

Fragile funding landscape

The extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020

Women's Aid, 2021

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 46 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of nearly 180 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national dataset on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

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1. Introduction

In 2019, the government announced plans to introduce a new legal duty on local authorities to fund 'safe accommodation' for survivors of domestic abuse and their children, creating a new statutory system for the funding of refuges and other services within the community. The statutory duty presents a welcome opportunity to achieve a secure future for the sector. Although there is currently no national data collection on local government spending on domestic abuse, Women's Aid know from our work that specialist domestic abuse service providers are currently facing a funding crisis (Women's Aid, 2020a). Ahead of the new statutory duty for the funding of refuge services, this report determines the current level of local authority commissioned funding for refuge services. It looks at the number of commissioned refuge services and the level of funding in these contracts based on funding contracts in place in November 2020. We know that funding periods can vary, with contracts covering either the financial year or calendar year. This report includes data for 2019/20 but looks at what was in place at the time for all refuges running in England at 1st November (see Section 4.2).

Refuge services are of course just one important element of specialist support provision that is required for survivors of domestic abuse and their children. It is vital that sufficiently resourced community-based support services with a range of service types are also readily available. Freedom of Information request data (see Section 4.2) suggests that the funding landscape for community-based services is likely to be even more complex than funding for refuge service. For example, resources for community-based services are often delivered from Clinical Commissioning Groups and Police and Crime Commissioners in addition to local authorities. The Victims Commissioner and the Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner have expressed concerns that the introduction of the statutory duty could mean cash-strapped local authorities divert funding away from community based service provision in order to meet their requirements under the duty (Baird and Jacobs, 2020). Analysis of commissioned funding for community-based services does therefore require further investigation, but is beyond the scope of this project and is likely to form an initial focus of the Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner's mapping of provision.

2. Key findings

This report finds that:

- More than 1 in 5 refuge services in England received no local authority commissioned funding in 2019/20 (60 out of 269 refuge services)
- 18.5% of all refuge bedspaces running in November 2020 were not funded through local authority commissioning (788 out of 4251 bedspaces)
- There were 18 refuge services run by specialist 'by and for' Black and minoritised women's organisations running at November 2020. A much higher percentage, 57.5% (146 out of 254), of spaces in these services were provided by non-commissioned refuge services, compared to the overall 18.5%.
- Women's Aid survey data shows that only 19.8% of commissioned services (20 out of 101) received enough funding to cover all of their support staff costs.
- The current commissioned refuge sector is currently supported by a significant number of non-commissioned spaces. Without these, the shortfall in spaces would increase from 24.5% to 42.5%.

3. Background

3.1 What are refuge services?

Refuge services are support services that provide safe accommodation for women and children escaping domestic abuse. As such, the specialist staff play a vital role in supporting survivors of domestic abuse and moving them on to independent living and the next stage of their recovery. Whilst in refuge, residents receive a planned programme of therapeutic and practical support from staff and access peer support from other residents. Where adequately resourced refuge services provide follow up resettlement support to women as they move on to their own accommodation. Other service types, such as counselling and dedicated support for children and young people, often run alongside refuge to empower women and children to recover from their experiences of abuse. Refuge services include accommodation in shared, communal accommodation, self-contained properties on the same site or dispersed properties in the community and specialist support is tied to that accommodation. Women's Aid outline what constitutes a refuge service more fully in our Annual Audit reports (Women's Aid, 2020a) and our 2019 report on funding domestic abuse provision (Women's Aid, 2019).

The domestic abuse bill now includes an important legal duty on local authorities to deliver support to survivors of domestic abuse in "accommodation-based services". Whilst it is understood that this includes refuge services, they are not explicitly

mentioned. Women's Aid and Imkaan¹, the national second-tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls, have drafted amendments to address key concerns with the current duty. This includes an amendment to ensure definitions in the duty are updated so that local authorities must be required to fund specialist refuge services rather than generic forms of accommodation. Specialist refuge services provide the range of accommodation types required to support all women and children that the bill aims to allow for. It is the safety and expert support they deliver which distinguishes them from general 'accommodation' that can be unsuitable and unsafe for women and children, and does not provide the expert support that survivors escaping abuse need to cope and recover from trauma.

