



Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse Meeting

The Road to Recovery:

The road to recovery: Report Launch

Monday 24th January 2022, 14.30pm-15.30pm

Virtual meeting

Chair: Apsana Begum MP

Over the past decade mental health has seen increased attention both by the Government and the public. Despite this, and the knowledge that domestic abuse can have a severe and life-long impact on a survivor's mental health, survivors continue to struggle to access the support they need. The COVID 19 pandemic has worsened many people's mental health, particularly survivors who experienced escalating domestic abuse and barriers to support, or whose previous experience of domestic abuse was triggered by lockdown measures.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Domestic Violence and Abuse launched an inquiry into mental health and domestic abuse in July 2021 with oral and written evidence received from survivors, specialist domestic abuse organisations, health experts and academics. Through this the APPG examined the experiences of survivors and the specialist services working to meet their needs. The report launch enabled the APPG to hear from an expert by experience as well as a domestic abuse sector organisation, and to discuss the key findings and recommendations of the inquiry report. The meeting was chaired by Apsana Begum MP and other parliamentarians in attendance include:

- Jess Phillips MP
- Kate Griffiths MP
- Naz Shah MP
- Gavin Newlands MP

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana welcomed attendees and the speakers and thanked them all for sharing their expertise. She briefly discussed some of the barriers that survivors of domestic abuse and VAWG face whilst trying to access mental health support before introducing the speakers.

Tom, Expert by Experience

Tom welcomed the opportunity to share his story and the APPG's work on this subject, as it is an area that is poorly understood. He highlighted that he lost his Mum to suicide June 2020. The inquest into her death concluded that she took her own life while suffering anxiety precipitated by domestic abuse.

His mum's name is Roma Cartwright, and she was a GP who was married to her husband for seven years before he attacked her. She had a history of mental illness and had suffered depression twice, and although she had been stable for more than 10 years, within four months of getting attacked she made an attempt to take her own life and within six months she did take her own life. Tom highlighted that there were key moments between the attack happening and her death that demonstrate where services fell short and should have done better, for example during a hospital visit to get her head injuries checked and when she was receiving care from a community nurse. Tom set out his concern and disappointment that his Mum did not receive the care and support she needed.

Tom stressed the urgency for the Government to invest in mental health staff, as they are overworked, underpaid, have too many patients and not enough authority within the healthcare system. He also emphasised the importance of improving wages, training, and increasing the number of doctors and nurses to enable more interaction with patients. Tom also highlighted the importance of training for all public sector staff that come into contact with abuse victims – including security guards, family courts, doctors – and to improve the infrastructure and procedures of key statutory and non-statutory agencies that victims engage with.

Tom also highlighted the impact of financial and legal decisions on his Mum, as she was more financially comfortable than her husband. Tom set out how the complexity of this situation was overwhelming for his Mum and impacted her already deteriorating mental health. As a result, she decided not to pursue a divorce but ultimately her husband did. She should not have been put in this position. Tom called for it to be easier for people in abusive marriages to leave, and that they should be automatically annulled when one partner is a victim of domestic abuse.

Tom's Mum had experience with mental health as a professional, a patient and a carer. As a result, she knew better than anyone what changes could be made, and she should have been here to tell her own story.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana thanked Tom for his courage to share his experience on both his and his Mum's behalf's. She echoed his comments on the need for infrastructures to accommodate survivors who are engaging with their systems, and for staff to be equipped enough to respond to that and help people.

Apsana set out how mental health is frequently weaponised against survivors and misunderstood by healthcare professionals. This can often lead to survivors being re-traumatised by the very systems meant to support them. Apsana highlighted that the APPG's report has a number of recommendations in the report to be put to the government, however noted that many of the solutions evidenced during the inquiry already exist and have also been called by this APPG in the past. Apsana emphasised that what is needed is the political will to prioritise these issues, give them the urgency they require and ensure cross governmental approach making sure that survivors needs are met. It is also crucial that the Government ensure work undertaken to address these issues is underpinned by challenging societal and cultural stigmas.

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

Farah thanked the survivors who contributed to the inquiry, and thanked Tom specifically for sharing such a moving experience. Farah set out that domestic abuse has a severe and long-lasting impact on survivors their mental health and their children and explained how many of the women that Women's Aid work with have spoken to the lack of understanding and empathy about this impact and a lack of support to meet their long-term needs.

She explained how the research shows that domestic abuse and VAWG are closely linked to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal behaviour, depression, sleep and eating problems, and how these experiences are worse for marginalised women. Farah noted that health practitioners often focus on what is wrong with the survivor rather than what has happened to them which results in the cause (domestic abuse) being side-lined and overlooked. She also emphasised the wider societal costs of domestic abuse to our strained health sector which the government estimates to be 2.3 billion.

Farah set out that there must be a whole of society approach to domestic abuse rather than looking at it purely through a criminal justice lens. She emphasised the importance of partnership working between health and specialist domestic abuse sectors and allocating funding. Farah highlighted that specialist services, with their gendered and intersectional understanding of survivors' experiences, are best placed to meet the needs of survivors.

Farah highlighted opportunities to address this in the current Health and Care Bill and upcoming Women's Health Strategy, as indicated by the APPG's report. She stressed the importance of the Department of Health and Social Care recognising mental health and the impact of VAWG as serious health issues, and the need to make sure that the strategy delivers in commitment and funding.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana echoed many of Farah's comments, highlighting in particular those around the lack of funding and commitment to tackling these issues.

Jess Phillips MP

Jess suggested that the APPG Officers meet with both the Home Office Minister and Health Minister with regards to the report. She explained how in her experience 'state actors', including health and mental health services and children services, used specialist services as 'dumping grounds' to close their cases without pushing through any funding or individualised care packages to go with it.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana thanked Jess and highlighted the Health and Care Bill as an opportunity to address this. She then opened up the floor to questions from the audience.

Discussion

- The need for recognition of the fact that bereaved families of victims are also in need of support was highlighted.
- Why charities were relied on to provide support was queried. It was noted that charities and specialist services have key expertise and independence and are key for work on violence against women and girls, however there should be a more joined-up approach.
- It was noted that systems that are supposed to help survivors can often re-traumatise them, for example when a survivor's children are taken away after admitting to battling with mental health issues and seeking for support.
- A question was raised around including education on domestic abuse in curriculums and empowering young people from a young age to speak on certain issues.
- The issue of gatekeeping of information between different boroughs and local authorities was raised, and the impact this has on survivors.
- It was highlighted that the survivors most in need are often the ones who are not able to ask for it.
- The connection between brain injury and domestic abuse, and whether or not this should be included when discussing mental health and domestic abuse was noted.