

Landmark Domestic Abuse Bill receives Royal Assent

Today (29 April), the Domestic Abuse Bill has passed both Houses of Parliament and been signed into law.

The Domestic Abuse Act will provide further protections to the millions of people who experience domestic abuse and strengthen measures to tackle perpetrators.

For the first time in history there will be a wide-ranging legal definition of domestic abuse which incorporates a range of abuses beyond physical violence, including emotional, coercive or controlling behaviour, and economic abuse.

The measures include important new protections and support for victims ensuring that abusers will no longer be allowed to directly cross-examine their victims in the family and civil courts, and giving victims better access to special measures in the courtroom to help prevent intimidation – such as protective screens and giving evidence via video link.

Police will also be given new powers including Domestic Abuse Protection Notices providing victims with immediate protection from abusers, while courts will be able to hand out new Domestic Abuse Protection Orders to help prevent offending by forcing perpetrators to take steps to change their behaviour, including seeking mental health support or drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

In recent weeks, the government has added new measures to the bill to further strengthen the law, including creating a new offence of non-fatal strangulation, extending an offence to cover the threat to disclose intimate images, and clarifying the law to further clamp down on claims of “rough sex gone wrong” in cases involving death or serious injury.

The Domestic Abuse Bill was originally published in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny and the Government worked closely with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and charities to make key changes to the bill, ensuring the law is as robust as possible.

Speaking on the new law Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls are utterly shameful. As Home Secretary, I am determined to work tirelessly to keep vulnerable people safe and bring crime down.

The Domestic Abuse Act is long overdue. This landmark act will transform the support we offer across society. This includes the support Government provides to victims to ensure they have the

protection they rightly need, so that perpetrators of these abhorrent crimes are brought to justice.

Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland said:

This landmark piece of legislation steps up the response to domestic abuse at every level – giving victims more support than ever before while ensuring perpetrators feel the full force of the law.

Thanks to the many survivors, charities, parliamentarians and colleagues from across government who have worked tirelessly to make this possible, more vulnerable people and families will be protected from the scourge of domestic abuse.

Other measures included in the act include:

- extending the controlling or coercive behaviour offence to cover post-separation abuse
- explicitly recognise children as victims if they see, hear or experience the effects of abuse
- establish in law the office of Domestic Abuse Commissioner and set out the Commissioner's functions and powers
- placing a duty on local authorities in England to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation
- provide that all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance
- place the guidance supporting the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme ("Clare's law") on a statutory footing

Safeguarding Minister Victoria Atkins said:

This law will fundamentally transform our response to tackling domestic abuse by providing much greater protections from all forms of abuse.

I'm grateful for the brave victims and survivors who have inspired this strengthened action and have helped inform this legislation throughout.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, says:

Today marks an historic moment for victims and survivors of domestic abuse when change is needed the most.

The act sets out my legal powers which I will use to support all victims across England and Wales by first tackling the 'postcode

lottery' of services.

So many campaigners, charities and individuals have worked incredibly hard to make the bill as robust as possible and there is no doubt that the legislation, which now includes non-fatal strangulation as a standalone offence, is much stronger as a result.

Legislation won't transform things overnight and we know there is more to do, so and I will work with partners to advocate for further changes.

National Police Chiefs' Council lead for Domestic Abuse, Assistant Commissioner Louisa Rolfe, said:

Supporting victims of this cruel crime and bringing offenders to justice remains a priority for the police and we have improved our response to domestic abuse across the country. Police attend more than one million incidents of domestic abuse each year, yet we know many victims will still not come forward.

Though policing alone cannot solve domestic abuse, and we must work with others in education, probation, health, social care and housing to ensure support is joined up and intervention is effective.

The bill provides an opportunity to do this, and we welcome the measures within it, including the new tools available to officers to better support victims and their families.

Finally, I want to reiterate our message to victims of domestic abuse. You are not alone. We will come when you ask for help and can take steps to make sure you're safe.

Farah Nazeer, Chief Executive of Women's Aid Federation of England, said:

The Domestic Abuse Bill has been long-awaited, and could not be more needed, following the impact of the pandemic on survivors and our national network of domestic abuse services.

Thanks to the bravery of survivors in campaigning for change, we now have an act that will strengthen protection in the family courts, improve housing law in cases of domestic abuse, and require councils to fund support in safe accommodation.

We continue to urge for the law to address the significant gaps it leaves and protect every survivor, ensuring that all women and children are able to access support regardless of immigration

status, and for us to see guaranteed long-term funding for specialist women's domestic abuse services, including refuge services around the country that are saving lives every day.

Claire Throssell, MBE Survivor Ambassador for Women's Aid said:

As a survivor and domestic abuse campaigner, the new act is a chance to make sure survivors are safe, protected and loved. The vital changes to the family court are long overdue and everyone accessing them deserves better. It is high time the family courts are safe and supportive, protecting victims and survivors instead of shielding perpetrators.

Jo Todd, Chief Executive Officer, Respect said:

We're delighted to see a requirement for a strategic approach to domestic abuse perpetrators set into law. This is something that we and over a hundred other organisations have been campaigning for a long time.

Domestic abuse is not acceptable or inevitable. A comprehensive strategy – spanning early responses, community interventions, quality assured behaviour change programmes and risk management systems, that centre the needs of survivors – will help survivors and their families to find freedom and reduce the numbers of new victims, including children.