3.2 Funding landscape

Traditionally, local authorities have funded support in refuge services. However, levels of local authority funding reduced significantly after the removal of the ring-fence on the Supporting People² programme in 2009 and the fund was absorbed into shrinking local authority budgets in 2011. Since then, a combination of localism, spending cuts and a competitive commissioning landscape that has put cutting costs above the effectiveness of services and the outcomes of service users, have created a crisis in funding for specialist services. The proposed new legal duty on local authorities to fund 'secure accommodation' for survivors of domestic abuse and their children sets out to address the issue of funding for refuge services.

Despite government guidance on best practice (Home Office, 2016), we know that poor commissioning practices continue. Smaller organisations are at a disadvantage in tendering processes when competing against larger organisations, and the experience and expertise of specialist domestic abuse services is often overlooked in commissioning decisions that focus on cost above all else (Women's Aid, 2020a).

3.3 Value of contracts

Providers that are successful in the tender process can still face difficulties in securing adequate funding to deliver their services, as often they do not get full cost recovery from their contracts (see Section 5.4).

¹ <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/> : "We are the only UK-based, second-tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls i.e. women which are defined in policy terms as Black and 'Minority Ethnic' (BME)."

² The Supporting People programme was launched in 2003 as a ring fenced grant to local authorities intended to fund services to help vulnerable people live independently. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/rp12-40/>

Where providers are only covering basic running costs for refuge, they may not have the resources to provide other service types alongside refuge. This can include a formal counselling service, which enables women to process the emotional and psychological effects of domestic abuse, or a resettlement service to support with the transition from refuge to independent living. At 1st of May 2019, just over a quarter (26%) of all refuge services available in England were running without a dedicated resettlement service. Only just over a third (32%) of local services were able to provide a formal counselling service to women resident in their refuge service.

3.4 By and for support services

In recognition of the specific needs and experiences of women from marginalised groups, some services provide specialist support dedicated to Black and minoritised women and girls, who are defined in policy terms as Black and 'Minority Ethnic' (BME). Not all of these are expert services run by women from the group they support however, so for the purposes of this report we refer to only services run by providers that are members of Imkaan's specialist 'by and for' BME women's services. Research by Imkaan has shown that specialist by and for services for BME women have been disproportionately impacted by cuts and competitive tendering processes. These processes often favour larger providers, value quantity over quality and leave the unique specialism of these organisations "*unrecognised, misunderstood and devalued.*" (Imkaan, 2016). Some specialist by and for providers reported an increase in the number of referrals they received from statutory agencies during the first Covid-19 lockdown period which started in March 2020 (Imkaan, 2020).

3.5 Demand

The funding crisis means that domestic abuse service providers are currently struggling to meet demand. The number of refuge bed spaces in England in 2019/20 was 30% below the number recommended by the Council of Europe, with 64% of refuge referrals being declined (Women's Aid, 2020a). A survey of local providers by Women's Aid in June 2020 found that all responding providers expected to see an increase in demand over the coming year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Women's Aid 2020b)

Investment and a sustainable funding settlement to address the funding crisis are critically required. The proposed new legal duty on local authorities has potential to improve funding for the sector, if delivered successfully. The information provided in this report aims to inform the statutory guidance, which will accompany the duty, and to highlight the need to ensure that non-commissioned refuges services are fully included within the new funding landscape – as they provide invaluable support to survivors and the wider sector.

4. Methodology

This report includes information about service providers and refuge services listed on Women's Aid's online services directory Routes to Support³.

Service provider: this refers to an organisation providing a domestic abuse service. These can be dedicated providers or larger organisations, for example, housing associations. A provider may offer refuge and/or community-based services, with some larger providers running multiple services in multiple local authority areas or across several regions.

Refuge service: as providers can have different funding arrangements for the different services they deliver, this report explores funding for each individual refuge service listed on Routes to Support. A refuge service offers accommodation and support only for women experiencing domestic abuse. See the background section above for more detail on what these services provide.

