

# FUNDING A NATIONAL NETWORK OF REFUGES

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Providing a lifeline for families fleeing domestic abuse

Developing a sustainable funding mechanism for refuges

*The model of refuge funding developed as part of this work is supported by Women's Aid Federation of England and Imkaan, the two leading umbrella organisations for women's domestic abuse services in England, and Refuge, the largest direct provider of refuge services in England.*

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## ■ Executive summary

Refuges are a lifeline. They are far more than a 'bed for the night'; these independent and expert services provide holistic accommodation-based support to women and children escaping domestic abuse, as well as a range of other vital services to help families escape and recover from domestic abuse. They provide significant added value to their local communities and go above and beyond delivering their contracted work alone. Across England, support within these services is funded in numerous, complex and insecure ways. A significant proportion of refuges are no longer locally commissioned or funded at all.

This work was undertaken in the context of the government's proposal to change the way short-term supported housing would be funded, by devolving rent and service charge funding (previously paid through housing benefit) to local authorities to administer from 2020. The refuge sector, and wider Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector, were hugely concerned about these proposals and made clear the necessity to keep services within the welfare system. In August 2018 the government announced that it had "heard concerns expressed by both providers and by the Work and Pensions and Housing, Local Government and Communities Select Committees" and will keep all supported housing rent and eligible services charges within housing benefit<sup>1</sup>. This move was welcomed across the refuge sector and this report provides an important contribution to the discussion around sustainable funding for domestic abuse services.

On International Women's Day 2018, in a speech to the VAWG sector at 10 Downing Street, the prime minister reaffirmed her commitment to protecting the future of refuge services.

*"I want to make clear that I am committed to delivering a sustainable funding model for refuges and to ensuring that there is no postcode lottery when it comes to provision across the country. That is why I want to work with all the charities and organisations working on the front line to get your ideas on how we can get this right."*

Women's Aid has continued to advise, offer data, insight, and expertise to the government while it has been considering new funding proposals for short-term supported housing. This briefing details its latest contribution to this work and sets out a proposal designed by independent consultants for a secure, sustainable and workable model of funding for independent refuges<sup>2</sup>.

Women's Aid commissioned expert consultants on supported housing, welfare benefits and universal credit - Jo Linney, Lorraine Regan and Domini Gunn - alongside Dominic Llewellyn from Numbers for Good to lead on the scoping and design of a new model of funding for the national network of specialist women's refuges in England. This project builds on previous work completed by Jim Clifford OBE and Katie Barnes of Bates Wells Braithwaite in 2015 and 2016 which explored models of funding for support costs, of distributing the burden of payment across local authorities, the creation of a central control and clearing function, and the use of social investment to deliver that.

1 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Work and Pensions (2018) *Funding for Supported Housing: Government Response to Two Consultations*.

2 Where the report refers to refuge services, we are specifically referring to women's refuges which are set up and designed specifically to deliver domestic abuse support. There are a network of refuges across England, which form part of a national network of domestic abuse services enabling women and children to move across the country in order to be safe. These services are mainly run by small, dedicated charities whose core purpose is to enable women and children to flee domestic abuse to safety and begin to rebuild their lives with expert support and advocacy.

This briefing sets out initial proposals for an alternative funding model, the methodology and rationale behind it, and the next steps identified to progress this work. Early on it was identified that the proposals developed must cover the costs of accommodation and support - both are essential for the provision of refuge and cannot be advanced in isolation. In summary the model recommends:

- ▶ **Housing costs** remain within the welfare benefits system to provide refuges with an essential, reliable and stable income source.
- ▶ A new **national oversight mechanism** (NOM) is developed to deliver a secure system of funding for support costs, overseeing a mainly local system of funding and commissioning, but delivering national assurance that no woman is turned away from the support she needs.

We hope that this initial proposal provides the foundations for developing a sustainable funding model that this life-saving sector urgently requires.

## ■ Introduction: a life-saving sector in urgent need of sustainability

There is no doubt that the future of the refuge sector is at risk from chronic underfunding and despite housing costs now being secured through Housing Benefit, there is still an urgent need to create sustainability for the sector. Women's Aid commissioned this work to develop an alternative funding solution for these life-saving services. The project involved working with Women's Aid member services, including a dedicated policy group of members, Refuge and Imkaan - the only UK-based, black feminist second-tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against black and minoritised women and girls. Liaising with officials in relevant government departments was a core part of the project. The brief was clear that any new model developed must be:

- ▶ Practicable and workable: creating sustainability and not increasing bureaucracy and administrative burdens on already over-stretched services.
- ▶ Value for money: provide cost-effective support and build in opportunities for additional capital investment.
- ▶ Survivor-centred: build up a quality range of services to meet the diverse needs of women and children experiencing domestic abuse and focus on monitoring outcomes and quality assurance.

