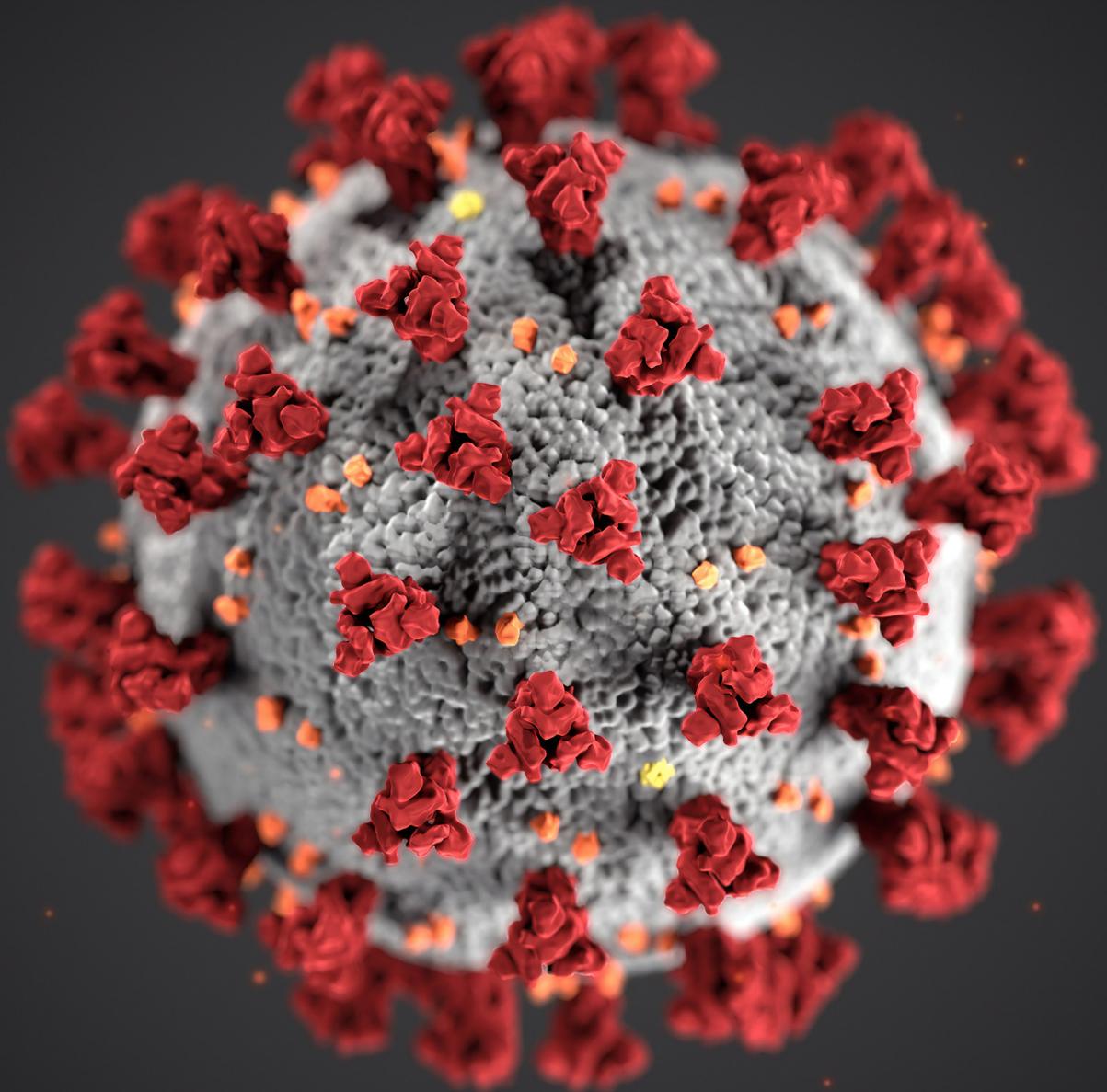


Supporting victims of domestic violence during COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on service providers in North-East Scotland and Orkney

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a significant rise in gender-based violence and increased risks of harm for domestic-abuse survivors due to restrictions on movement and an increase in social isolation. Gender-based violence is a major public health, equality and human rights issue. It can result in physical, sexual and psychological harm, often with long-lasting impacts. The pandemic has compounded women's experiences of violence and abuse and has rendered their needs more complex by preventing their access to basic safety nets (Respect 2020).

In April 2020, the Scottish Government announced additional funding for some domestic abuse charities, acknowledging the increased demand for their services, and the need to change delivery mechanisms, during the pandemic. Spring 2021 thus afforded the perfect time to assess how support organisations in the region, both third sector and government departments, coped with increased demand for their services over the last year and to identify challenges and good practice.

12 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with managers of domestic abuse service providers in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Orkney in April – May 2021. In this report we identify key findings and make recommendations to both the service providers and policymakers in regional and national governments relating to our findings.

Many thanks to all who participated in the project.

“It takes more time and more flexibility to support a service user”

CHALLENGES

The move to online and telephone provision of support services

- Sourcing technology, particularly for volunteers
- Broadband coverage
- Lack of access to technology, including telephones, by users

Increase in demand across the board

- Introduction of waiting lists
- Some services reported an increase in historic abuse cases
- Some reported an increase in the number of severe cases
- High demand for accommodation
- Struggle to furnish and equip accommodation during lockdown

“You can't hold their hand on Zoom”

IMPACT ON STAFF / MANAGERS

- Challenge to recruit and train key workers and volunteers
- Unpaid overtime
- Stress
- Juggling childcare and home schooling with supporting service users appropriately
- Difficult to replicate a sense of community for staff
- Lack of debriefing and support opportunities
- No separation between home and work

“COVID gave perpetrators more tools for control”

“Staff can't have a debrief with someone sitting next to them after a difficult phone call”

IMPACT ON SERVICE USERS

- Children do not respond well to telephone-only contact
- The closure of the courts brought delays and stress
- Increase in levels of anxiety
- Lack of opportunities to engage in the community
- Concerns about breaking lockdown – not reporting abuse; not leaving the home
- Perpetrators using lockdown as a tool of abuse

FUNDING

- The provision of extra funding was valuable to those who received it, and funders were praised for their flexibility re changes of use.
- However, interviewees expressed concerns that funding would not be as accessible in the future and noted the resourcing demands of continual funding applications and reporting.

GOOD PRACTICE

- National provision of support – allowing staff to gain more diverse experience.
- Flexibility of choice for service users – support via telephone, face to face meetings, online.
- Online provision allows more anonymity in small communities.
- Use of online environments such as Minecraft to support children and young people.
- Better communication via Teams, Zoom rather than endless emails.
- More consideration of staff wellbeing.
- The role of Violence Against Women Partnerships in connecting different organisations and sharing experience and information.
- Undertaking national training online offers more opportunities for those in remote locations.
- Use of local media to get messages across regarding support and rights.
- Undertaking perpetrator screening processes without face-to-face interactions through team working and seeking feedback.

“If something like this happened again, we would know better that we can cope with it”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The need for emergency planning.
- Continue with flexibility of service provisions and training (service providers and national organisations)
- Continue online meetings of VAWP.
- The closure of the courts has had an ongoing impact on service users – government needs to consider how to avoid or mitigate a full closure in the future.
- The need for the provision of initiatives and funding to support women in rural locations to stay digital in order to access the right support for them.
- Scottish government needs to address the insecure and partial provision of funding for all parts of the gender-based violence sector.