Refuge space: as the size of refuge services varies greatly we also look at the number of refuge spaces to draw comparisons. Refuge services have a set number of places but can vary in size, for example they may have space for just one family or be running multiple properties accommodating a large number women and children. Refuge spaces are counted as one space per household and sizes of the accommodation can vary to be for a woman only up to spaces suitable for women with 5 or more children.

Costs: The costs of refuge services can be broken down into four main areas, all of which are essential elements for delivering the service:

- **Housing costs:** accommodation rental charges and maintenance. These costs are largely met by housing benefit
- **Support staff costs:** this includes all staff salary costs, additional employment costs, clinical supervision and staff training
- **Activity costs:** direct activity costs, accessibility costs and external contractors
- **Central costs:** Admin/finance staff, management/governance staff, premises and other central costs

While housing costs are for the most part covered by the housing benefit system, the funding settlement, which accompanies the new legal duty, will need to cover all other support staff costs, activity and central costs involved in delivering refuge services.

This report draws on evidence from a number of data sources that together provide a comprehensive picture of local authority refuge commissioning in England. Analysis and

³ Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation of England and Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland.

comparison of the data sources outlined below has enabled us to confirm the numbers and proportion of refuge services and bed spaces in each English region that are funded through local authority commissioning arrangements. Further, we have been able to explore the extent to which commissioned funding meets the costs of delivering these services. We look at the number of refuge services that do not receive funding from their local authority and the impact that uncertain and unsustainable funding arrangements can have on service delivery. In addition to drawing on the data sources listed below, this report draws on Women's Aid's sector expertise and specialist knowledge about domestic abuse service providers to help us interpret the findings.

Routes to Support: snapshot data of all domestic abuse refuge services in England listed on Routes to Support on 1st November 2020. As highlighted earlier, funding periods can vary so this report looks at what was in place at the time of writing.

Freedom of Information request data: data gathered through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request submitted by Women's Aid to all local authorities (local authorities) in England in December 2019. The purpose of the FOI request was to build a nationwide list of domestic abuse contracts, their monetary values and renewal dates, and whether spending on domestic violence support had increased or decreased since the contracts were last tendered. The FOI request was sent to 347 local authorities⁴. Of the 296 local authorities that responded, 129 local authorities told us they commissioned domestic abuse services in 2019/20, through 342 individually tendered contracts. These contracts included both refuge and community-based services, however as mentioned previously, this report will focus on funding for refuge services only.

Women's Aid Annual Survey: the Annual Survey is sent to all domestic abuse service providers in England and includes questions on funding arrangements for refuge services. This report draws on findings from the 2019 and 2020 Annual Surveys.

Commissioning survey: a targeted survey of selected domestic abuse service providers, sent to providers where it had not been possible to determine (through the other data sources outlined above) whether their refuge service was local authority commissioned in 2019/20. The Commissioning Survey replicated selected relevant questions from the Annual Survey 2020, to provide comparable survey data. In total, 98 providers running 170 refuge services answered the same set of questions, either by completing the Annual Survey 2020 or the Commissioning Survey.

⁴ 51 local authorities did not respond, however 34 of these were District or Borough Councils that are not usually responsible for commissioning domestic abuse services. For example, only 39 (17%) of the 232 District and Borough Councils who did respond to the FOI commission services.

5. Findings

This section will look at the percentage of refuge services and spaces in them that are commissioned by local authorities. The numbers are based on a snapshot of data from Routes to Support taken on 1st November 2020.

This snapshot showed that there were 269 refuge services with a total of 4,251 refuge spaces available in England on 1st November 2020. This represents an increase of 316 refuge spaces compared to the previous snapshot taken by Women's Aid on 1st May 2020⁵, largely due to emergency funding made available to meet additional needs created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Not all of these spaces are likely to remain after emergency funding streams come to an end due to the temporary nature of this funding. The figure still falls short of the Council of Europe's minimum recommendation⁶ on the number of refuge spaces that should be available. The shortfall on 1st November was 1,378 which equates to a shortfall of 24.5% however, if we were to look only at those space commissioned by local authorities this shortfall increases considerably to 42.5% (2,390) which clearly demonstrates the importance and scale of non-commissioned services.

