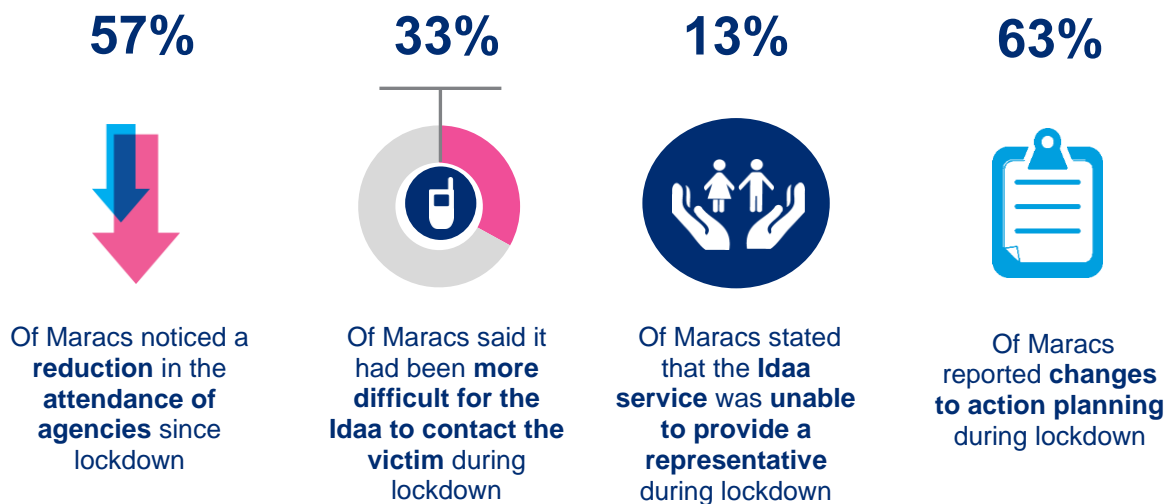


Marac in Scotland

Virtual Marac Operation

The Covid-19 pandemic presented new challenges for all of us, many of us found ourselves isolated in our own homes, and for some, home was not a safe place. Scottish Maracs continued operating throughout both national lockdowns, with examples of truly creative practice, reflecting the commitment of professionals and agencies to work together to improve the safety and outcomes for adult and child victims of domestic abuse.

Key findings from SafeLives Covid-19 Marac Survey¹



Early on in the pandemic, we asked Scottish Maracs to share their views on how lockdown impacted on Marac operation. At the time, the majority of Scottish Maracs were operating via teleconference and only one Marac was operating via videoconference. Accessibility of virtual platforms impacted on the ability of agencies to attend meetings and capacity of specialist services meant Idaas were not always able to attend meetings, with victim voice missing as a result. Challenges created by the lockdown itself also created barriers for effective action planning and safe contact with victims.

Scottish Maracs have now been operating virtually for 2+ years, as part of new operating structures. Since the start of the first national lockdown Maracs have developed and embedded processes locally to support effective virtual operation. This briefing provides an overview of the current picture of virtual operation of Scottish Maracs, highlighting some of the challenges of operating virtually alongside examples of good practice. Please also see [SafeLives virtual Marac guidance](#) based on work with Maracs across the UK since the start of the pandemic.

¹SafeLives Scottish Marac COVID-19 survey was open between 21st April and 28th May 2020, and all except one Scottish Marac responded to the survey.

Virtual Marac Operation

At the time of this guidance being created, there were 32 Maracs operating monthly across 29 Scottish local authorities², since then Marac has been established in the remaining 3 local authorities³. No Maracs are currently being held in person, and the majority are operating using Microsoft Teams. Between December 2020 and May 2021, SafeLives undertook a number of virtual observations as well as wider engagements with Scottish Maracs to understand the potential challenges and best practice for virtual Marac operation⁴. All observed Maracs were hosted through MS Teams, with agency representatives dialling in remotely from offices or home. The majority of the observed Maracs continued to follow the evaluated model⁵ even for virtual meetings, with information about current risk shared virtually in the meeting followed by joint action planning.

