

Cost of Living and the impact on domestic abuse support services

A survey of Women's Aid members

Women's Aid January 2023

Introduction and methodology

Specialist domestic abuse services such as Women's Aid members are a vital lifeline for survivors, providing safety and support for women to recover and rebuild their lives after their experiences of abuse. In summer 2022, a Women's Aid survey of domestic abuse survivors found that the cost of living crisis was making it even harder for women to escape domestic abuse (Women's Aid, 2022). At a time when their life saving specialist services were especially needed, our members told us they were also feeling a severe impact from the rising cost of living.

Women's Aid research has found that the domestic abuse support sector is facing an ongoing funding crisis (Women's Aid, 2021). The recent Covid-19 pandemic presented huge challenges to domestic abuse services (Women's Aid, 2020). As the cost of living crisis has intensified this winter, it has added to the pressures on these already stretched services. To understand our members' experiences of this further crisis and to find out what impact it is having on their capacity to support survivors, the Women's Aid research team issued a survey in November 2022.

Sample

The survey was sent to Women's Aid's network of just under 170 members. There were 75 responses from Women's Aid members across England, including 14 specialist organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women who are also members of Imkaan¹. Some members did not answer all of the questions in the survey so the sample size varies throughout. Of the members who responded to the survey, 74.7% (56) were running a refuge service. 25.3% of members (19) responding did not run a refuge service and offered community-based support (CBS) and/or open access services only. The majority of members with a refuge service were also running CBS and/or open access services (47 members). Around three-quarters of all Women's Aid members run a refuge service, so this sample is reflective of our membership.

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 who are defined in policy terms as Black and 'Minority Ethnic' (BME)."

Local support services are facing financial challenges due to the crisis

Nearly all of the specialist frontline services who responded to the survey (95.9%) told us they were facing a financial issue related to the crisis. With the majority (78.4%) reporting that their funding was not rising increasing in line with the increased costs they are seeing, member services were looking for ways to cut costs and having to scale back on the extra 'added value' support they deliver alongside their core services, such as care packages for survivors or peer group work programmes. Over half (58.9%) were having to use their charitable reserves to cope, which is not sustainable in the long-term.

"Our reserves can only be spent once, when they're gone that will be the end of any support we can give to staff and survivors..."

Staff are struggling with the crisis, creating additional challenges for services in delivering support to survivors

Local authority funding contracts for domestic abuse support does not always cover the full cost of delivering the service. Often services rely on unsustainable and short-term funding pots to support their work, leaving domestic abuse services under-resourced and restricted in what they can pay their staff. With low salaries in the sector and the cost of living soaring, almost three-quarters of the specialist support services responding (73.0%) said they had staff who are experiencing financial hardship. One in five (20.3%) had staff who were using foodbanks.

Low salaries mean passionate and experienced staff are making the difficult choice to leave for higher paid roles elsewhere in order to support themselves and their families. The majority of the specialist domestic abuse support services responding (79.7%) were struggling to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries they can pay. Member services told us they were concerned these issues were affecting the quality of the services they could deliver to survivors, with short-staffed services and heavy workloads leading to burnout and affecting the wellbeing of existing staff.

"We cannot keep up with increasing demand and staff are working non-stop and beyond working hours to support women. This is leading to burnout. Staff vacancies means that staff are doing more for longer"

Domestic abuse support services are feeling the impact of pressures on public services

The impacts of the cost of living crisis are far-reaching and services in other public services are also feeling the effects. The vast majority of Women's Aid member services responding (91.8%) said they were seeing an increase in delays or difficulties accessing services in at least one other sector. This is leading to longer stays in refuge as survivors struggle to secure move-on housing or require support over longer periods of time, adding to demands on services and reducing the number of refuge places they can make available.

"It's prolonging progress, positive outcomes and recovery, lives are on hold."

Support services have not been widely able to access support around the crisis

The majority of specialist support services responding have not been able to access government support schemes to help with their refuge energy bills. These schemes are not straightforward to access for communal buildings, which is how utilities in refuge services are often managed. Just five (10.4%) of the services responding to our survey, said they had successfully been able to access energy support for their refuge and some were unaware that support was even available to them.

"Our bills are set to soar and the additional cost of funding these bills takes away money from other areas such as staff."

Specialist services for Black and minoritised women are particularly feeling the impact of the crisis

The survey showed these challenges were having a disproportionate effect on specialist services run 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. For example, specialist services for Black and minoritised women were more likely to report issues recruiting staff and more than half (53.8%) said they had not been able to provide any cost of living pay increases to staff, compared with just under one-third (28.4%) of all services. More of these specialist services reported concerns about how the crisis may affect their ability to support survivors in the future.