5.1 Non-commissioned refuge services and bed spaces

Our research found that around one in five refuge services (22.3%, 60 out of 269) running in November 2020 were not commissioned by the local authority. **See Table 1.**

These 60 non-commissioned services were run by 51 different providers. Eight of these 51 providers were also running other refuge services that were local authority commissioned, usually where the provider was running services in multiple local authority areas or for a specific group of women. These 60 non-commissioned refuge services hold valuable expertise in the sector, some of the providers have been established in communities for many years and providers of 11 services hold the Women's Aid National Quality Standards⁷.

⁵ More detail on this change is available in *The Domestic Abuse Report 2021, The Annual Audit*: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Domestic-Abuse-Report-2021-The-Annual-Audit.pdf>

⁶ Council of Europe (2008): "...safe accommodation in specialised women's shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10,000 head of population." (p. 51). Based on ONS mid-year estimate for 2018: 55,977,178.

⁷ Women's Aid National Quality Standards demonstrate the unique value of dedicated specialist services for women and children survivors by providing a set of criteria against which they can evidence their quality: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/national-quality-standards/>

In addition to the 60 non-commissioned refuge services, six services told us they did receive funding through a local authority commissioning process for some of the bed spaces in their refuge service, but they also run additional bed spaces that are not included in the contract and are funded through other means. For the purposes of this report we will refer to these six refuge services as 'partially commissioned', although as we explore later the majority of commissioned services did not receive sufficient statutory funding to cover their costs. Further detail on partially-commissioned services is given in Section 5.2.

We are also able to look at the number of bed spaces in refuge services in November 2020 to determine what proportion of spaces in each region were provided outside of commissioning arrangements.

Our research found that a significant proportion of all refuge bed spaces in England, 18.5%, are not funded by local authority commissioning. **See Table 1.**

This is made up of spaces in the 60 non-commissioned services, along with the confirmed number of spaces in partially-commissioned services that are not included in local authority contracts.

Table 1: Number of commissioned and non-commissioned refuge services and spaces in November 2020 (Routes to Support)

	Number of services	% of all services	Number of spaces	% of all spaces
Commissioned	193	71.7%	3239	76.2%
Partially commissioned⁸	6	2.2%	-	-
Non-commissioned	60	22.3%	788	18.5%
No data	10	3.7%	224	5.3%
Total	269		4251	

Specialist 'by and for' services

Of the 269 refuge services running in November 2020, 18 were members of Imkaan. When we looked only at these refuge services, run by and for Black and minoritised women, we found that the proportion running without local authority commissioned funding was much higher.

We found that 12 of these 18 specialist by and for services were operating without being contracted by the local authority. These 12 non-commissioned services ran 57.5%

⁸ The number of spaces these partially-commissioned services were running in November 2020 are included in the totals shown in this table for commissioned spaces, non-commissioned spaces and spaces for which there is no data.

of all refuge spaces in by and for services, compared to the overall 18.5% of all refuge spaces in England being non-commissioned. **See Table 2.**

This finding supports research by Imkaan, referenced above (see background) which has shown that specialist by and for services for BME women have been disproportionately impacted by cuts and disadvantaged in competitive tendering processes.

Table 2: Number of commissioned and non-commissioned specialist by and for refuge services for Black and minoritised women and bedspaces available in them (Routes to Support, 1st November 2020)

	Number of by and for refuges services	Number of spaces in by and for refuge services	% of all spaces in by and for refuge services
Commissioned	5	108	42.5%
Partially commissioned⁹	1	-	
Non-commissioned	12	146	57.5%
Total	18	254	

5.2 Commissioned refuge services and bed spaces

Our research found that 71.7% (193 out of 269) of refuge services running in England in November 2020 were commissioned by the local authority in 2019/20. These services delivered 76.2% of bed spaces in England. See **Table 1.**

The 193 commissioned refuge services were run by 103 different providers, eight of which were also running refuge services that were not commissioned, usually where the provider was running services in multiple local authority areas or for a specific group of women. Of these 193 commissioned refuge services:

- Two services (run by the same provider in one local authority area) were jointly commissioned by the local authority and the Police Crime Commissioner
- Two services (run by different providers in different local authority areas) confirmed they were not directly commissioned by the local authority but were sub-contracted by the commissioned service in the area

⁹ The number of spaces this partially-commissioned service was running in November 2020 are included in the totals shown in this table for commissioned spaces and non-commissioned spaces.

