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Dr Sasha Rakoff

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30 April

Dear Dr Rakoff,

Thank you for your e-mail of 5 April about support to vulnerable women during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, including those involved in prostitution. Your email has been passed to officials for a response.

We would like to assure you that the Government is committed to supporting vulnerable women, including those involved in prostitution or those who are particularly at risk of sexual violence and exploitation during the COVID-19 crisis. The Government is working closely with providers of sexual violence support services to ensure that the needs of victims of sexual violence and exploitation are fully considered in its response to COVID-19. We are also carefully considering the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on victims of sexual violence and their support needs once lockdown has ended.

On 23 April the Government announced £600,000 of funding for vital online and helpline services for victims and witnesses. This includes four specialist helplines for survivors of sexual violence. We have been promoting this across social media to inform victims that support is still available to them during the pandemic and encourage them to seek help. In addition, on 2 May the Government announced £10 million to support victims of sexual violence through the funding of technology to enable charities to offer services remotely. A further £3 million per annum until 2022 will also be invested in the recruitment of more Independent Sexual Violence Advisors across the country.

As you know, police guidance is clear that for those involved in prostitution, the priority for policing is very much to start from a position that seeks to address vulnerability and exploitation, to encourage those in vulnerable positions to report crimes and abuse and bring those that seek to exploit them to justice.

We understand that those who are vulnerable and involved in selling sex or engaging in 'survival sex' can face a number of challenges that affect their ability to access services, particularly during this time.

As part of the Government's strategy to support people affected by COVID-19, we have made changes to ensure people who need financial help have access to the benefit system. We have temporarily relaxed the application of the Minimum Income Floor for all self-employed Universal Credit claimants affected by the impact of COVID-19, for the duration of the outbreak.

In regard to the concerns about women leaving prison being particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in selling sex, a range of support is in place to help them rebuild their lives; this continues to be the case during the COVID-19 lockdown. Released women have a named contact, usually their 'Through the Gate Worker', to help them prepare for release and support their resettlement needs. They also receive support from community homelessness prevention teams. All prisons are providing a care package of items to women who are identified as requiring additional support on release, to ensure that these women have access to any practical items they might need before they are able to receive Universal Credit.

In addition to the direct work with providers of sexual violence services, you will be aware that the Government has pledged a package of grant funds worth £750 million, which will be provided to support charities at risk of financial hardship that are providing key frontline services to vulnerable people affected by the pandemic. The funding will be handled by the National Lottery Community Fund as well as individual Government Departments and will be open to applications shortly. This will give charities supporting the women you have outlined in your letter the opportunity to bid directly for additional funding, as well as the more targeted support provided by government as outlined above.

Thank you for writing on this important issue.

Public Protection Unit.

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