

| General Election **2024**

women's aid
until women & children are safe

A **whole-system response** to domestic abuse

Three women a fortnight are
killed by a partner or ex-partner ^[1]

Nearly **one in five crimes** recorded by
the police are **domestic abuse related** ^[1b]

The **economic and social costs** of
domestic abuse in England were
just under **£78 billion** in 2022. ^[2]

A **whole-system response** to domestic abuse

Women's Aid's manifesto for the 2024 General Election calls for the national prioritisation of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and for political parties to pledge their commitment to the much-needed actions under our **three key pillars**.

Call to Action



Women's Aid Patron, Melanie Brown MBE:

On behalf of the survivors whose voices can't be heard, I am here with my voice and my platform, loudly telling every political party that they need to put domestic abuse as a priority as we lead up to the next general election. Domestic abuse isn't like other issues - so many people are affected but can't safely speak out - it is everywhere and I'm telling you today lives are at risk, and women in particular need you. No matter which political party you are in, I'm asking you for your commitment today that domestic abuse is an issue you will prioritise.



[1a] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2022) Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2022. [Published online.](#)

[1b] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2022) Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2022.

[2] Women's Aid. (2023) [Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

[3] Women's Aid. (2023) [Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

Foreward

by Farah Nazeer, chief executive
and Sarah Hill, chair of the board

Farah Nazeer, chief executive



“Over recent years we have seen legislation, policies and strategies all aiming to improve parts of the response to domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Whilst Women’s Aid has welcomed this work, **it has not been enough**. We need to go further still to create the systemic change needed to keep women and children safe.

Domestic abuse is not just a criminal justice issue, and this is well evidenced. We therefore need all government departments, public sector agencies, commissioners - **everyone** - to work together to tackle this issue and protect women and children.

This could not be more urgent - too many women, like **Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry, Sarah Everard, Ellie Gould, Alice Ruggles** and so many more, have suffered the most devastating of consequences through failure to take the necessary action.

Sarah Hill, chair of the board



Furthermore, we know that women’s specialist domestic abuse services [4] have been depleted, leaving women and children fleeing abuse unable to access the support they need. These services, and those led ‘by and for’ minoritised groups, must be sustainably funded. Existing funding is failing to meet demand - it is too often spent on large, generic services that are ill-equipped to provide the expert support that survivors urgently need. This means that public funding is being wasted as decisions are too often driven by a rush to get money out the door.

This must change. **A whole-system response to domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG must be a priority for all political parties.** This would not only be a cost-effective solution that will save taxpayers’ money, it would also save the lives of women and children.

[4] These services are specifically designed to support women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, are delivered by trained and expert staff, and have a track record in meeting survivors’ needs within their local communities.

Introduction

Domestic abuse is an epidemic in our society – an estimated 1.7 million women experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales in the year ending March 2022. [5] With only around one in five survivors reporting to the police, the response needs to extend beyond the criminal justice system. [6] Yet the experiences of survivors and our member services show that there is currently no sufficiently joined-up, whole-system response to domestic abuse.

Failing to help survivors of domestic abuse the first time they come forward is expensive - **£78 billion** per year on average – and resource-intensive for public services like the NHS and police, as it leads to repeated and additional interventions. [7] With the adequate provision of specialist support services, at the annual cost of **£427 million**, the domestic abuse sector could save the public purse as much as **£23 billion** a year. A fully funded whole-system response with robust training across the public sector and efficient referral pathways could reap even greater savings.

Women's Aid is clear that we need to see a seismic shift towards a whole-system approach that can better understand and address the needs of survivors, as well as recognise the value that specialist women's and 'by and for' domestic abuse services deliver.

Domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) are violations of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. [8] This manifesto focuses on women and children who have experienced domestic abuse. Whilst recognising that both 'survivor' and 'victim' can be used interchangeably depending on the context, Women's Aid primarily uses the term 'survivor'.