- One service was managed by a local authority Housing Department, having previously been run by a Housing Association before it was taken in-house by the local authority in 2018

It is possible other refuge services were operating with similar arrangements but this was not highlighted in the data. As mentioned in Section 5.1, six additional refuge services were partially-commissioned; although they received some funding through a local authority tender, they were operating bed spaces above the number in their contract without commissioned funding. Again, it is possible that some of the 193 commissioned refuge services were also running additional bed spaces above the number they were contracted for but it was not highlighted in the data.

Regional variation

There is some regional variation in the proportion of commissioned bed spaces across the country. A degree of variation is to be expected due to different regional demographics, for example, levels of demand will vary in relation to population rates in the region. Women's Aid know from our work with our members however that many providers depend on local commissioners being interested in or concerned about domestic abuse in order for funding to be available.

Specialist by and for services

Of the 18 by and for BME women's services running in November 2020, six were commissioned by a local authority, with one of these services in the North West confirming they were also running additional bed spaces above the number they were contracted for. **See Table 2.** At least two of the six by and for refuge services that did receive local authority commissioned funding were run by providers that were part of a consortium or working in partnership with other providers. By and for organisations can face unequal resource allocation in partnerships, because often the non-BME organisation is larger and more visible, has more influence with funders and commissioners and is therefore better able to make the case for receiving a higher proportion of the available funding (Imkaan, 2017).

5.3 Other commissioning arrangements

Local authority grant funding

Local authorities also issue funding through grants. As shown in **Table 3**, we found that similar proportions of commissioned and non-commissioned services received grant funding in 2019/20. Of those services which answered the survey question, 22.2% of commissioned services told us they also received grant funding from the local authority, compared with 23.8% of non-commissioned services which said they received local authority grant funding. The majority of all services (76.2%) for which we have survey data did not receive any grant funding.

Table 3: local authority grant funding for refuge services in 2019/20 (Survey data)

	Commissioned refuge		Non-commissioned refuge		Partially commissioned refuge service		Grand Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Received local authority grant funding in 2019/20	24	22.2%	10	23.8%	3	50.0%	37	23.7%
Did not receive local authority grant funding in 2019/20	84	77.8%	32	76.2%	3	50.0%	119	76.2%
Number services answered this question	108		42		6		156	

Other commissioning bodies

Local authorities are not the only type of commissioning body, as Police Crime commissioners (PCCs) and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) also have powers to commission domestic abuse and other services. However, of the 155 services that answered survey questions about other contracts, only 6 services reported being commissioned by a PCC. This includes the two services mentioned earlier that were jointly commissioned by the local authority and the PCC. None of the services for which we have survey data reported being commissioned by a CCG for refuge services.

5.4 Value of contracts

Cuts in contract value

We know that the amount of funding available through local authority contracts is not consistently rising year-on-year with inflation. Of the local authorities which responded to the FOI request, 106 were able to provide information on whether their total commissioned spending (including contracts for both refuge and community-based services) was higher, lower, or the same as when it was last commissioned. Of these:

- 41% (44 local authorities) spent **more** than when their contract was last renewed
- 40% (42 local authorities) spent **the same** as when their contracts were last renewed
- 19% (20 local authorities) spent **less** than when their contract was last renewed

This means that, taking account of inflation, 59% of local authorities implemented a real-time cut to their domestic abuse funding in 2019/20.

One respondent to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2019 told us: *"The funding we receive is for one year and only covers one full-time support worker supporting the same number of women as previous funding with two support workers and one part-time child support worker."*

Full cost recovery

Reducing budgets mean that the level of funding in contracts is often insufficient to cover the full costs of delivering the service. The Annual Survey 2020 and the Commissioning Survey included questions for commissioned services about what proportion of their costs were covered by local authority contracted funding. Questions were categorised into three main areas: support staff costs, activity costs and central costs (see Section 4 for details).

