**Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP**

Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons

House of Commons

London

SW1A 0AA

CC: Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor

26 May 2020

Dear Mr Rees-Mogg,

**Domestic Abuse Bill – Public Bill Committee**

We are writing to express urgent concerns about the current proposals for evidence to the Public Bill Committee on the Domestic Abuse Bill. Following our previous correspondence with the Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor, which you were copied into, we are pleased that survivors of domestic abuse have been prioritised to give evidence to the Committee. As ‘experts by experience’, their views and insights are essential for effective scrutiny of this important legislation. However it is unacceptable, in the context of coronavirus pandemic, that survivors will be required to do so in person because the Committee will be operating in physical form only.

We know that, following the Parliamentary recess, the ‘hybrid’ House of Commons will end. However, around the country, many people continue to self-isolate and shield to protect themselves, their vulnerable family members or to protect family members who are key workers. Structural inequalities, which produce health inequalities, are resulting in disproportionate rates of mortality within black and minoritised communities and amongst older and disabled people and individuals with these protected characteristics therefore continue to be at risk.

The current pandemic has necessitated alternative ways of working – including within parliament, where effective mechanisms for witnesses to give evidence to Select Committees have already been established. It is vital that this flexibility is retained to ensure that survivors can deliver evidence safely to the Public Bill Committee.

Witnesses whom some of our organisations are supporting to give evidence include women with childcare responsibilities, who are not able to secure alternative childcare arrangements whilst adhering to current social distancing guidelines. Another witness has disability and accessibility requirements and would therefore need someone to break social distancing guidelines to support them in navigating Westminster. Witnesses would also be required to use public transport to make journeys which are not essential, given that remote evidence is a clear option. The insistence on giving evidence in person also excludes any survivor or organisation in Wales from engaging in legislation which will impact upon them, as leaving home and travel restrictions within Wales are currently more stringent.

Whilst giving evidence to a Parliamentary Committee is intimidating for most, survivors will be detailing some of the most traumatic experiences of their lives. Some of our organisations will therefore need to support the witnesses in delivering evidence, which of course will necessitate further unnecessary journeys. When supporting survivors to give evidence to the Joint Pre-Legislative Scrutiny Committee, our organisations were able to advise on questions and guidance for members of the Committee to ensure scrutiny was safe and appropriate. We hope you will reach out again to our organisations for this advice and guidance.

The requirement for survivors to attend in person makes the process inaccessible, unsafe and is clearly discriminatory. It will put the health of witnesses, particularly those from BME communities, at risk. It would also mean that the survivors and our organisations are being pushed to breach government guidance and our own risk assessments for what is currently safe practice.

We urge you to ensure to reconsider and ensure that survivors and other witnesses can deliver remote evidence to the Public Bill Committee to protect their health and safety. Due to the urgency of the Bill proceedings, we would appreciate a response to this issue as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive, Women’s Aid Federation of England

Sarah Green, Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

Donna Covey, Director, Against Violence and Abuse

Gudrun Burnet, CEO, Standing Together Against Domestic Violence

Gisela Valle, Director, Latin American Women Rights Service

Pragna Patel, Director, Southall Black Sisters

Medina Johnson, Chief Executive, IRISi

Kate Allen, Director, Amnesty International UK

Jo Todd, CEO, Respect

Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women

Suzanne Jacob, CEO, SafeLives

Refuge

Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda: the alliance for women and girls at risk

Sheila Coates MBE, External Relations, Rape Crisis England & Wales

Nicola Sharp-Jeffs, Director, Surviving Economic Abuse

Frank Mullane MBE, CEO, Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse

Nik Noone, CEO, Galop

Sara Kirkpatrick, Chief Executive Officer, Welsh Women’s Aid.