

**SOS** save refuges,  
save lives



## WHY WE NEED TO SAVE OUR SERVICES

- Women's Aid data
- report on specialist
- domestic violence
- services in England



## INTRODUCTION

*“I would be dead if it had not been for a refuge”*

Every week two women are killed by their partner or ex-partner and the levels of domestic violence in England are not decreasing. Over a million women experienced domestic violence last year in England and Wales and many of these women and children need to be able to access specialist domestic violence refuges to ensure they are safe from violence.

Specialist domestic violence refuges have supported hundreds of thousands of women and children who are fleeing domestic violence and kept them safe. They are literally life-saving services which provide safety and sanctuary and are established specifically to meet the needs of the women and children that need refuge.

A range of services are provided in a specialist refuge, including accommodation with 24-hour support, counselling and therapy both individually and in groups, specialist support for children and young people, support with accessing health and other universal services, housing and benefits advice, support with finding legal advice, and follow-up support once the woman and her children have left. The services are women-only, to ensure maximum accessibility, confidentiality and security. Refuges have developed over the past forty years and are built on decades of knowledge and experience that have led to innovation in ways of supporting women and children.

Refuges have to be a national service as women and children often flee for many miles to find safety from the perpetrator, and sometimes his family and network. Over the past forty years an effective national network of refuges was established – yet this network is now at risk as more and more areas place restrictions on women able to use refuge and time limits on how long they can stay.

Specialist domestic violence refuges are at crisis point in England. In recent years we have not only seen funding cuts to refuges but also changing commissioning practices which don't always value the specialist nature of services and the expertise of the sector. This has resulted in funding cuts for many specialist domestic violence refuges, restrictions on refuge services and sadly, the closure of some refuges across the country.

The national network of specialist domestic violence refuges that we have built up over the past forty years is at risk – it needs to be protected and secured for all women and children that will need its life-saving services.



*“Going into a refuge saved my life, and gave hope and a future to my children”*

*“It has given me the support and strength that has helped me rebuild my life”*

## Women's Aid SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives campaign

The Women's Aid SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives campaign is calling for the national network of refuges to be protected and funded to better protect the lives of the thousands of women and children escaping domestic violence every year. The campaign aims to ensure that refuges, and the services they provide, are protected and secured by a new model of funding and commissioning and that funding for specialist women-only refuges is sustained so that survivors receive the support they need to recover and regain independence.



This report provides the most up to date evidence and information on the provision of specialist domestic violence refuge services in England in 2014. It collates data from the Women's Aid Annual Survey, UKrefugesonline (UKROL<sup>1</sup>) and other published sources to highlight the impact of funding cuts and poor local commissioning on specialist domestic violence refuge services and the women and children who need them.

<sup>1</sup> UKrefugesonline is a secure on-line database of domestic abuse services across the UK run in partnership between leading domestic abuse charities: Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid and Women's Aid Federation of England.



## THE PROBLEM

Over a million women experienced domestic violence in the last year and approximately 750,000 children witness domestic violence every year. Refuge provision is an essential part of the support available to any woman or child who is fleeing domestic violence. Refuges are not always a last resort. Many women will not have contacted the police or any other agency about the abuse they are suffering until they feel safe and secure away from the perpetrator in a refuge.

The Women's Aid Annual Survey of around 200 domestic violence services in 2013 found that approximately 10,000 women and 10,000 children sought support from the surveyed domestic violence refuges in England<sup>2</sup>. This is only part of the picture as the WAVE country report estimates that 15,404 women were accommodated in refuges across England in 2012/13<sup>3</sup>. This means that just based on those who obtain a place in refuge, more than one in every 100 women who experience domestic violence needs a refuge place.

However, there is more demand for refuge services than the above figures indicate, since in one 'census' day in 2013, 155 women and their 103 children were turned away from refuge because of lack of suitable space<sup>4</sup>.