Survey data shows that only 19.8% of commissioned services (20 out of 101) received enough funding to cover all of their support staff costs. This means less than one in five commissioned refuge services were able to pay for support staff salaries, training and staff related expenses in 2019/20 without having to secure additional funds above those provided by their contract. The proportion of services which had full cost recovery for other types of expenditure was even lower, with only 14.6% (14 out of 96) of commissioned services receiving sufficient funding for activity costs and only 16.7% (17 out of 102) covering all of their central costs with their contracted funding. See **Table 4**.

The majority of commissioned services told us that for each area of cost, their contract covered more than half but not all of their expenditures. 15 services told us none of their activity costs were met by their contract and 6 services said none of their central costs were covered by their commissioned funding.

Table 4: Proportion of local authority commissioned refuge services costs covered by their contract in 2019/20 (Survey data)

Proportion of costs covered	Support staff costs	% of total answered	Activity costs	% of total answered	Central costs	% of total answered
All costs	20	19.8%	14	14.6%	17	16.7%
More than half of costs	66	65.3%	47	49.0%	46	45.1%
Half or less of costs	15	14.9%	20	20.8%	33	32.4%
None	0	0.0%	15	15.6%	6	5.9%
Total services responding	101		96		102	
Skipped question	16		21		15	

Making up the funding shortfall

Without statutory funding, non-commissioned refuge services must seek other forms of income to meet all of their support staff and other costs. This income comes from a range of sources such as government emergency funding pots, charitable grants and trusts and other fundraising activities. These other funding streams can be insecure and also time-consuming to source, particularly for smaller organisations, who for example are unlikely to have dedicated grant writers (Women's Aid, 2020a). Where sufficient funding cannot be secured providers can be forced to use their reserves to sustain their services.

Another key element of funding for non-commissioned refuge services is housing benefit. As previously mentioned, housing benefit income largely meets the housing costs of all refuge services. Non-commissioned services however will be even more reliant on this form of funding, leaving them vulnerable to a drop in regular income if rooms are left empty, for example, when essential repairs are required. We know many refuge services were unable to accept new referrals during the time Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were in place (Women's Aid, 2020b), which would have had a knock-on effect on their income from housing benefit. Reliance on housing benefit income can also impact on a service's capacity to accept women who are not eligible to claim housing benefit, such as women denied recourse to public funds due to their immigration status.

Even where refuge services are commissioned, our research shows that the vast majority had some level of shortfall between their contracted funding and their essential costs, which they had to make up with income from other sources.

Most refuge services who answered survey questions about how they covered this shortfall told us they did this through grants and other fundraising activities (78.1%, 75 out of 96). Six refuge services told us they were forced to use their reserves to cover costs.

5.5 Impact of insecure and insufficient funding arrangements

Local authority commissioning provides a degree of funding certainty by guaranteeing that a specific amount of funding is secured for the service, at least for the length of the contract. Contract length can impact a provider's ability to plan in the long-term, for example, decisions around staff recruitment or property leases may be restricted when providers are aware will have to tender for the service every year. One respondent to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2019 wrote about the insecurity created by uncertainty in the commissioning timetable:

"The threat of possible tendering from one year to the next, the uncertainty created by LAs [local authorities] – knock-on effect is funders finding services too insecure to fund."

Some respondents described how smaller organisations were at a disadvantage in the local authority tendering process, especially when competing against larger organisations.

"Due to our [small] size we are not in a position to tender for services and therefore heavily rely on support from grants and fundraising which is extremely time-consuming for a small organisation."

Providers that are unable to secure contracts or grants are in the difficult position of running services without dedicated funding. 54.5% (42 out of 77) of respondents to the Annual Survey 2020 told us they were running an area of their domestic abuse service without dedicated funding in 2019/20, and this included 12 respondents that were running a refuge service without dedicated funding. In their comments on running services with no dedicated funding, several respondents wrote about:

- Staff shortages and burnout, and reliance on volunteers.
"This can impact on the level of service we provide and want to continue to provide for our families living in refuge. Staff work tirelessly to provide a fantastic level of support and often work over their hours. The staff log the extra hours and take of in leave. This can then put a strain on the service we want to provide. Our staff are dedicated to the cause and project and are then working hours in a voluntary capacity."
- The struggle to meet demand and the resulting in gaps in services
"We have (heartbreakingly) struggled to meet demand and only had basic interventions to offer clients."
- The burden of time spent on funding applications, which detracts from service delivery, planning and sustainability.
"We are constantly trying to bid for funding for projects which is a time consuming and lengthy process, this takes time away from delivering the service."