### The need for an alternative model

Currently, refuges are primarily funded through two key funding streams:

- a. **Rent and related service charges** are funded through housing benefit, which on average makes up about half of a refuge's income<sup>3</sup>.

3 Women's Aid Survey on the LHA Cap, 2016: from 43 refuges responding to this question

**b. Support funding** which is usually commissioned at local authority level. This is supplemented by a refuge's fundraising in their communities, bidding for funds from trusts and foundations and other statutory funding sources. This varies significantly, but can include: funding from police and crime commissioners; infrequent limited funding from health bodies; and emergency funds from central government.

The government's proposals, announced in October 2017<sup>4</sup>, for how rent and service charges for short-term<sup>5</sup> supported housing would be paid were widely criticised, particularly by the refuge sector, which makes up just 1% of total supported housing<sup>6</sup>. These proposals would have removed all short-term supported housing, including refuges, from the welfare system. Instead of survivors receiving housing benefit to cover their rent (and related service charges) while in refuge, all the funding for housing costs that were previously met by housing benefit would have instead been allocated to local authorities to fund services that meet the needs of their local areas.

The model posed some huge challenges for the refuge sector: removing housing benefit which is the last form of secure income for these services and enables them to leverage some additional funding; adding to complex and time consuming local commissioning processes; removing the only funding source for some specialist services who are not locally commissioned; creating further disincentives

for housing providers to keep units as refuges, as they become a risky financial investment in comparison to other types of longer-term supported housing that were going to remain within the welfare system; and the absence of any guarantee that this devolved funding must be spent on refuges.

Over 170,000 people signed a petition set up by Women's Aid, hosted by 38 Degrees, calling on the government to abandon these funding plans for refuges. When Women's Aid conducted an emergency survey on the impact of these proposed reforms with its member services, over half said they would either have to close completely (39%) or reduce their provision (13%), leading to 4,000 fewer refuge spaces<sup>7</sup> available, when already 60% of referrals to refuges are being turned away<sup>8</sup>.

The sector welcomed the government's announcement in summer 2018 to keep the housing costs of refuges within housing benefit. The government had clearly listened to the concerns of the sector and acted to secure this core element of funding. However, there is a pressing need to consider how universal credit, which survivors will continue to claim for other entitlements, will work alongside housing benefit within refuges. There are also wider questions about how the quality of provision funded through the public purse can be monitored.

4 Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Communities and Local Government (2017) *Funding Supported Housing: policy statement and consultation*. Accessed online: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/655990/Funding\\_supported\\_housing\\_-\\_policy\\_statement\\_and\\_consultation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655990/Funding_supported_housing_-_policy_statement_and_consultation.pdf)

5 Currently categorised as where average length of stay is less than two years: accommodation with support, accessed following a point of crisis or as part of a transition to living independently, and provided for a period of up to two years or until transition to suitable long-term stable accommodation is found, whichever occurs first.

6 Ipsos MORI, Imogen Blood & Associates and Housing & Support Partnership (2016) *Supported Accommodation Review: the scale, scope and cost of the supported housing sector*.

7 Women's Aid Survey on the LHA Cap, 2016: from 43 refuges responding to this question.

8 Women's Aid (2018) *Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

## What do refuges do?

Fundamentally, refuges provide safe accommodation with a planned and specialist programme of therapeutic support where women and children who are experiencing domestic abuse can stay free from fear, when they have exhausted all other options. It is estimated that in 2016/17, 13,414 women with 14,353 children and young people accessed refuges in England<sup>9</sup>.

There are a range of refuges available to meet different women's needs; often services also support women who have experienced other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and help pick up the pieces for women and children at highest risk, including minoritised women from marginalised communities and those who have additional vulnerabilities<sup>10</sup> and complex needs<sup>11</sup>. There are also a small number of refuges of significant national importance for disabled women, LGBT+ survivors and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women. The 'led by and for' model that BME women's ending VAWG sector services, including refuges, work within is unique; it offers choice to women from marginalised communities to receive tailored support from services that reflect their identities and have developed particular expertise in tackling the barriers they face. These services have been disproportionately impacted by cuts and poor local commissioning practices, reducing the choices that women have about the type of refuge they can stay in.

Refuges provide specialist services that cannot be delivered in other settings, offering holistic services in a supportive, safe and secure environment. This enables women and children to make informed decisions about what to do next and start rebuilding their lives.

