, contact with the criminal justice system and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. www.weareagenda.org

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues outlined in this briefing with you in more depth. To arrange a call please get in touch with Hermione Greenhalgh: hermione@weareagenda.org