Fears for the year ahead

Despite all of the challenges they are facing, specialist domestic abuse services continue to provide their lifesaving work and support for survivors remains available. However many specialist services (67.2%) said that if the cost of crisis continues without intervention, they were concerned they would have to turn survivors away and/or reduce their services. Shockingly, five member services had fears they might have to close their services completely.

"Our service is at serious threat of closure"

Women's Aid members' experiences of the cost of living crisis – November 2022 survey findings

Local support services are facing financial challenges due to the crisis

- Nearly all of the members who responded to the survey told us they were facing a financial issue related to the crisis. 95.9% (71 out of 74) said they were experiencing at least one of the following financial issues: increased rent for premises, other increased costs (e.g. food or supplies), funding not rising in line with costs or another financial issue.
- 78.4% (58 out of 74) are not seeing their funding rise in line with costs. This was slightly higher for responding members running a refuge service (83.6%, 46 out of 55), compared with 63.2% (12 out of 19) of members running CBS and/or open-access services only.
- 67.8% (50 out of 74) have seen an increase in energy costs, with three members reporting they have seen an increase of 300% with their energy bills, and one other member reporting an increase of 291%. One member said they have seen an increase of 600%, this is from the community centre where they are based but it will affect every organisation based there.

- A slightly higher proportion of members with a refuge (70.9%, 39 out of 55) reported they have seen an increase in energy bills, compared to 57.9% (11 out of 19) of members running CBS and/or open access services only. A higher proportion of members with a refuge also reported seeing other increased costs (81.8%, 45 out of 55) compared to 63.2% (12 out of 19) of members who were not running a refuge.
- More than half of members told us they were using their charitable reserves to cope with the crisis. 58.9% (43 out of 73) of members reported using their reserves to cover staff pay rises and/or to cover other essential costs.

When asked about the impact this was having on their services, members told us they were looking for ways to cut costs and having to scale back on the extra 'added value' support they deliver alongside their core services, such as care packages for survivors or peer group work programmes. Six members left comments indicating they were receiving fewer donations and seeing fewer funding grants being available.

"We don't have enough funds to support clients with food costs, accommodation or any other emergency needs. Many of our survivors are facing financial difficulty and ask us to help to send them food vouchers, but our funding is limited" (comment from a Black and minoritised women's service)

"What we have budgeted to deliver services no longer applies. This means in real terms you cannot deliver what you planned to; the costs are not possible. The capacity to deliver was already impossible with high caseloads, we are being forced to review staffing levels meaning even less staff to deliver to even more survivors."

"Office rent has not been increased but it's likely to when the lease needs renewal. Some contract funding is being paid in arrears so it has an impact on cashflow, yet we are expected to continue service delivery"

"Our donations have vanished completely so we are struggling to support those with no recourse to public funds." (By and for member)

"We are being asked to deliver more services for less money (in real terms)"

As staff struggle with the crisis, this creates additional challenges for services in delivering support to survivors

- Almost three-quarters (73.0%, 59 out of 74) said they have staff who are experiencing financial hardship, with one in five (20.3%, 15 out of 74) saying they have staff who are using foodbanks.
- The majority of members are experiencing staffing issues, with 79.7% (59 out of 74) struggling to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries they can pay. This was higher for Black and minoritised women services, with 92.3% (12 out of 13) of these services struggling to recruit.
- 67.6% (50 out of 74) of all members reported they have lost staff who have left either to work in a higher paid role elsewhere or because they can no longer afford to keep working (for example, due to childcare costs)
- Over a third of members (53.1%, 26 out of 74) have lost staff who have been recruited by a local authority
- Almost one-third (28.4%, 21 out of 74) have not been able to provide any cost of living pay increases to staff. This was higher for Black and minoritised women's services, with more than half of these members (53.8%, 7 out of 13) reporting they have been unable to provide a cost of living pay increase.
- 41.9% of members (31 out of 74) have provided a cost of living increase to staff at a lower level than they would like
- One in five (20.5%, 15 out of 73) are providing hardship funds for their staff. Nine members (12.3%) have provided food for their staff to support them with rising costs.

Members told us they were concerned these issues were affecting the quality of the services they could deliver to survivors, with short-staffed services and heavy workloads leading to burnout and affecting the wellbeing of staff. Members highlighted how by only being able to offer low salaries, they are losing talented and experienced staff which are difficult to replace.

"We cannot keep up with increasing demand and staff are working non-stop and beyond working hours to support women. This is leading to burnout. Staff vacancies means that staff are doing more for longer" (comment from a Black and minoritised women's service)

"We are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit new staff due to our wage constraints. It's the constant threat of losing good staff because you can't pay them what they are worth, combined with the worry around recruiting good staff if they leave."