Refuges not only provide support to women

within refuge, but also deliver a range of key services across the community to women living with a perpetrator, those planning to leave a perpetrator and those who have ended the relationship but do not require refuge. Refuges also either provide or work closely alongside community-based services, such as outreach and education programmes.

As well as supporting survivors directly, these services provide significant added value. Refuges deliver a wide range of services that are not part of the contracted work, such as prevention and awareness-raising in local communities, and supporting women through the criminal justice system and in court. They provide critical training and strategic advice to the police, and social care and health care agencies. This enables statutory organisations to not only identify victims of domestic abuse, but to also ensure that women and their children are able to seek support and access refuge safely and appropriately. Refuges are integral to a holistic 'whole housing' response to domestic abuse and underpin robust responses from statutory agencies, who rely on these services to refer families in need of support.

The proposals outlined in this briefing aim to strike a balance to ensure workable and practical solutions for funding are deliverable to meet survivor's needs, and have taken into account the key principles of the government's proposals and other relevant policies such as universal credit, and the needs of the sector.

## Key questions for consideration

Refuge services are totally reliant on the availability of funding for both accommodation and support services. One part cannot be decided without consideration of the other and the funding mechanism must recognise

9 Women's Aid (2018) *Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

10 Such as ethnicity, sexuality, age and immigration status.

11 Such as mental health issues, substance misuse issues, a history of offending behaviour.



the importance of and interlink between both elements. For this project, five key questions were identified to develop funding mechanisms for refuges:

1. How should rent and service charges be funded in the future?
2. What arrangements should be put in place to fund core support services?
3. What are the core services refuges provide?
4. How can refuge accommodation be secured in the future?
5. How can the refuge sector be developed?

In consideration of these core questions data was collected from domestic abuse services (28 organisations providing 60 refuge services), interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in government and other related fields and a literature review of existing materials, from the last five years, was undertaken. The recommendations made in this report are informed by this evidence base and collaboration with other specialist domestic abuse and VAWG organisations.

The data identified that the funding of refuges is highly complex and varied. A number of refuges have lost all locally commissioned funding for support costs and are reliant solely on fundraising for support and housing benefit to cover accommodation costs. Others receive significant funding from local commissioners to cover all services provided by the refuge. These variations in existing funding arrangements have been factored into the development of a new model that can support services of all different shapes and sizes.

## 1. How should **rent and service charges** be funded in the future?

In light of the government's announcement in August 2018, there is confirmation that refuge housing costs will continue to be met through housing benefit. Before this announcement was made this project identified three possible funding mechanisms to cover the costs of rent and accommodation related service charges:

- a. Full local commissioning:** this was the government's previous proposal.
- b. Partial local commissioning and partial universal credit:** this was the previous government proposal to pay housing benefit up to the local housing allowance (LHA) rate and devolve 'top up' funding to local areas.
- c. Full payment of eligible housing costs through the welfare system (housing benefit or universal credit):** as is currently the case through housing benefit and, as announced in summer 2018, will continue to be the case indefinitely.

The third option of **full payment through the welfare system is recommended** as the most efficient and sustainable method to cover rent and accommodation related service charges. This is in line with the government's new proposals to keep refuge housing costs paid through housing benefit, therefore we are in agreement with the approach that the government is now planning to take. Service charges will also continue to be paid through housing benefit and it is likely the government will want to do further work to identify what these costs are covering and to ensure spend of public money in this way is effective. Service charge costs vary within the refuge sector, and the wider supported housing sector. Refuge services often have additional costs, around security for example, that are met through service charges. Further work is required to

understand the makeup of service charges and the additional costs these incur in refuge services. Additional thinking is also required to identify the practical implications of rental payments for refuges remaining in housing benefit alongside survivors claiming universal credit for other entitlements and how it will be administered if pension credits move into universal credit.

This project also considered whether universal credit could be adapted to work for refuges, and whilst funding through housing benefit is the preferred, most sustainable option, adaptations were identified that could make universal credit a viable option for secure funding. There are already specific regulations in place around universal credit for women who have fled domestic abuse, such as the exemption from the benefit cap<sup>12</sup> and the 12 week work suitability easement<sup>13</sup>. A precedent has been set to ensure that universal credit can support survivors of domestic abuse to rebuild their lives, so there is clear foundation for considering a more flexible approach to universal credit for refuges, if this was a funding approach ever to be considered by the government again.