Where services are relying on their reserves to cover essential costs, without access to secure funding that enables them to invest in their organisation and identify opportunities to replace these reserves, this can threaten their long-term sustainability:

"This has depleted our reserves, reducing our future ability to be able to fund other projects."

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

The findings in this report highlight that existing funding arrangements for the life-saving network of specialist domestic abuse refuge services in England are insufficient and insecure. Current refuge provision in England relies heavily on the availability of non-commissioned services and existing contracts do not always cover the full cost of delivering services.

This fragile funding landscape means that, which are already struggling to meet demand, are often required to allocate substantial resource to fundraising activities in order to sustain their services, even those in receipt of 'secure' commissioned funding from a local authority. A significant number of refuge services in England receive no statutory funding, leaving them in a precarious position and many find themselves competing for contracts with non-specialist providers with little or limited experiences in working with survivors of domestic abuse. Our research also found that by and for specialist services are also far less likely to have statutory funding.

The proposed new duty on local authorities to fund domestic abuse safe accommodation services presents an opportunity to achieve a secure future for the sector. A secure funding settlement to underpin this, which enables specialist services to meet the needs of all survivors and their children who need their help is urgently required. However, sufficient funding alone is unlikely to reform the issues that non-commissioned services face. Women's Aid know from discussions with our members that non-commissioned services remain highly uncertain and unconfident about how the duty will impact on them, and whether they will be able to compete in this new landscape. This is not based on speculation, but on their experiences of the past decade.

In implementing the new statutory duty, including the requirement to deliver a 'local partnership board' to oversee local delivery, local authorities must be aware of the importance of engaging and building relationships with non-commissioned services as well as those they already fund. This is vitally important for specialist 'by and for' services for BME women who have clearly been disproportionately impacted by decommissioning at local level. Statutory guidance and national oversight arrangements must ensure consistent practice across the country, with monitoring to ensure quality provision for all women and children. The role of the Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner with responsibilities for monitoring and mapping service provision should help identify inconsistencies in resource allocation which must be addressed through the new statutory duty.

Women's Aid recommends that:

1. The government commits to an annual funding settlement of at least **£393,326,676¹⁰**, including £173 million for refuge services, working with the domestic abuse sector, local authorities and commissioning bodies to ensure it is delivered effectively, sustainably and secures the future of specialist provision for women and children escaping domestic abuse. This figure may need to be revised in light of additional demand relating to Covid-19.
2. The government and domestic abuse commissioner work in partnership with the 'by and for' sector – including those representing services working 'by and for' BME women, LGBT survivors and survivors who are disabled, deaf or blind – to develop the ring-fenced funding settlement, and model of delivery, required for specialist provision for groups with protected characteristics.
3. The government works with Women's Aid and Imkaan to further strengthen the statutory duty in the Bill, ensuring it recognises the need for local authorities to fund specialist women's refuge services, work in an equal and respectful collaboration with specialist providers in delivering the duty, and is underpinned with robust oversight for this national network of services.
4. Statutory guidance for local authorities accompanying the duty: provides clear definitions and expectations for commissioning of specialist services, including 'by and for' services; requires best practice commissioning practice, including for local partnerships, needs assessment and outcomes; sets out in detail how to meet the full costs of running refuge services.

We also put forward the following prerequisites for a sustainable specialist domestic abuse sector:

1. Ring-fenced funding within the settlement for the 'by and for' expert sector.
2. Availability of a full range of service types including community based and open access services.
3. Effective and sustainable funding of the VAWG and wider support sector.
4. Provision for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).
5. Availability of housing benefit to cover housing costs for refuge services.
6. Funded coordination and oversight/monitoring.

¹⁰ The calculations behind this figure are set out, along with further background on the recommendations in this section, in *Funding Specialist Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors*, Women's Aid (2019). Available online at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Funding-Specialist-Support-Full-Report.pdf>

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