For the majority of the observed meetings mainland Scotland was in national lockdown⁶, and for the meetings observed in December 2020, when local restrictions were in place under the levels system, all areas observed during that time were in level 3. In the majority of the observed meetings information was shared only in the virtual meeting, with the Chair subsequently summarising the risks identified and any protective factors, before inviting agencies to volunteer actions to mitigate risk.

Good practice

Although there have been challenges associated with the shift to virtual operation there was a lot of good practice observed across the 15 observed Maracs. Across the observed meetings agency representatives were working well together despite the added barrier of remote working and virtual meetings, often thinking outside the box and working together to mitigate risk, in particular during lockdown when victims' space for action was limited. In many areas attendance from agencies previously not in regular attendance had also increased due to the increased accessibility of meetings as a result of these being conducted virtually, removing barriers to attendance such as travel. This was the case for Maracs in rural and dispersed areas especially.

"The volume of cases we have is growing and, in a way, [the pandemic] has actually forced us to look at other ways of working [using technology], and I think we have got more efficient as a result."

Scottish Local Authority Marac Lead, 2021

Maracs also made good use of the functions afforded by MS Teams for example the hands-up facility, which meant discussions were often well-managed by the Chairs. Videos were kept on by representatives at the majority of Maracs, which meant Chairs were able to keep track of who was in the meeting, and also ensure no one else was in the room overhearing any of the discussions.

Benefits of virtual operation



Increased and **consistent attendance & engagement** at meetings by agencies



Increased **awareness of risk** in domestic abuse cases – Idaa expertise recognised in action plans



More **efficient meetings**, technology facilitating **effective information sharing**

At the start of the pandemic a lot of Maracs adapted their operational model, with information largely shared in advance of the meeting and the meeting itself focused primarily on action planning,

² See [Marac in Scotland: National Overview 2020](#) for further details

³ The North, East and South Ayrshire Maracs became operational in August 2022

⁴ In total 15 Maracs were observed: Glasgow, Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, North & South Lanarkshire, Argyll & Bute, West Dunbartonshire, East & Midlothian, Fife, Dundee, Perth & Kinross, and Angus, Western Isles & East Renfrewshire

⁵ See SafeLives' [Scotland Marac toolkit](#)

⁶ Mainland Scotland entered a second national lockdown on 4 January 2021

sometimes only with a selection of core agencies in attendance. However, at the time of the observations, most of the observed Maracs had returned to a process more closely aligned with the evaluated model, with the only change being the method of conducting the meeting. Feedback from both representatives, Idaas and Chairs on these adaptations suggests there were concerns around the effectiveness of these processes, in particular that the views of victims sometimes got lost in written pre-meeting updates and that risks were not always fully addressed. The return to the evaluated model is therefore positive and means all victims at high risk of serious harm in the local area are more likely to receive a robust response, with risks assessed fully.

Challenges of virtual operation

Across the observations, although there were some challenges specifically associated with virtual operation (internet connections, virtual meeting etiquette etc.), most of the issues and challenges identified related to wider Marac operation and were not unique to virtual meetings.

Across the observed meetings case discussions often exceeded the recommended 12-15 minute timeframes. Although this is the case pre-pandemic as well, case discussions at virtual Maracs seem to go on for longer than at in-person Maracs. During our engagements Chairs reflected that it felt more difficult to manage information sharing during online, virtual Maracs and that discussions often ran over as a result. The lack of eye contact and non-verbal cues may make it more difficult for Chairs to bring discussions back to risk or ask representatives to move the discussion on where information is being shared that is not relevant to risk.

Technology itself sometimes held up discussions, with delays in muting or unmuting and poor internet connections or sound quality contributing to delays in discussions. Across the observed meetings there were also instances of both Chairs, Coordinators and agency representatives being 'kicked out' of the meeting and having to re-join, which also contributed to hold-ups and at times slightly disjointed case discussions. Although some of these issues are an unavoidable part of virtual meetings, they are worth bearing in mind when considering and planning for continued virtual Marac operation in the future.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more workplaces and organisations are applying 'hybrid' working models, with staff working some time in the office and some time from home. In terms of Marac operation, some Maracs are equally considering various versions of 'hybrid' models of operation. For example, continuing to hold some or a majority of meetings online and some in person, others are also considering whether hybrid meeting options where some attendees attend in person and some online would work and how this would impact on meeting management. Whatever model of operation Maracs choose to adopt going forward, proper consideration should be given to what changes are needed to the process, technology set-up and planning to ensure a smooth and inclusive meeting.

