

2 March 2021

Baroness Williams of Trafford
Minister of State, Home Office
Via email

Dear Minister

Call to address the 'baby blind-spot' in the Domestic Abuse Bill

We applaud the Government's intention for the Domestic Abuse Bill to be transformational in our nation's approach to preventing and responding to domestic abuse and its traumatic impact.

The draft legislation has been improved to go some way towards meeting the needs of children and young people, though further amendments are essential if all children and their parents are to receive the support they need, where and when they need it.

Among the serious gaps in the legislation are its failure to explicitly recognise the needs of babies and their parents:

- The first 1001 days until a baby's second birthday is a period of uniquely rapid development, when babies are particularly susceptible to their environment. Domestic abuse during this time is harmful and can affect parents' ability to give their baby the best start. We know that exposure to stress during this critical period of early development can have pervasive and lasting impacts
- Babies and parents need explicit reference because, as shown in research recently published by the First 1001 Days Movement, there are 'baby blind-spots' in policy, planning and funding. Measures for children are usually interpreted to focus on school-age children and young people. The needs of babies and toddlers – and the specialised approaches with them and their parents, required to respond to these needs – are often overlooked. COVID-19 has increased the scale and depth of these needs, making it more important than ever that the domestic abuse legislation addresses them
- Around 30% of domestic abuse begins during pregnancy, while 40–60% of women experiencing domestic abuse are abused during pregnancy (*SafeLives, A Cry for Health, 2016*)
- The legislation fails to recognise the significant impact of domestic abuse on unborn babies, which include poor birth outcomes and disruption to the baby's neurodevelopment.

We urge the Government to strengthen the legislation and statutory guidance to:

- Recognise that domestic abuse has a significant impact on babies and on babies in utero (while preserving the current legal definition of a child, which is essential and achievable)
- Stipulate a responsibility on the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to identify babies and babies in utero affected by domestic abuse, in order to improve access to support for them and their parents
- Require the Secretary of State to make provision for publicly funded trauma-informed and attachment-focused support for expectant parents and parents of children under age two
- Stipulate that the guidance on the effect of domestic abuse on children and young people will include babies and young children aged under two and babies who were in utero at the time of the abuse.



Exposure to domestic abuse before age two can have serious and long-lasting consequences for children's mental and physical health and for their development. The risks include lower academic achievement and impaired social development. This creates an imperative to guarantee that babies and their parents are not overlooked in the new domestic abuse legislation.

A baby's first 1001 days, including during pregnancy, is a time of motivation for parents experiencing and using abusive behaviour to seek support, adding to the case for seizing this window of opportunity.

We share the Government's ambitions for the legislation, as a once in a generation opportunity to turn the tide on domestic abuse and address its impact. Ensuring that the legislation meets the needs of babies and their parents is essential to realising these ambitions.

We would be pleased to discuss this further with you and to work with your team while the Bill completes its passage, as the statutory guidance is finalised, and during implementation. This is a critical moment to ensure that domestic abuse policy, provision and practice works for babies, unborn babies and their parents.

Yours sincerely,

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