*"A sanctuary in which to start to build a new life"*

*"The specialist refuges means people care whether I live or die"*

<sup>2</sup> Women's Aid Annual Survey 2013.

<sup>3</sup> WAVE country report 2013 (available at <http://bit.ly/1ujUPUy>).

<sup>4</sup> Women's Aid Annual Survey 2013.

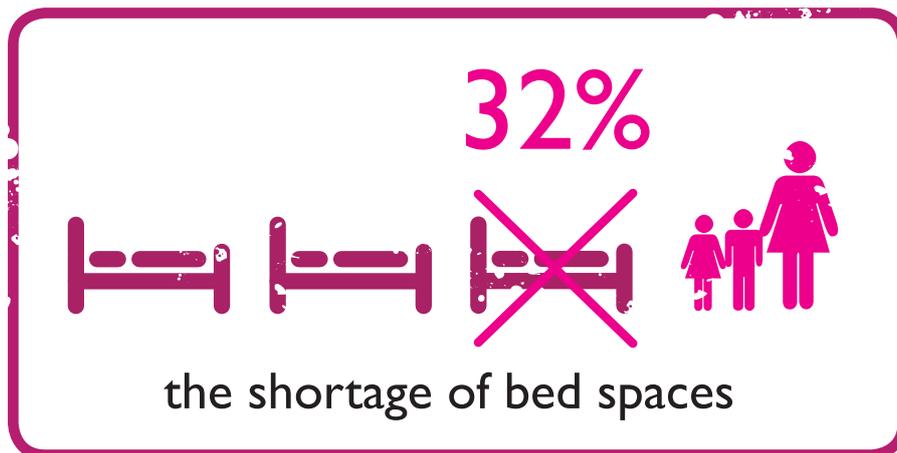
# DO WE HAVE ENOUGH REFUGE PLACES?



The Council of Europe recommends that there is one family place in a refuge per 10,000 of the population<sup>5</sup>. This recommendation is a good indication of how many refuge places there should be in a country – although the level of provision in England has never reached the level recommended by the Council of Europe.

England's refuge provision currently falls short of this recommendation with approximately 1,727 women's refuge places missing. Based on the Council of Europe Taskforce recommendations, approximately 5,387 women's refuge places are needed in England, but currently only 3,660 places are available<sup>6</sup>.

At a time when we have a constant need for refuge places, and we know that there are not enough spaces to fulfil that need, it is vital that measures are put in place to halt further reductions in the numbers of refuge places for women and children.



*"It [refuge] has given me the support and strength that has helped me rebuild my life"*

*"They save lives and give hope for victims"*

5 Kelly, L. and Dubois, L. (2008) *Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services* Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs, Council of Europe.

6 UKROL data (2014).



## WHAT IS HAPPENING TO SPECIALIST REFUGE PROVISION IN ENGLAND?

Our world leading national network of refuges is facing an urgent crisis. Across England, more and more specialist refuges are experiencing funding cuts and being closed down. This crisis will cost lives.

This crisis for specialist refuges can be seen in two specific areas:

- ▶ The funding and commissioning landscape for specialist services and;
- ▶ Changes in specialist provision of refuge services.

### Funding and commissioning for specialist services

The Women's Aid Annual Survey in 2013<sup>7</sup> showed:

- ▶ In 2013, nearly 200 specialist refuge services supported 9,577 women and 10,117 children.
- ▶ On the census day (Thursday 27 June 2013) 155 women with 103 children were turned away from the first refuge they approached by responding organisations.
- ▶ When asked if they were running services without dedicated funding, of 167 respondents answering the questions, 82 (48%) said that they were. Six refuge services were being run without dedicated funding, using charitable reserves and therefore unsustainable.
- ▶ Of 145 respondents expecting to receive local authority funding during 2013/2014, 30% expected to get less compared to last year – 17% did not know if they were getting local authority funding (even though the survey was conducted three months into the financial year).



The following data on specialist domestic violence services in England is compiled from the most up to date information from UKROL and from recent updates from Women's Aid member services.

