



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

Jackie Doyle Price MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health,  
Inequalities and Suicide Prevention.  
39 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0EU  
020 7210 4850



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Dear colleague

**Sexual assault and abuse are serious crimes which continue to have a significant impact on our society. Their devastating consequences can often be misunderstood and neglected.**

Following publication of the Strategic Direction in April 2018, and the NHS Long Term Plan, we call on commissioners to consider how they are meeting their responsibilities for victims and survivors of sexual assault.

The NHS Long Term Plan sets a clear ambition to ensure survivors of sexual assault are offered integrated therapeutic mental health support both immediately after an incident and continuity of care when needed and new services for children who have complex needs not currently being met including victims of sexual assault.

The strategic direction sets out a shared vision to improve the response to survivors across Government – only in partnership will transformation happen. NHS England's strategic partners and most importantly, victims and survivors of sexual assault and abuse, worked together to consult on the co-development of a health and well-being focussed strategy, which takes into account a lifelong pathway of care for survivors and seeks to drive the improvement of services now and in years to come. It outlines how services need to evolve to ensure that as much as possible can be done to safeguard individuals and to support them at times of crisis and in particular, at the point of disclosure.

Even though certain cases of sexual assault and abuse receive national media coverage, we must remember that this is a hugely underestimated problem and the vast number of victims remain hidden. The 2017 Crime Survey of England and Wales estimated that 20% of women and 4% of men have experienced some type of sexual assault since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 3.4 million female victims and 631,000 male victims. However, around 5 in 6 victims (83%) did not report their experiences to the police.

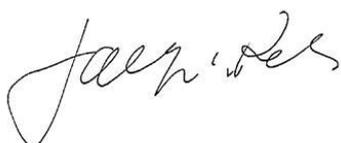
Far too many victims remain fearful of coming forward or lack faith in organisations that they will provide the help they need. Services are not just needed for women and girls but we must ensure they are available and seen as approachable and accessible for all who need them, including men and boys, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, the black and minority ethnic communities, those with learning disabilities and sex workers, as well as all age groups within the prison population.

It is of utmost important to commission better and higher quality services. We need more locally commissioned services that support victims in a more informed and consistent way, and services which are developed in partnerships with victims. The points raised in this very valuable Strategic Direction offer a framework of guidance in doing just that.

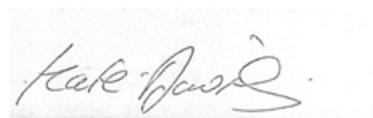
The strategic direction is focussed on six core priorities for delivery across England. Each priority recognises the complexity of health and wellbeing for lifelong care for victims and survivors of sexual abuse; and the fact that individuals may already be known to a number of services, even prior to disclosing. The priorities also recognise that to be effective at meeting short, medium and long term needs over the lifetime of a survivor, care needs to be trauma informed and considered as part of an integrated and whole system pathway of care and not an isolated segment.

NHS Commissioners cannot do this in isolation. Each organisation has a key role to play, working in partnership, if victims and survivors are to flow seamlessly between the different services without complication and over their lifetime – this includes the voluntary sector. This will only be possible by taking a joined-up approach to the commissioning and provision of services, recognising the highly varied needs of individuals, needing different levels of care and different types of support at different times in their lives. To ensure this, commissioning decisions should be based on the needs of victims and survivors, not only based on existing information, but by involving survivors and advocacy organisations in the improvement and development of services. This should include a wide range of options, including recognising the important role of the voluntary sector.

We met many of you at the 'From Strategy to Action' event, held on 22 November in London and co-hosted by NHS England, Public Health England, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, demonstrated the importance of partnership. It was inspiring to understand the work which is already underway, but we must hold ourselves and each other accountable to make the most progress we can. We have a responsibility to the victims and survivors who need our support, and together we need to rise to the challenge.



**Jackie Doyle-Price**  
Minister for Mental  
Health, Inequalities  
and Suicide  
Prevention



**Kate Davies**  
Director of Health &  
Justice, Armed Forces  
and Sexual Assault  
Services Commissioning

Link: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/strategic-direction-for-sexual-assault-and-abuse-services/>