The additional core benefit of a model that works on the basis of refuges being paid rent costs through the welfare system is that it provides stability and a guaranteed income for refuges. This enables refuge providers to secure additional capital funding and grants from charitable trusts and other sources to develop new services, provide additional and enhanced support and refurbish older properties that are no longer fit for purpose.

A core part of the government's incentive to change the funding model for supported

housing was to ensure greater oversight of how welfare funds are being spent. The announcement in August 2018 echoed this sentiment:

*"We are determined that oversight of quality and value for money must be achieved across the supported housing sector. Ensuring quality accommodation for vulnerable people whilst spending tax-payers' money correctly is a priority for government. We recognise the level of commitment and high standards demonstrated by most providers in this sector, but we need to ensure standards across the whole sector. We will continue to work with providers, local authorities, membership bodies and resident representatives over the coming months to put together a sound and robust oversight regime."*<sup>14</sup>

The refuge - and wider supported housing - sector will need to demonstrate the quality of the accommodation they are providing through housing benefit payments, and that they are good value for money. Women's Aid, alongside the National Housing Federation and Homeless Link, wrote to the minister of housing and local government in June 2018 to express their commitment to transparency and oversight of services funded through a funding model situated in the welfare system.

However, the reliance on housing benefit has an obvious drawback in how women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) will be able to access refuges. Women who are not eligible for state benefits due to their immigration status face huge barriers in accessing refuges. Women's Aid's latest research shows that of the 61 women with NRPF who were supported by its No Woman Turned Away project in its

12 The Housing Benefit And Universal Credit (Supported Accommodation) (Amendment) Regulations 2014

13 Universal Credit Miscellaneous Amendment Regulation 2014 No.2888

14 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Work and Pensions (2018) *Funding for Supported Housing: Government Response to Two Consultations*. P.24



second year, only 8.2% were able to access a refuge, even with intensive support to do so<sup>15</sup>. This must be addressed in any new model; fair access to support is crucial. The Istanbul Convention On Ending Violence Against Women, which the government has committed to ratify as part of its package of measures in the domestic abuse bill, states that all women should be protected from violence, regardless of their immigration status<sup>16</sup>.

## ■ 2. What arrangements should be put in place to fund core support in services?

The second vital element of refuge funding pays for support and the related services that allow refugees to support women and children to cope and recover from their experiences. Three possible mechanisms were identified to fund support and related services in refuges:

- ▶ **Full local commissioning** as is currently the case, with local authorities commissioning services.
- ▶ **Full national commissioning** with central government administering grants/tenders.
- ▶ **A hybrid model** involving a national oversight mechanism (NOM) with flexible local commissioning.

The evidence base, interviews and assessment of strengths/weaknesses of different funding options points to the hybrid model being the best option for sustainable funding. The diagram on the next page (**Proposed funding model, p.10**) provides an overview of the framework proposed for the government, Women's Aid and other key stakeholders to develop further.