<sup>7</sup> The most recent Women's Aid Annual Survey details key findings on funding and service provision from nearly 200 specialist domestic violence services in England in 2012/13.

Information from UKROL shows that between April and July 2014:

- ▶ **10** specialist domestic violence refuges across England lost services they were providing. All of them lost these services through a competitive tender commissioning process. All but one of these nine services lost their services to a non-specialist provider.
- ▶ Concerns about the commissioning processes in **10** areas of the country were raised with Women's Aid by specialist domestic violence services across England.



*"We are due to tender for these services in 2015, it is concerning that future commissioning arrangements will be based on value for money and therefore encourage non-specialist providers to tender for contracts. We believe this new approach may also have an impact on the gender specific services we provide."*

Specialist domestic violence service

## Commissioning practices

Between April and July 2014:

- ▶ **Three** local authorities issued tenders that included 'local connection' rules – i.e. 70% or 80% of the refuge spaces in the service have to be reserved for women and children who live in the local area.
- ▶ **One** local authority tender for domestic violence services was won by a non-specialist organisation and did not include refuge provision. Three specialist domestic violence organisations in the area had their funding cut drastically. One refuge closed down and one refuge will remain open relying on donations and their reserves.
- ▶ **One** local authority told a specialist refuge who had won the tender six months ago that they now need to make budget cuts which will mean 50% cut to their budget in six months.
- ▶ **One** local authority awarded a tender for refuge accommodation to a non-specialist service outside of the local area even though the submission from the specialist domestic violence service was less expensive. To keep this vital service for women the specialist refuge service is trying to remain open as long as it can using their reserves.
- ▶ **Two** local authorities awarded a tender for refuge accommodation to a non-specialist service. The specialist services are currently considering their future and whether they can stay open.

It is of concern that local authorities in England are restricting access to refuges to women and children from the local area. Refuges provide a national service and play a vital role in preventing women and their children from death or serious injury. 70% of referrals to refuge services in England are from local authority areas outside the one in which the service is located<sup>8</sup>. There is a clear need for women and their children to be able to travel to different areas in order for them to be safe from the perpetrator. Research that mapped 18,000 women's journeys to a refuge found that tens of thousands of women and children were forced to relocate due to domestic violence in a distinctive process of forced migration in

<sup>8</sup> Quilgars, D and Pleace, N (University of York), (2010), *Meeting the needs of households at risk of domestic violence in England*, CLG, p74.

the UK<sup>9</sup>. In total these tens of thousands of women and children travelled over 380,000 miles to access refuge<sup>10</sup>.

The policy of 'localism', in which funding decisions are devolved entirely to local authorities, provides a perverse incentive against the preservation of the national network of refuges.

## Changes in specialist provision of refuge services

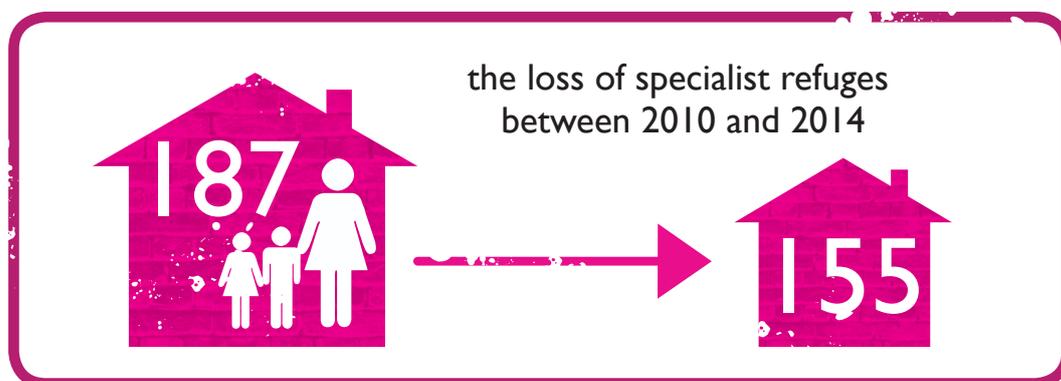
One major challenge facing specialist refuge provision is the awarding of tenders to large generic providers, which may not provide specialist refuge services, as a means of delivering accommodation more cheaply, at the expense of the service delivery which is an intrinsic part of a specialist refuge.

