

CODE WORD SCHEME

Following the 'Mask 19' initiative in Spain and other European countries, where women can use this code word to alert pharmacies about domestic abuse, the UK Government is planning a code word scheme in supermarkets and pharmacies. We support efforts to develop a national scheme through which survivors can access support through retailers, but remain clear that a number of safeguards must be established for this to be safe and effective.

Change that Lasts, developed by Women's Aid Federation of England and Welsh Women's Aid, is a plan for a future where all survivors get the right response to domestic abuse the very first time. This starts in the community, who we know can be critical 'gate-openers' or 'gate-closers' to support.¹ Survivors tell us they can feel judged, isolated or silenced by the people around them, and that when they tell someone about the abuse they often encounter poor responses and harmful victim blaming attitudes. Over the past four years, the Change that Lasts 'ask me' scheme has worked with local communities to change this. We have delivered 12 hours of free training to over 1000 ask me ambassadors² across the UK, equipping them to understand domestic abuse and deliver the 'right response'. Ambassadors are empowered to listen, believe and validate survivors and to signpost them safely to specialist support – bridging communities and local services, who are best placed to deliver ongoing support that meets their needs.

Through the ask me scheme we have a body of expertise in 'what works' in an effective community response to domestic abuse. We believe, as do many survivors, that safe access points in communities are essential to reaching the right support at the right time. We consider that the following requirements are crucial for this to work:

- 1. Training** – survivors tell us that the first response they receive when reaching out for help is critical. Through delivering ask me, we have learnt that training which equips community members to understand the dynamics of abuse and build empathy with survivors is crucial for enabling the right response. We recognise the severe burdens on retailers during COVID 19, but is it not fair or safe to expect staff members to respond to a survivor asking for help without training. A minimum level of mandatory training for staff who may be approached by a survivor would need to be delivered *before* the scheme was rolled out nationally, which could be built upon in the future. Whilst remote delivery of training may currently be required, this would need to be more thorough than an optional video.
- 2. Attitudes** - challenging victim blaming attitudes would need to be a central component of the training. Harmful attitudes towards survivors – 'why doesn't she leave him?' - remain widespread in our communities and create a conducive context for abuse. For this scheme to work, training must focus on attitudinal change and empowering staff to give a validating and believing response when a survivor uses the code word. Through ask me we have an established approach and tools to deliver this training in a way that's accessible for community members.
- 3. Risk assessment** – domestic abuse is a serious crime and survivors are at ongoing risk of serious harm. There will be a wider range of scenarios in which the code word is used, some of which will be frightening, difficult and challenging for staff to deal with. Survivors and perpetrators will be staff too, and the scheme must respond to them. Understanding the potential risks and scenarios that retailers will face and ensuring that steps to mitigate these – including through training, guidance and support – are in place is essential.
- 4. Inclusion** – the scheme must be designed to reach survivors who face the greatest barriers to support, including black and minoritised women, migrant women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT survivors. Engagement with specialist organisations working 'by and for' marginalised groups will be essential for shaping effective training and ensuring that appropriate retailers are targeted. The communications and information on the scheme must be accessible to all communities. A scheme which centres the most marginalised survivors will work for all.
- 5. Evaluation and accountability** – when developing 'ask me' we identified that there is a significant lack of evidence on the safety and efficacy of community based interventions. It is essential that there is some form of monitoring in place to enable evaluation of a code word scheme, including to understand whether it is working safely and to assess the attitudes of staff, and the government can learn from the evaluation framework developed for ask me to establish this. Accountability for the scheme is also critical – we need to know where survivors can turn if they don't get the response they need.

¹ Kelly, L, Sharp, N, Klein, R (2014). Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence, London: Solace Women's Aid.

² The ask me scheme has been delivered by Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation England and Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland across the four nations. At December 2019 1,164 ambassadors had been trained in England and 250 in Wales alone.