[5] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2022). Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2022. [Published online.](#)

[6] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2018) Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2018. [Published online.](#)

[7] Women's Aid. (2023) [Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

[8] United Nations. (2014) Women's rights are human rights. UN; Birchall, J. and Choudhry, S. (2018) [What about my right not to be abused?](#) Domestic abuse, human rights and the family courts. Bristol: Women's Aid.

The pillars for change

We are calling for political parties to commit to the following **key pillars** in their 2024 General Election manifestos:

- 1 INVEST to save:** fund specialist women's services to save lives and money
- 2 SUPPORT survivors:** deliver the right response the first time
- 3 PREVENT abuse:** transform societal attitudes and understanding

Foundations underpinning these pillars

We are clear that the following foundations must underpin these pillars:

- **A gendered approach** – recognising that while anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, it is disproportionately committed by men against women [9] and is a form of VAWG.
- **Women's rights are human rights** – a rights-based approach, which protects and supports all women, including those facing additional forms of inequality.
- **A whole-system response** – recognising that all government departments and the public sector – including health, social care, criminal and family justice, education and housing - need to play their part in ending domestic abuse.
- **Government accountability** – including through the creation of a dedicated ministerial lead for VAWG who attends cabinet to drive forward action and holds all government departments, statutory agencies and local commissioners accountable for progress.

[9] CEDAW 1992: para 6.

INVEST to save:

fund specialist women's services to save lives and money

As an economic analysis commissioned by Women's Aid shows, **for every pound invested** in domestic abuse services, we will see **a saving to the public purse of at least £9 [10]**

Specialist services are experts at meeting the needs of the communities they serve, however we know in England there remains a **23%** shortfall in bed spaces in refuges and **50%** of all the referrals received by community-based support services **[11]** were rejected. **[12]** Investment in specialist women's and 'by and for' domestic abuse services will not only help the next government to save **£3,898,100,000 [13]** by reducing duplication of effort and pressure on public services, but it will also save lives. **We are calling on political parties to commit to:**

- Invest **£427 million** per year, as a minimum, to fund specialist women-led and 'by and for' domestic abuse services in England.
- Strengthen monitoring and national oversight of the delivery of support to survivors of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and safe accommodation. **[14]**
- Require local authorities to adhere to national commissioning guidance, which requires local authorities to account for the range of survivors' needs and how to provide a quality service.
- Reform the current procurement and commissioning landscape to ensure the specialist women's and 'by and for' domestic abuse sector, who deliver expert and quality services, can access funding fairly.

[10] Women's Aid. (2023) Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support. Bristol: Women's Aid. Available [online](#).

[11] Community-based services include floating support (tied to accommodation), outreach support (not tied to accommodation), advocacy support, helplines, drop-in services, prevention work and information services.

[12] Women's Aid. (2023) [The Domestic Abuse Report 2023: The Annual Audit](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

[13] Women's Aid. (2023) [Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.

[14] This will help ensure the robust delivery of Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

SUPPORT survivors:

deliver the right response the first time

By listening to the individual needs of each survivor, responses can be more accessible and responsive the first time to those who needs support.

Even before the start of a survivor's journey to safety, women and children need to know that no matter where they turn, they will be supported and protected – whether that be, for example, with their mental health, supporting their children's wellbeing, accessing emergency funds, or securing housing. **We are calling on political parties to commit to:**

Young people

- Develop and publish specific guidance on teenage relationship abuse, to sit alongside the statutory guidance for the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Housing

- Support local authorities to implement the automatic priority need for housing to survivors of domestic abuse.
- Exempt survivors of domestic abuse from local connections or residency requirements for applicants of social housing.
- In secure or assured social tenancies, introduce a simplified legal mechanism to place responsibility on the perpetrator to leave so that survivors can maintain or secure a sole tenancy.
- Recognise and respond to women's rough sleeping as an urgent problem that requires a distinct response to enable survivors to access emergency accommodation and move on from refuge.