### National oversight mechanism

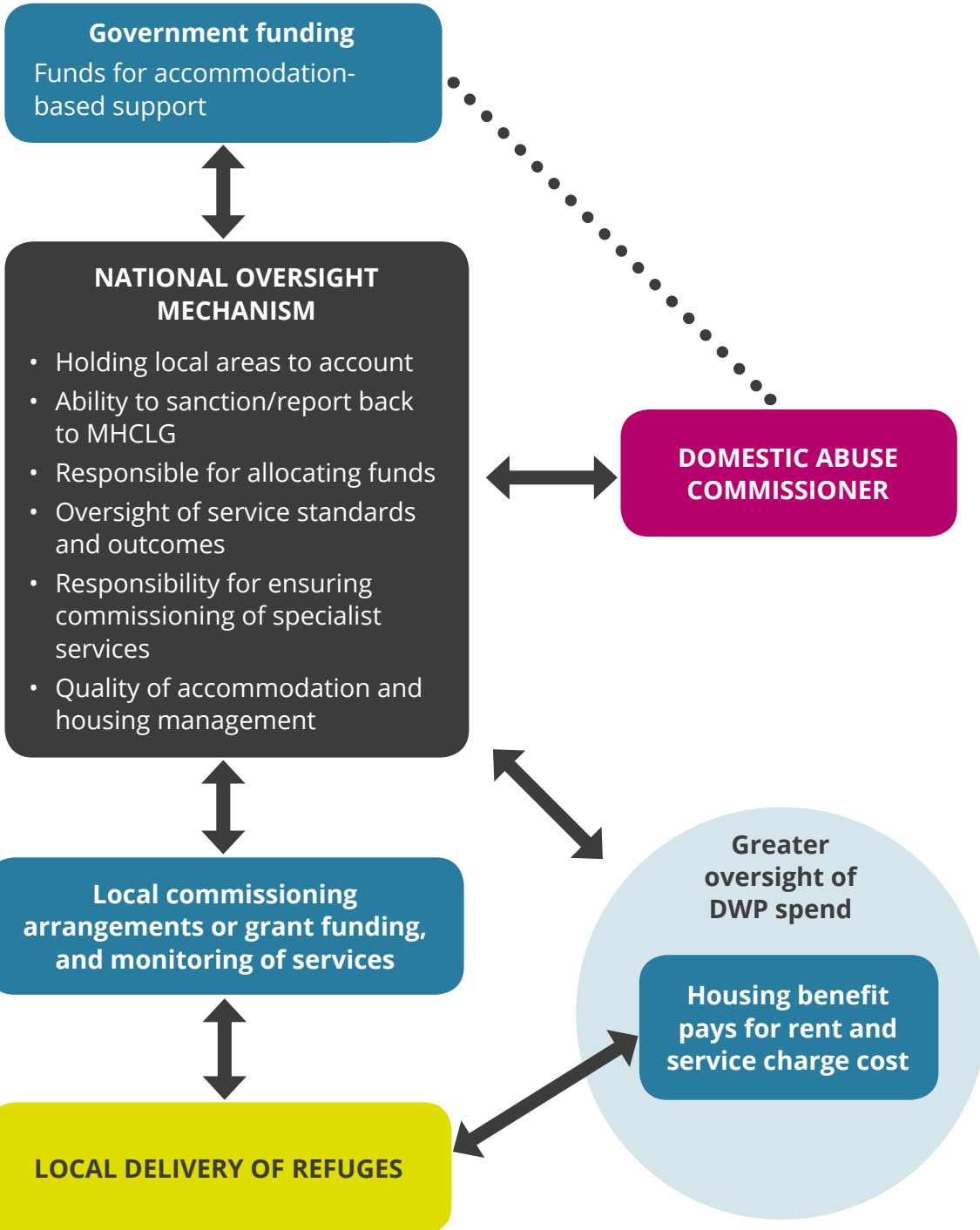
The national oversight mechanism (NOM) can plug the gap in national accountability for the commissioning, funding and delivery of refuge services, and help provide assurances around how public funds are being spent

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15 Women's Aid (2018) *Nowhere to Turn 2018*. Since 2016 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has funded Women's Aid to deliver the No Woman Turned Away project, which provides frontline telephone-based support service for women who face barriers to accessing refuge and detailed monitoring of their journeys.

16 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Article 4 Section 3.

## Proposed funding model





through housing benefit. It should be made up of a range of stakeholders and report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Home Office. The NOM must be flexible and agile to respond to changes in the sector and fluctuations in demand for domestic abuse services. It allows for local areas to continue to commission services, which is essential for local level buy-in and strategic planning. The NOM can also hold areas to account where commissioning and funding is not meeting the needs of women and children fleeing abuse, for example, challenging local authorities who want to impose caps on the number of women from out of the local area who can access the refuge.

Initial thinking suggests the key functions of the NOM would be to:

- ▶ Ensure the refuge sector is able to continue to operate as a national network and retain a national picture of what local domestic abuse provision is available and where there are gaps in provision.
- ▶ Operate independently from local and national government, but directly feed into relevant departments, and promote a funding approach that levels the playing field for specialist independent providers, including those for specific groups of women.
- ▶ Work with the domestic abuse commissioner, as set out in the government's consultation for the new domestic abuse bill, to provide the mechanism for accountability to the national statement of expectations for VAWG services, the Home Office VAWG commissioning guidance and the MHCLG 'priorities for domestic abuse services' document.
- ▶ Hold local areas to account for commissioning practices, numbers of bed spaces, quality of provision, supporting specialist providers (such as those for BME women), and value for money.
- ▶ Identify and share best practice between local areas and work with specialist domestic abuse organisations to upskill and quality assure local commissioners.
- ▶ Recognise that a 'one size fits all' model for domestic abuse services is not appropriate, and work alongside specialist domestic abuse organisations and second tier organisations such as Women's Aid and Imkaan, to identify patterns and trends in the local response to domestic abuse.
- ▶ Have a flexible approach, so that it can work for single local authority areas, as well as combined authorities and other regions where there are specific devolved arrangements in place.
- ▶ The NOM could also have a role in directly commissioning specific specialist services, where there may be small numbers of those services across the whole of England that have national significance, such as those for different groups of BME women, disabled women, or LGBT+ women. This would ensure that the local areas which are currently hosting these services are not disincentivised to keep these services open where they may not be supporting any women from that local area.