“Keeping communication going is a challenge. IT has been tricky (with not all partners being able to use the same IT systems etc for teleconferencing).”

Response to SafeLives Covid-19 Scotland Marac survey, 2020

Extensive home working during the pandemic has also meant new considerations for Maracs in terms of confidentiality of the information shared during meetings. Across meetings, videos were largely kept on and participants were using headphones, which was good practice. However, there were also instances where representatives were not wearing headphones in what appeared to be shared office or home spaces, and on some occasions could be seen talking to others off screen during the observed meeting, meaning the information shared may have been overheard by others potentially not signed up to the information sharing protocol. As far as possible Marac attendees should be encouraged to attend the virtual meeting from non-shared spaces, and where this is not possible, headphones should be used.

Challenges of virtual operation



Challenging **managing long case discussions** in virtual meetings



Difficult to build **constructive professional relationships** and encourage creative action planning



Technology related issues – connection, sound quality – **holding up discussions**

Some Chairs also reflected that virtual meetings, at times, made action planning more challenging, with agency representatives less likely to volunteer actions. Again, the lack of eye contact was seen as an obstacle to effective action planning and some Chairs felt they had to be more forceful when directing action planning as it felt easier for participants to 'hide' in virtual meetings. Although there were examples of really creative action planning and really good joined up working across the observed meetings, there were at times also examples of a lack of actions being taken, reflecting the experiences of some Marac Chairs.

Impact on staff

At the start of the pandemic several Maracs raised concerns in relation to staff wellbeing in light of homeworking and staff "brining Marac into their homes" and the increased risk of vicarious trauma. Throughout the virtual observations both Chairs, Marac Coordinators and Agency Representatives have highlighted the increased toll of online, virtual meetings. Marac meetings are often long due to the number of cases being discussed, however Marac professionals have flagged the increased impact of virtual meetings and how fatigue from the meeting can often 'spill over' into the next day for staff.

"Commitment of partners [is a challenge], people are really busy and finding it difficult to attend. Keeping people engaged is hard going at present due to fatigue."

Scottish Marac Chair, 2021

The majority of Marac professionals spoken to during the course of the observations and wider engagements, noted the positives of virtual operation in ensuring that Marac was able to continue operating throughout the pandemic. Moreover some, particularly in remote areas, stated that virtual operation had made it easier for them to engage with Marac, by removing the need to travel to the meeting. However, practitioners across all areas also commented on missing the 'informal communication' of in-person meetings, and the opportunity to check in and debrief with colleagues after "heavy" meetings.

In particular where meetings are held entirely online, building in time and opportunities for in-person development and networking may be particularly important to build and foster a sense of team working at Marac. Moreover, recognising the added impact of balancing boundaries in virtual meetings, especially where staff are still homeworking, it Maracs should consider building in debriefing opportunities in a safe space following the meeting for representatives.

Lockdown impact

The pandemic has meant that some agencies have been experiencing limitations in the support they are able to offer to victims, and this was evident across the observed meetings, from refuges not being able to offer spaces to victims due to shared spaces, to court mandated perpetrator programmes being suspended due to limitations on group work. However, there were also examples of how the pandemic was impacting the risk victims and their families were experiencing. For example, perpetrators using Covid-19 exposure as an excuse not to turn themselves in to Police and avoiding arrest, or not returning children after contact. School closures and limited hub spaces also impacted on the support available to children, as well as victims' ability to engage with supports with children at home.

The impact of lockdown and changes in service provision for domestic abuse victims, children and perpetrators have been documented elsewhere and was a theme in both the Scottish Government

report on VAWG during Covid-19⁷, and in our engagements with domestic abuse professionals through the [Safe at Home in Scotland](#) network. For Maracs, the additional barriers and changes to service provision have led to challenges to being able to take proactive and realistic actions from the meeting.

