

New measures announced ahead of Hidden Harms Summit

The government will spearhead a new codeword scheme for domestic abuse victims, which will allow people in urgent or immediate danger to get help from shop workers by using a specific phrase that staff will be trained to identify.

The new scheme, which has been championed by the Victims' Commissioner, Domestic Abuse Commissioner and crisis support charities such as SafeLives and Hestia, will be discussed at the Hidden Harms Summit today (Thursday 21 May).

Representatives from government, law enforcement, victims' charities, front line practitioners and the private sector will drive forward action to support victims of crimes such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, child sexual abuse and modern slavery.

The virtual summit, hosted by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is in response to the unique challenges victims have faced during the coronavirus pandemic and to ensure they continue to get support.

Attendees include representatives from the National Crime Agency, National Police Chiefs' Council, the children's, domestic abuse, anti-slavery and victims' commissioners and leaders from domestic abuse and children's charities, including the NSPCC, Refuge and Women's Aid.

Ahead of the summit the government has announced it is working with business groups, such as the National Pharmacy Association and British Retail Consortium, and domestic abuse charities, on the implementation of a codeword scheme to support domestic abuse victims.

In addition to this, funding will support law enforcement to target perpetrators sexually exploiting children and help those affected by abuse rebuild their lives. Around £10 million will boost the National Crime Agency's ability to tackle paedophiles operating on the dark web and a further £3.36 million has been allocated to projects to understand the threat posed by the most serious criminals.

This follows the unprecedented £76 million extra funding for vulnerable people from the government's £750 million package of support for charities. This included £34.1 million to safeguard vulnerable children, £28 million to help survivors of domestic abuse, £10 million to support victims of sexual violence and £1.73 million for modern slavery support services.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

I am acutely aware that for some people home is not a safe space, and that coronavirus has brought with it additional dangers.

Just as I am committed to tackling the virus, we have to support the most vulnerable and keep them safe from harm and exploitation. That is why it is vital that we come together and bring all our collective expertise to ensure we are doing everything we can to support those at risk, and to help them rebuild their lives.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

While the necessary social distancing guidelines are keeping the majority of us safe, they are amplifying danger for others. Protecting vulnerable people from the most sickening crimes such as child sexual abuse and domestic abuse has been my priority since the very start of this crisis.

This summit will enable us, along with experts from the public and private sectors, to develop an action plan to protect victims as we seek to rebuild society.

Justice Secretary & Lord Chancellor, Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP, said:

We have taken every measure possible to protect the most vulnerable throughout this pandemic. This includes an unprecedented £750 million boost for front line charities and making sure victims can still access the support they desperately rely on remotely.

Our message is clear that despite these difficult times no one should suffer in silence.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Now more than ever, we must make sure the most vulnerable children and families in our society are protected from any hidden harms they may face, including abuse, exploitation or neglect.

We know that the nature of such harms have changed, and this summit is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our wholehearted commitment to working together to keep children safe.

The summit will also provide an opportunity to show victims that support is available, empower them to reach out for help and give a forum for key stakeholders to come up with further solutions to tackle these harms.

It will also discuss the proactive and innovative tactics being piloted by police forces to tackle domestic abuse, such as Cumbria, South Wales and Sussex, which include methods for better identifying those posing the highest risk of offending and multi-agency approaches to prevent re-offending.

As well as the opening session chaired by the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Education Secretary will also lead meetings on law enforcement, victim support and safeguarding vulnerable people in the community.

Further measures announced ahead of the summit include:

- £2 million funding boost for domestic abuse charities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic
- £1.4 million for the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Programme – this will support the police to increase prosecutions and crack down on organised immigration crime
- launching a £2.8 million child sexual abuse Support Services Transformation Fund to improve support available for children and young people affected by sexual abuse by building our understanding of what support works for victims and promoting best practice between providers and communities
- a pledge of £3.7 million to continue support for 11 local authority-led projects in England through the Trusted Relationship Fund, to support young people identified as at high risk of sexual or criminal exploitation by providing bespoke help from adult role models such as youth workers, police officers and other professionals
- £800,000 for a helpline, email service, and online tool to assist unrepresented victims seeking an emergency protective order from the family court with making their applications
- a commitment to review the delivery model for victim support services
- commissioning further work to identify the best law enforcement responses to domestic abuse by analysing data and intelligence on incidents during the lockdown period – working with police forces and leading academics, this will ensure we develop a deeper understanding of emerging trends, such as the nature of offending and perpetrators – to encourage forces to share best practice the government will convene a further ministerial roundtable on domestic abuse with academics, police and other key stakeholders

National Crime Agency Director General Lynne Owens said:

Tackling child sexual abuse must be a priority for all of us, this includes the tech industry. The NCA and UK policing relentlessly fight the online child sexual abuse threat, arresting more than 650 child sex offenders and safeguarding around 750 children each month.

The additional funding for this financial year will enable the NCA to de-anonymise and arrest more child sex offenders operating on the dark web and safeguard more children.

SafeLives Chief Executive Suzanne Jacob, CEO, said:

In normal times domestic abuse victims and survivors talk about

walking on eggshells. During this period of lockdown they have talked about walking on glass.

We warmly welcome the chance to speak about this to the Prime Minister and Ministers with responsibilities for mental health, law enforcement and child safeguarding, and are delighted that a SafeLives Pioneer – an expert by experience – can also have her voice and views heard directly by those who shape UK policy.

Susie Hargreaves OBE, Chief Executive of the Internet Watch Foundation, said:

Now is the time, more than ever, to work together to make sure children are not exposed to risk or harm online. Over the last month, 8.8 million attempts have been made in the UK alone, across three internet service providers, to access known child sexual abuse imagery. On top of this, there has been an 89% reduction in the number of webpages being removed from the IWF's URL list, meaning this content is remaining live for longer.

In the past week, our analysts have taken action on the first self-generated indecent image of a child created over the lockdown period. We simply have to act now to avoid things worsening further, and the IWF will be working alongside the Government, technology companies, parents, and other partners to make sure our children are kept out of harm and can use the internet safely.

Lyndsey Dearlove, Head of UK SAYS NO MORE at Hestia, said:

Since launching Safe Spaces nationwide, Hestia's UK SAYS NO MORE campaign has seen an immediate response from pharmacies across the UK to open their consultation rooms to allow victims of domestic abuse to seek specialist support. Key workers in pharmacies hold a unique position within the community and through their rapid response Safe Spaces are now operating in a quarter of all pharmacies in the UK.

We welcome the government's support to enhance measures for victims of domestic abuse that can provide the opportunity for victims to discreetly seek specialist support as part of someone's daily routine.

Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse Chair Elizabeth Filkin said:

Today's virtual Hidden Harms Summit is an important opportunity for businesses to work with domestic abuse charities and other stakeholders at an unprecedented time for those affected by domestic abuse.

The Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse has long championed the role of businesses in helping to identify and tackle domestic abuse, so we welcome the prospect of the codeword scheme. We all have a role to play in rooting out domestic abuse from our society, a fact underscored by the significant rise in reports of abuse during the lockdown.

As public health restrictions begin to be relaxed, the role of businesses and colleagues in helping to support those at risk of abuse will be all the more important. That's why today's summit is a crucial opportunity to discuss and share ideas on the challenges which lie ahead.