Tenders which specify that refuge provision should be seen as 'emergency' or 'crisis' accommodation do not recognise the value of the holistic provision that refuges provide and the safe space they are for women and children. They also do not recognise that rebuilding a life after domestic violence is not achieved merely by moving away from the perpetrator. Recent research has highlighted that rebuilding lives after domestic violence takes time with some women and children were still facing post separation abuse after three years<sup>11</sup>. Rebuilding a life after domestic violence is achieved by specialist refuge provision, if that is what a woman and her children need, which is then followed with moving on support and continued outreach support such as counselling.

## Data from UKROL on refuge providers

- ▶ In 2010 there were a total of 187 refuge services run by specialist providers in England. By 2014 this had decreased to 155 refuge services.
- ▶ In 2010 there were a total of 109 refuge services run by non-specialists in England. By 2014 this had increased to 121 refuge services.

From this data it is clear that there has been a move towards a smaller number of large organisations, that are not always from the local area or have local expertise, providing accommodation in many local authority areas.



9 Bowstead, J (2013) 'What – if anything – is local about domestic violence?' *Safe*, Issue 47, p10.

10 Bowstead, J (2012) *Women's journeys in response to domestic violence, initial findings March 2012*, London Metropolitan University (<http://bit.ly/ZpLTbf>); Bowstead, J (2013) *Ibid*.

11 *Finding the costs of Freedom* (2014) Solace Women's Aid and CWASU.

## CONCLUSION



The national safety net that protects women and children escaping violence is being unpicked. Specialist domestic violence refuges in England are experiencing a perfect storm of funding cuts and poor local commissioning which means that their services are disappearing or being replaced with non-specialist provision.

We are calling on the government to Save Our Services by committing to preserving the national network of specialist refuges and to exploring a new model of funding and commissioning for refuges which supports a sustainable service and high quality care.

The number of refuge bedspaces is not enough to meet the need for refuge provision. Yet, the demand for specialist refuges provision remains, with 155 women and their 103 children being turned away from refuge in one day in 2013<sup>12</sup>. It is the thousands of women and children fleeing domestic violence who desperately need specialist refuge provision who suffer when funding is lost and refuges closed.

Refuges provide a national service and play a vital role in preventing women and their children from being killed and seriously injured. 70% of referrals to refuge services in England are from local authority areas outside the one in which the services is located<sup>13</sup>. There is a clear need for women and their children to be able to travel to different areas in order for them to be safe from the perpetrator.

Our national network of specialist refuges is in a critical condition. Ultimately women and children will pay for the dismantling of this national network with their lives.

**Women's Aid is sending an SOS signal to Government and asking them to Save Refuges, Save Lives.**

*"A lifeline to protect women and enable them to protect their children from abuse"*



<sup>12</sup> From Women's Aid Annual Survey 2013 of around 200 domestic violence services.

<sup>13</sup> Quilgars, D and Pleace, N (University of York), (2010), *Meeting the needs of households at risk of domestic violence in England*, CLG, p74.

*Why we need to Save our Services  
Women's Aid data report on specialist domestic violence services in England*

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(run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge)

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Women's Aid is the national domestic violence charity that supports a network of around 300 local services working to end domestic violence against women and children in England. Our member services are integrated domestic violence service providers delivering a range of holistic services for women experiencing domestic violence and their children. Keeping the voices of survivors at the heart of its work, Women's Aid campaigns for better support for women and children, provides training and resources for professionals and delivers a package of vital 24 hour lifeline services through publications, websites and the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership with Refuge).