The pressures of the pandemic, remote working, increased referrals and court backlogs, have also meant additional pressures on Idaa services, without additional resources, and have led to contact not always being made within recommended timeframes. The pandemic has also meant challenges for safe contact, with victims experiencing limitations on their ability to reach out to specialist and other services, and this was evident to some extent across the observed meetings. Even outside of the pandemic, there is often an over-reliance on Idaas and Police to make contact with and bring the views of victims to the meeting, and where this has not been possible

Information Sharing & Data protection

In light of new virtual operational structures, we would advise Maracs to review their information sharing and action planning in line with the 10 principles as some aspects of this may become more challenging in virtual operational models. Equally, Maracs should ensure information sharing and operating protocols have been updated to reflect the new operational model and in line with data protection legislation and guidance. SafeLives have produced information sharing guidance for Maracs around [GDPR and data protection](#) which may be helpful in this respect.

Normal data protection procedures should be followed for virtual Maracs, and where representatives are home working, agencies should follow their own organisational protocols/advice around confidentiality. Staff working from home need the right equipment. Computers should have the appropriate levels of encryption and security settings, and this applies to meeting platforms too.

Paper files and confidential notes need to be stored in lockable cabinets, which only the staff member can access. Documents need to be disposed of in a confidential waste bin. This may mean staff transporting documents to their office, or to another location such as the police station for appropriate disposal. Each representative should adhere to their organisational policies re storage and disposal and confidentiality.

Respect should be given to the information shared withing the meeting, and the privacy of the individuals involved should be respected. In particular, Marac representatives should be mindful of the privacy of any information shared and the possibility of this being overheard by others if joining from shared offices. Headphones should be used if there is no other option than to join the meeting from a shared workspace.

The Marac Coordinator and Chair need to know where representatives are physically located and ensure everyone are aware and hold each other accountable in relation to confidentiality. Additionally, any requests to observe the Marac should be submitted to the Marac Coordinator in advance along with the reason for the observation. The Chair should be informed in advance of any observers, and permission should then be sought from Marac representatives. In these instances, any observers also need to sign confidentiality documents or the Marac Operating Protocol.

Due to platforms' ability to record meeting audio, this is now becoming a more prominent consideration for Maracs, mainly to support minute taking. If Maracs are using this function, consents need to be sought by all in attendance and appropriate data protection procedures should be followed in relation to storage and removal of recordings.

Virtual Marac 'Do's & Don'ts'

The 'Do's and Don'ts' below reflect some of the good practice observed across the 15 Marac observations, and some of the pitfalls to avoid.

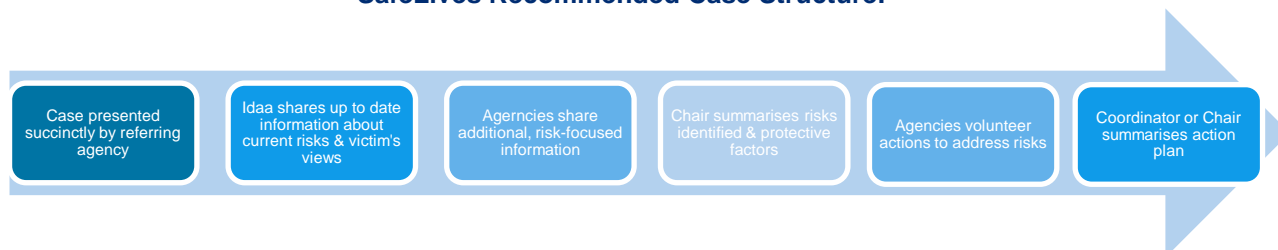


⁷ Coronavirus (COVID-19): domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls - 30/3/20-22/05/20

