



Somerset & Avon
rape & sexual abuse support

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Dear SARSAS partner,

An update on Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support (SARSAS) services in response to coronavirus.

We are writing to update you on the Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support (SARSAS) specialist services and how they can assist you. As you may already know, we provide support and sign-posting to people who have experienced rape or any kind of sexual assault or abuse at any time in their lives. Our services are open to girls, boys, women, men, trans and non-binary individuals across Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Bath & NES, North Somerset and Somerset.

We are aware that victim-survivors of sexual violence in the region are contacting medical, social care and community representatives. It is feasible that some victim-survivors are unaware that our services are still available and this may be true of some professionals too. We are also concerned that some victim-survivors, despite currently needing support, may be reluctant to contact us under the false belief that their problems are not serious enough in comparison to the current pandemic.

SARSAS's services have become non-contact in response to the coronavirus pandemic. **We have increased our capacity and improved and extended our helpline and e-support.** All victim-survivors of sexual violence can use our helpline and e-support services, and, women (with their prior permission) can be referred to SARSAS by an agency or professional. Our overall goal is to make our services as flexible, agile and accessible as possible by removing as many barriers as we possibly can.

Our **helpline numbers** are **0808 801 0456** and **0808 801 0464** and are open to any victim-survivor. Their operating hours are:

- Monday: 11pm – 2pm
- Tuesday: 12pm – 2pm and 6pm – 8pm
- Wednesday: 12pm – 2pm and 6pm – 8pm
- Thursday: 12pm – 2pm and 6pm – 8pm
- Friday: 11pm – 2pm

We have significantly increased the capacity of our confidential e-support service. This service is provided by trained staff via e-mail and offers confidential, practical and emotional support. Victim-survivors can email us at support@sarsas.org.uk and a member of our support team will aim to get back to them within a working day.

All counselling sessions are now being offered online or over the telephone where it is safe and appropriate to do so. Clinical staff are undertaking assessments with clients to ensure that they have a safe space within their home to access support. Where clients are unable or uncomfortable accessing online or telephone sessions, their support will be postponed while we are offering a remote service and until we are able to return to delivering face-to-face services.

And finally, we thought you may find it useful if we updated you on **what we have learnt from victim-survivors of sexual violence and the impact of the coronavirus on them**. They are experiencing:

- Escalation of trauma triggers and symptoms, and feeling 'overwhelmed' due to coronavirus and the lockdown
- Reduced access to 'normal' coping strategies and distracting activities (work, sports, culture)
- Feeling emotionally isolated through reduced access to other support systems
- Heightened stress levels with no break from children and home-schooling pressure – especially the case for single parents
- Limited safe space at home with privacy/uninterrupted space for phone calls
- Increased levels of fear and anxiety through living in close proximity to perpetrator or living with people who don't know about the abuse
- Deterioration of mental health: depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

Our team of staff and volunteers will continue to ensure our services are available and accessible and that we are supporting victim-survivors of sexual violence over this critical period. We are also **here to support you and your work and if we can help through a referral or something more specific please contact me**.

The **Survivor Pathway** is another excellent online resource that can provide details of all local services available for survivors of rape and sexual abuse across the South West. You can access the website at www.survivorpathway.org.uk

Please do share this letter with colleagues and make use of the attached poster to send out as widely as possible.

Kind regards,



Claire Bloor, CEO SARSAS