

Domestic Abuse Bill

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons), Chair, Liaison Committee

The Secretary of State may know that I took the Stalking Protection Act 2019 through the House and it received Royal Assent in March. Can he update the House on when it will come into force?

Robert Buckland The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work on this important issue and on getting that legislation through Parliament. I will make sure that that information is furnished to her in the course of the debate. Of course, we are brilliantly served by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend Victoria Atkins, and she will respond to the debate.

We have talked about the moral case for pursuing this issue, but there is also an economic case—a case of financial responsibility. Research has established that the cost of domestic abuse was approximately Â£66 billion for victims in England and Wales in the year ending March 2017. The biggest component of that cost is the physical and emotional harm incurred by them, but the cost to our economy and our health service is also considerable. Domestic abuse makes up one third of all violent crime reported to the police. The case for removal is clear, but the challenge is not easy. The dynamics are complex and mean that much domestic abuse is hidden. Victims face significant barriers in seeking help and difficulties in escaping from an abusive relationship. That is why we need a cross-Government, multi-pronged approach to tackling it. The Bill is not only part of that approach but demonstrates the breadth of our ambition in showing strong leadership and taking decisive action to help to end the suffering and harm.

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In my time as a GP and also as a forensic medical examiner, I learnt very quickly never to make assumptions about who are the victims of domestic abuse, or about how much courage it takes to come forward because of the extent to which such abuse isolates and terrorises its victims.

I pay particular tribute, as others have done already, to the hon. Members for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for sharing their deeply moving personal stories. They will have done so much to encourage others to come forward and take that first step to safety—and this is about safety. Two women a week are killed at the hands of their current or former partners. We also need to do something about the under-reporting of the number of women who take their own lives as a result of being in abusive domestic relationships. We must ensure that there is proper reporting, and also better reporting of the gendered nature of this crime.

It is the job of this House to do all those victims justice and to make sure that the services are there to meet them when they come forward. Likewise, we must ensure that the criminal justice system responds rapidly and sensitively, and that services are also there for perpetrators and we do more on prevention and early intervention, because this crime goes through cycles of generations. Those who have witnessed terrible abuse may be more likely to become abusers themselves.

I will touch briefly on protection orders, on tackling variation, and on alcohol and services. I welcome the change in the Bill to domestic abuse protection orders rather than orders for domestic violence prevention. Those provisions will take us a lot further. It is encouraging that the Bill gets rid of the 28-day limit and that there will be an increased number of settings in which people can apply for the orders and more individuals who can do so.

There is much to welcome but, as the Minister has set out, that takes time. The Stalking Protection Act 2019 received Royal Assent in March, but sadly it will not come into force until the new year. However much we welcome the legislation, we know that there will be a delay. When the Minister responds to the debate, will she explain how we tackle variation in the existing orders? She will know from Home Office data that there is huge variation. For example, three orders were applied for in one assessment period in Cambridge, as opposed to more than 250 in Essex. There can be no reason for that kind of variation. Some data from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary show that the use of the orders had gone down. Will the Minister set out what we are going to do to encourage the uptake of existing orders while we are waiting for the improved version to come into force?

I would particularly like to touch on the role of alcohol, because I do not think it has come up in the debate so far. Of course, alcohol is never an excuse for violent crime, but typically 25% to 50% of perpetrators have been using alcohol at the time of the offence. In particular, we know that there is a link with the very violent forms of domestic abuse—in those cases, alcohol is twice as likely to be involved. Will the Minister look at how we can take an evidence-based approach to alcohol in our policy? Will she set out what she is going to do to review alcohol policy so that we can make a difference to domestic abuse, as it is a significant factor?

Services must also be available for perpetrators. We are going to introduce protection orders, and it is welcome that there will be positive as well as negative requirements. If people are referred, those services need to be in place so that they can respond. I am out of time, so I shall conclude.