☑ Do

- Keep cameras on and make sure representatives are using headphones – particularly in shared spaces – to ensure confidentiality of the information shared. Videos also help Marac Chairs keep track of who is in the meeting and can help representatives feel more connected
- Representatives should join meetings 5-10 minutes prior to the meeting start and check internet connection and sound quality prior to the meeting to ensure the meeting can start on time and avoid hold-ups during discussions
- Let meeting participants in one at a time to avoid chaos of trying to identify who is present – and ensuring the Chair is aware of everyone who is in the meeting
- Ensure all participants stay muted when not sharing information to minimise disruption from background noise and digital feedback
- Implement clear structure for meetings, e.g., a set order in which agencies share information and volunteer actions, to promote and support smooth information sharing and keep meetings within recommended timeframes. The recommended case structure is also a good tool to support effective information sharing and action planning at virtual Maracs
- Ensure Representatives have the appropriate time and resources to research cases and attend meetings prepared to share information and volunteer actions
- Schedule regular breaks to break up long meetings and screen time and to ensure concentration levels remain the same for all cases, and avoid eating or other work being completed during the meeting
- Provide formal debrief spaces following meetings and opportunities for face-to-face development opportunities to foster sense of team working between Marac professionals
- Implement clear guidance and expectations for Reps, Chairs and Coordinators and regular reviews of processes and any operational issues by the steering group, with process adjusted accordingly where necessary
- Ensure Marac Operating and Information Sharing Protocols reflect changes in operation, including virtual meetings
- Implement clear governance structures locally to oversee and address any operational challenges, for example in relation to agency attendance, and to oversee regular reviews of Marac operation locally

SafeLives Recommended Case Structure:



☒ Don't

- Join meetings from shared spaces, particularly shared home spaces. Where this can't be avoided, headphones should be used to ensure confidentiality
- Research cases 'live' in the meeting, as this can lead to additional hold ups and gaps in information sharing as large amounts of information have to be analysed in a short amount of time to decide what is or isn't relevant to share
- Complete other work or answer emails during the course of the Marac meeting
- Work through long agendas without scheduled breaks as this can lead to poor concentration and less creative action planning, and have a negative impact of staff wellbeing
- Rely solely on information submitted in advance of the meeting, in particular in relation to victim views and wishes as this can lead to a lack of victim voice being present in the meeting
- Ask representatives to attend at short notice without appropriate or adequate time to research cases and bring relevant information to the meeting.

Recommendations

It is an incredible achievement that Scottish Maracs have managed to continue operating throughout the Covid-19 pandemic by moving to virtual meetings. Below are some recommendations for next steps, both in relation to virtual practice and Scottish Marac development more generally.

- Evaluation & monitoring - Following the virtual observations, SafeLives have developed a self-reflection toolkit for Maracs who want to evaluate their practice against the [10 Principles of an Effective Marac](#), to supplement the current the Marac review process. This is available by request to scotland@safelives.org.uk
- Future planning – Regular reviews of virtual operation at local level, with clear routes for escalation for any emerging issues, and feedback channels for those involved in Marac locally, ensuring the views of those involved in Marac are taken into account when making decisions about long-term plans for return to in-person meetings and other changes to operational models. Where plans for hybrid working models for Marac are being considered, consideration should be given to what investment is needed in terms of technology and other operational considerations to support this
- Reflection & ongoing learning – Reflect on where the move to virtual operation has led to positive impact on local Marac operation, and ensure this learning is sustained if and when Marac returns to in-person operation, e.g. in relation to increased agency attendance
- Review – As part of work ongoing around next steps for Marac development in Scotland, Scottish Government and other stakeholders should incorporate learning from virtual Marac operation, and ensure this is reflected and integrated into any learning to support best practice
- Training – Training for Marac professionals to support them to engage effectively with their local Maracs, this should include training both for professionals who attend Marac and professionals best placed to identify and refer high risk victims into the Marac process
- Data collection – Continue to monitor the impact of virtual operation on Marac outcomes, referrals and agency attendance.

Jenny Smith-Littlejohn
Multi-Agency Lead (Scotland)
SafeLives

About SafeLives

We are SafeLives, a UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.

We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking ‘why doesn’t he stop?’ rather than ‘why doesn’t she leave?’ This applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator and whatever the nature of their relationship.

Our Scottish publication **Whole Lives** highlighted that every year, nearly 130,000 people in Scotland experience domestic abuse. There are over 9,000 people at risk of being murdered or seriously harmed; over 12,000 children live in these households. For every person being abused, there is someone else responsible for that abuse: the perpetrator. And all too often, children are in the home and living with the impact. Domestic abuse affects us all; it thrives on being hidden behind closed doors.



We must make it everybody’s business

Contact

Please contact Scotland@SafeLives.org.uk for further information or questions in relation to this report.

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