

Statement of Michelle Ruse

I am Michelle Ruse, of Women's Aid England, PO Box 3245, Bristol BS2 8PE,

1. I am a helpline support worker working for Women's Aid on the National Domestic Violence Helpline. I work full-time taking calls from women seeking assistance because of domestic abuse, and have been in my role for three and a half years. Lisa Johnson, the Women's Aid Manager of Direct Services has also contributed to the preparation of this statement.
2. The National Domestic Violence Helpline is partly funded by the Home Office and delivered jointly by Women's Aid and Refuge. It operates a 24 hour service seven days a week and receives calls from women on every aspect of domestic abuse. In 2017-2018 the NDVH dealt with 94,549 calls.
3. We receive a large number of calls from women reporting that the perpetrator has breached an NMO and the police have done nothing in response. We do not have statistics on this, but I can say from experience that this is a common occurrence. Frequent breaches include contact such as letters, cards and e-mails, walking and driving past her house when they have been ordered not to approach her address or go into a particular area. Police officers often do not seem to regard such actions as breaches and do not understand the fear that women live with day to day. We also receive accounts from women about police not being able to find a record of an NMO on their systems.
4. We also receive many calls from women who say that they contacted the police to report conduct by a perpetrator such as harassment, stalking or

other abuse and the police have not taken any action but advised them to obtain a civil injunction. These women were expecting some kind of policing response. Sometimes they are told that there were no witnesses or other evidence but often the police do not regard it as a criminal matter unless there are threats being made. This is despite the fact that repeated unwanted contact amounts to the criminal offence of harassment.

5. It seems that police officers have little understanding of what is required to obtain an NMO. This is quite a demanding process for a woman to go through. Firstly, she may have to apply for legal aid which means providing bank statements, mortgage details and other financial documents. Some women obtain legal aid but then have to pay a contribution, which can be quite large depending on their income. Those who cannot obtain legal aid either have to prepare the court application themselves or pay a solicitor. Many women represent themselves without solicitors. A detailed written statement must be prepared along with a court application form and these must be lodged with the court urgently. In many cases where an order is granted ex parte at the first hearing the perpetrator may challenge the order and the woman has to attend a second hearing where she must confront him in court. In some cases, such as those involving repeat e-mails and text messages it is unlikely that an order will be granted ex parte and she will have to face the perpetrator at a hearing.
6. Therefore, obtaining an NMO is not a quick and easy alternative to a DVPO or DVPN, but quite an involved process. However, a very large number of women do go through this process to try to obtain protection. We very rarely

hear reports about DVPNs or DVPOs on the Helpline. In contrast to this discussing NMOs with callers is extremely common.

7. We also hear of cases where Restraining Orders have not been requested at the sentencing hearing. These include cases where the perpetrator was sent to prison but a Restraining Order was needed for when he is released, and also to stop him trying to contact her directly or indirectly whilst he is in prison. Often these are not applied for unless the woman, or those supporting her, push for it. Also, many women don't know that a Restraining Order can be granted even if the accused is acquitted or the prosecution offer no evidence.
8. From my experience, police appear to act more readily in response to breaches of Restraining Orders, which could be because they are treated more seriously as they come from the criminal courts.
9. From what we hear on the Helpline, bail is being used less and less over the last few years and many suspects are being released under investigation and voluntary interviews are also very common. We hear from women that they are very worried about the lack of bail conditions. I have even heard from women that they have been told by the police that they don't do bail any more. They are told by the police that they can't use bail conditions and they should obtain an NMO.

Signed 

Michelle Ruse

Dated 8th of March 2019