The NOM must be transparent and independent. Its members must have the expertise necessary to ensure it is able to carry out its functions and be trusted across the whole sector. Crucially, criteria for membership for the NOM should be developed in consultation with specialist organisations. Particularly it will be important to ensure BME women's services with expertise in the 'by and for' approach, LGBT+ women's services and disabled women's services are properly represented at this level. The NOM may also be most effective if combined with a requirement for every local area to have a lead accountable commissioner on domestic abuse, who is known to the NOM and held accountable for decision making.

The scope of the NOM could be expanded to cover more than refuges alone with the potential to pick up other domestic abuse services. The future domestic abuse commissioner, as proposed in the domestic abuse bill, should have a key role and there is an opportunity to develop the NOM in tandem with the role of domestic abuse commissioner. Furthermore, the NOM can support the government's intention for the domestic abuse bill to 'transform the way we think about and tackle domestic violence and abuse'. We need to design a body that can work alongside the domestic abuse commissioner, monitor how services are developed and delivered, provide a clearer picture of the outcomes for survivors, create further opportunities to share good practice and challenge things that aren't working, and ensure services continue to innovate whilst providing the core services that women and children need. With this, we will provide the context where the expertise and experience of the domestic abuse sector, and wider VAWG sector, can be optimised to provide the underpinning to this transformation.

More work needs to be completed on the design and testing of the NOM to ensure the hybrid model will work for the sector and provide a much needed feedback loop from 'on the ground', to commissioners, and back to central government.

## **Quality assurance and local commissioning**

The diversity of refuge provision and the complexity of commissioning arrangements has led to disparate and inequitable refuge provision across the country. There is a need for an effective and consistent quality assurance system for both refuge services, including monitoring how housing benefit is being spent, and the arrangements for commissioning refuge services. Monitoring needs to take into account the diversity of services, for example the resources available

to small refuges to complete monitoring requirements. Any further quality assurance processes or monitoring processes should not place additional undue administrative burdens on services and should take into account what is already in place and working well.

The VAWG sector has already developed outcomes frameworks to address the deficit in national monitoring and oversight of services being delivered through supported housing. Women's Aid and Imkaan, in collaboration with services, survivors, academics and commissioners, have carried out significant work on outcomes and the best ways to monitor and measure how domestic abuse services are meeting the needs of women and children who are using them. Women's Aid and Imkaan have further developed case management systems (On Track and Synthesis) and it is recommended that these frameworks are used to develop flexible and consistent national monitoring processes.

### 3. What are the core services that refuges provide?

Refuges provide a range of services in local communities, offering support for women still living with a perpetrator, those planning on leaving and those who have escaped. There are core contracted services that refuges provide (which fall under point 1 below). There are a host of additional activities the specialist domestic abuse and VAWG sector also see as core functions and which provide huge additional community and social value to their local areas - including training, work in schools, awareness raising and strategic guidance to police, social care and other statutory agencies (points 2 and 3 below).

It is problematic that additional funding to support children in refuges is very limited and patchy across the country. Refuges support more children than women across the year<sup>17</sup>, yet meeting the needs of these children is often not considered as a funding priority for local areas. Some refuges have been able to successfully secure additional funding to provide specific support for children through charitable trusts and foundations or police and crime commissioner's funding, but this is not sustainable.

The following provides an overview, but not exhaustive list, of these key services.

#### 1. The delivery of refuge accommodation including:

##### Core running and management costs

- ▶ Management and governance
- ▶ Training for staff in all key areas
- ▶ Clinical supervision for staff

##### Support for women

- ▶ Support planning with skilled workers

- ▶ Advocacy support liaising with statutory agencies/courts/probation
- ▶ Additional specialist support for BME women, LGBT+ women and disabled women
- ▶ Additional support for women with multiple or complex needs
- ▶ One to one therapeutic support and facilitating group work
- ▶ Encouraging and enabling peer support between women
- ▶ Practical support on arrival and during stay – food, clothing, toiletries etc.