"We are losing very experienced staff who are brilliant at supporting our clients and the difficulty in recruitment means that we are often needing to bring in practitioners who are new to the sector...vacant posts mean we are stretching our current capacity, we are needing to consider longer times between support sessions or even a waiting list for our standard risk clients."

"We have also used reserves to pay cost of living bonus to staff to try and mitigate some of their higher costs such as heating and food."

"It has cost us over £100,000 this year to give staff cost of living increases, this uses up budgets that could be used for survivors, however as staff are very important to us, and are also affected by the cost of living increase, then it wasn't a difficult decision. Utility costs going up so much have meant that the enhanced housing benefit we receive to deliver the accommodation based services doesn't in any way cover the costs, so we are having to use reserves to cover the costs. This reduces our long term sustainability and potential impact. Additionally, it means that our throughput in refuge has reduced, as survivors cannot afford to move out into their own tenancies as they can't afford the utility costs. This means they have no choice but to stay at refuge, but this then means that we cannot accept new referrals, so women are being left in dangerous, and life threatening situations, because refuges are full."

Domestic abuse support services are feeling the impact of pressures on public services

- Other sectors and public services are under pressure due to the crisis and this is having a knock-on effect on domestic abuse services. The vast majority (91.8%, 67 out of 73) said they were seeing an increase in delays or difficulties accessing services in at least one other sector².
- Most significantly, members told us they were seeing an increase in delays or difficulties accessing health services (72.6%, 53 out of 73), local authority housing departments (65.8%, 48 out of 73), private rental accommodation (54.8%, 40 out of 73) and the Criminal Justice System (52.1%, 38 out of 73).

Many members told us these knock-on effects meant that survivors were staying in refuge or requiring support over longer periods of time, adding to pressures on services

² Local authority housing departments, rental accommodation sector, benefits system, health services, social services, Criminal Justice System, Civil Justice System and/or services in another sector.

and reducing the number of refuge places they can make available. Members particularly highlighted difficulties accessing mental health services and the impact that issues with accessing other services was having on survivors' wellbeing.

"We are having families stuck in refuge because of the severe housing crisis which means that they are staying with us for longer than necessary and which means we cannot support others that need refuge. Our survivors are struggling with the money they are on and so this is affecting their ability to be offered private rentals"

"It's prolonging progress, positive outcomes and recovery, lives are on hold."

Support services have not been widely able to access support around the crisis

- Only five members (out of 48, 10.4%) confirmed they have been able to access help with their refuge energy bills. Of the remaining members who answered this question, over half confirmed they had not been able to access refuge energy bill support (54.2%, 26) and the remaining 17 members were not sure.
- Only three members (out of 66, 4.5%) confirmed they have been able to access help with their other energy bills as a charity (e.g. for premises other than refuge). Of the remaining members who answered this question, other three-quarters confirmed they had not been able to access this support (78.8%, 52) and the remaining 11 members were not sure.
- When asked about the impact of energy bill support ending on 31st March 2022, the most common responses were concerns around bills going up, increased impacts on service users (e.g. having to pass on rent and other charges) and around being unaware that support was currently available to them.
- Only ten members (out of 63) confirmed they have been able to access any support around the crisis from their local authority. Of the remaining members who answered this question, 66.7% confirmed they have not been able to access support from their local authority and the remaining 11 members were not sure.

"We asked the LA about the Household Support Fund but they said it was only for individuals."

"We are unable to take advantage of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme (EBRS), as the amount we pay (per unit) is already below the 'Government Supported Price'. Our fundraiser is currently looking into any that we can apply for, although most available

funds to help with the cost of living are aimed primarily at Service Users, rather than us, as an organisation."

"Our bills are set to soar and the additional cost of funding these bills takes away money from other areas such as staff."

"We will need to increase our rents and service charges this then puts pressure on our residents to pay higher charges."

Fears for the year ahead

- 67.2% (43 out of 64) said if this crisis continues without intervention, it would stop them from supporting survivors - either turning them away from existing support, reducing the support available or closing all together in 5 cases. This rose to 84.6% (11 out of 13) of Black and minoritised women's services.
- 79.7% (51 out of 64) said they might have to use reserves to cover additional costs.

"Our reserves can only be spent once, when they're gone that will be the end of any support we can give to staff and survivors. Local authority contracts have been ignoring inflation for too many years and there will come a point when we can't afford to bid for them. There is a risk that the next 12 months will see non-specialist providers take over specialist services, women will be the losers in this scenario"

"Having worked in DA for many years it seems like things are now at capacity more than ever before"

"Our service is at serious threat of closure"

References

Women's Aid (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them*. Available [online](#).

Women's Aid (2021) *Fragile Funding Landscape: The extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020*. Available [online](#).

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