##### Support for children

- ▶ Qualified experienced workers
- ▶ Play therapy
- ▶ Play rooms
- ▶ Support to access and settle into local schools

##### Triage and move on support including:

- ▶ Supporting women who have been referred but who are not able to access the refuge, to access other accommodation or refuges out of area
- ▶ Support from point of referral to entry into refuge and planning safe exit from refuge
- ▶ Resettlement support when moving on from refuge

#### 2. Community engagement

- ▶ Awareness raising and training within the community
- ▶ Working with local nurseries, schools and health services to raise awareness and ease access for women and their children

17 Women's Aid (2018) *Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017*. Bristol: Women's Aid.



### **3. Maintaining links and training for with local strategic partnerships, statutory agencies and other VAWG services including, but not limited to:**

- ▶ Crime and safety partnerships
- ▶ Education – schools, colleges, informal education settings
- ▶ Housing and homelessness services
- ▶ Adult social care
- ▶ Children social care
- ▶ Local courts
- ▶ Voluntary sector organisations and partnerships

### **4. How is refuge accommodation secured in the future?**

In order that any future funding framework is truly sustainable, there is a pressing need to address the availability of properties for refuges and the variation in property arrangements that refuges have, in particular managing agent arrangements. Generally, in managing agent arrangements the core rent (total rent excluding all service charges) is set by the landlord, collected by the managing agent (the refuge provider) and then paid to the landlord, less a management fee. The service charges are then set, collected and the property managed by the managing agent (the refuge provider).

Most refuges are reliant on managing agent arrangement leases with social landlords; these arrangements and relationships vary and can be very complex. A number of refuges interviewed as part of this project expressed concern about how landlords are changing the arrangements they have with providers. These contract variations are placing additional financial pressure and risk on the refuge, which may lead to further refuges closing. Examples include: landlords increasingly reducing the management fee retained by the refuge; short no-fault notice periods for terminating leases; levying additional service charges on the women; and moving to full repairs leases.

Under a new model of funding, the landlord-provider arrangements will have to be reliable and consistent to ensure that a new refuge funding model will be sustainable and equitable between areas, with landlords encouraged to retain and support refuge provision in their stock.

## ■ 5. How can the refuge sector be developed?

Many refuges are within buildings that are no longer fit for purpose and the sector is concerned about its ability to respond to the needs of women with physical disabilities or mobility issues. Data on vacancies collected by Women's Aid between April 2017 and March 2018 showed that only 1.7% of total refuge vacancies are fully wheelchair accessible. Capital investment is urgently required to build new and refurbish old accommodation. This is essential if the refuge network is to meet the needs of all women and allow all women to be able to access any refuge with good quality responsive accommodation, which is, for example, wheelchair accessible, and has dedicated play and therapy spaces and interview rooms/office space in all refuges.

While investors now have clarity on revenue for housing costs, the future funding model for support costs remains uncertain, which impacts on decisions for capital investment. If the new funding model addresses these concerns, refuges could access additional funds to ensure accommodation is fit for purpose and also develop new and innovative accommodation-based services.

### Opportunities for social investment

There are a number of funders who are exploring specific funding for housing for vulnerable women fleeing domestic violence. There are a range of social investment models that could be considered and, with a secure revenue stream, refuges could benefit from raising social investment. This investment could be used for various purposes:

- ▶ purchasing new properties and converting them into refuges;
- ▶ repairing and refurbishing existing refuges;

- ▶ making refuges more accessible, e.g. to those with physical disabilities that restrict their mobility;
- ▶ upfront working capital against future revenue.

The issuance of longer term contracts for refuges would also enable longer term lending, making repayments more manageable for refuges. At present investors have no clarity on the future of support funding for refuges, and this continual uncertainty creates risk for both refuges and investors and is preventing any investment from being raised, as the source of funding for repaying the loans is unknown.

## Conclusion, recommendations and next steps:

The refuge sector is in stark need of a sustainable funding system that will shore up provision of high quality services to meet the needs of women and children survivors of domestic abuse. The government's announcement in August 2018 to keep refuge housing costs in housing benefit is a positive step. However, the forthcoming domestic abuse bill will increase the demand for services, as we encourage more survivors to come forward and seek help if they need it. Therefore, it is more important than ever that the refuge sector can flex to meet demand, can continue to underpin a good response from statutory agencies to domestic abuse and can continue to innovate and adapt to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

The model outlined in this report is a solid foundation upon which the government and the domestic abuse sector can build to develop a funding model that will work for the sector, that will work for government, and, most importantly, work for the women and children who flee to these services in life-threatening situations. This model also has the potential to be expanded to cover not just refuge services, but the full suite of domestic abuse services, including outreach, floating support and other community-based services.

This project makes clear recommendations to government and to the domestic abuse sector relating to an alternative future funding model, further work required and securing further investment.

### Rent and related service charges

- ▶ The government should further consult the housing sector, including smaller providers, on definitions of 'short-term', 'specified' and 'exempt' accommodation to ensure

that these definitions and the policy written around them are fit for purpose.

- ▶ Further work must be completed to understand the true cost of household spend on 'eligible service charges' and how these can continue to be met through housing benefit and provide assurance on appropriate spending to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- ▶ It is recommended that the rent and accommodation related service charges presently paid through housing benefit remain within the welfare system. The government's announcement to retain housing benefit for supported housing is welcome and considered to be the most sensible way forward.
- ▶ Housing benefit should continue to be paid directly to the refuge provider and MHCLG should use this opportunity to address anomalies in different managing agent/ landlord/provider relationships and how the funds flow through to services.
- ▶ Government should consider how the rent and service charge costs for women with no recourse to public funds staying in refuges can be covered – either through housing benefit or an alternative mechanism, such as directly from MHCLG.
- ▶ There should be a consistent approach to having specific employees in local councils who are able to administer claims and payments of housing benefit to refuges and who refuges can refer questions to. Where this currently works well payments of housing benefit are made accurately and quickly and this reduces this administrative burdens on both sides.

### Timescales for funding changes

- ▶ It is recommended that no further changes to proposals for housing costs funding for refuges are made. The succession of announcements on funding for supported housing over the past two years has led

to the further destabilisation of the refuge sector.

- ▶ It is recommended that the timetable for changes to how refuge support costs are funded allows for any required regulatory changes, identification of the most effective processes and piloting of the final funding structure before full implementation.
- ▶ Timescales for funding refuges must take into account the timetable for the domestic abuse bill, which is expected to reach parliament in 2019, and will drive an increase in demand for all kinds of domestic abuse support services, including refuges, impacting both support funds and housing costs funds from housing benefit.

### Funding for support and the national oversight mechanism (NOM)

- ▶ It is recommended that a NOM is developed to provide oversight and accountability to the funding of refuge services, including assurances on how housing benefit funding is being spent, and particularly focusing on funding for core support.
- ▶ The NOM could work with other government departments, related arms-length bodies, clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and police and crime commissioners (PCCs) to ensure wider investment in the sector.
- ▶ The NOM could be considered as a direct funder for specific specialist services of national significance, such as those for BME women, disabled women and LGBT+ women. This should be explored with representative organisations.
- ▶ It is essential that both local and front-line services, and national and second-tier organisations from across the refuge and VAWG sector work in partnership with government departments to identify the most effective mechanisms to deliver the NOM and how to constitute representation

on the NOM. This work should be properly resourced and funded.

- ▶ There must be collaborative working between MHCLG, the Home Office and the VAWG sector in order to develop this recommendation further.

### Children

- ▶ Any new funding model must include core support costs for children including, but not limited to, direct support, play therapy and liaison with local educational facilities and schools.

### Quality assurance

- ▶ It is recommended that quality assurance and outcome monitoring frameworks already developed within the VAWG sector (such as the Women's Aid National Quality Standards, Imkaan Accredited Quality Standards, and VAWG Sector Shared Core Standards, and On Track and Synthesis) are used to develop robust national monitoring for refuges.
- ▶ Any new quality assurance or monitoring processes should not increase any administrative burdens on frontline services.

### Further research/analysis

The project has identified a range of issues that require further investigation:

- ▶ It is recommended that more detailed systematic research is undertaken to establish in more detail the funding arrangements for refuges, and related services, building on the data collected during this project.
- ▶ Further detailed analysis of similar NOMs and the key elements of this function, alongside an assessment of core membership, will be crucial.

- ▶ It is recommended that further systematic research is undertaken to establish the full costs of the complete range of core refuge services and the full value of the benefits of these services, and the savings they make for other public services in the short and long term.
- ▶ Further consideration of the needs of the specialist BME women's sector and how to ensure fair access to services for women with NRPF, as required by the Istanbul Convention, which the government plans to ratify as part of the domestic abuse bill.
- ▶ Further consideration of the needs of disabled women, LGBT+ women and women with complex or additional needs and how the model can support services to develop to meet these needs and adapt properties.
- ▶ Further consideration of how this model could be broadened to work for all domestic abuse services, specifically with reference to the NOM where housing costs are not required.
- ▶ It is recommended there should be some initial scoping of the design of investment mechanisms to provide additional capital funds for refuges and broader domestic abuse services.
- ▶ A systematic asset review of refuges should be undertaken against an agreed set of building parameters to ascertain the suitability of refuge properties and areas for development.





*Funding a national network of refuges: Providing a lifeline for families fleeing domestic abuse  
Developing a sustainable funding mechanism for refuges*

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