Health

- Recognise domestic abuse as a fundamental cause of women's mental health issues, through a refresh of the Women's Health Strategy and creation of an implementation plan.
- Sustainably fund partnership work between health services and specialist domestic abuse services and ensure Integrated Care Boards are held accountable for the commissioning of support from local specialist domestic abuse services.

Employment

- Require employers to have an internal workplace policy on domestic abuse and VAWG.
- Enable survivors to access flexible working arrangements and a period of paid employment leave, to cope and recover from their experiences.

Welfare

- Set up a long-term fund to support survivors suffering from financial hardship to flee quickly and safely, which includes women with no recourse to public funds.
- Deliver a social security system which keeps survivors safe, including assessing all welfare reforms for their impact on women's ability to escape abuse. **[15]**
- Abolish the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition for survivors of domestic abuse to address the additional barriers this creates in accessing life-saving support.
- Commit to building on the success of the Rail to Refuge scheme to ensure survivors experiencing domestic abuse can access the transport they need to escape.

Courts

- Abolish the means test for legal aid for survivors of domestic abuse.
- Provide legal aid to both alleged perpetrators and survivors of domestic abuse, in the best interests of the child.
- Urgently prioritise and resource the full implementation of reforms in the family courts to keep survivors and their children safe, as promised in a Ministry of Justice review in 2020.**[16]**

Immigration

- Implement a firewall between Immigration Enforcement and statutory services, to ensure women experiencing abuse are treated as victims first and foremost.
- Extend eligibility for the existing Domestic Violence (DV) Rule to ensure not only survivors on spousal visas can access a refuge space, financial support and housing.

Perpetrator intervention

- Quality-assure all perpetrator interventions to ensure they keep survivors safe and are consistently available across the country and in all settings like the family courts.
- Review police capability and capacity to pursue and prosecute the perpetrators of domestic abuse and enhance these, as necessary.
- Further develop and deliver of Domestic Abuse Matters to ensure all police forces have undertaken the training, which must be delivered by specialist domestic abuse services.

[15] Currently this would require an exemption for survivors of domestic abuse from the benefit cap, and an end to the two-child tax credit limit.

[16] Ministry of Justice. (2020) Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases. [Available online](#).

PREVENT abuse:

transform societal attitudes and understanding

There must be a change in attitudes to ensure we help achieve a world where **domestic abuse is no longer tolerated**.

Attitudes which enable and excuse domestic abuse to continue are still worryingly prevalent in the United Kingdom. [17] Our research shows that those who do not see the link between domestic abuse and sexism are also more likely to tolerate it. Therefore, to end domestic abuse, it is vital that we raise awareness of how it is underpinned by sexist and misogynistic attitudes. [18] **We are calling on political parties to commit to:**

- Require all public sector agencies undertake training delivered by specialist domestic abuse services to ensure professionals provide the right response to survivors the first time.
- Invest in responses that effectively challenge perpetrator behaviour, such as the Make a Change [19] programme, and deliver change across all systems.
- Universal delivery of a 'whole school approach' [20] to tackling VAWG across educational settings, which includes improving relationship, sex and health education (RSHE) in consultation with the specialist VAWG sector.
- Nationally roll out expert resources like Women's Aid's Expect Respect Healthy Relationship Toolkit to encourage conversations on the root causes that lead to violence, as well as educating children and young people on gender-based violence.

Measuring success

It is vital that the next government works with Women's Aid to evaluate and measure performance against these key commitments. The following are examples of indicators that Women's Aid stand ready to support the next government with to ensure we, as a society, are successfully working to end domestic abuse:

- Fewer declined referrals to specialist services, e.g. referrals declined due to lack of space, to assess impact of increased resourcing of refuge spaces;
- Reduction in in-house provision, e.g. local authority run provision;
- Use of alternatives to competitive tendering to ensure specialist services are funded;

[continued on next page]

Measuring success (continued)

- Increased survivor confidence in statutory services, for example measured through a survivor satisfaction survey;
- Increase in police referrals, prosecutions and convictions for coercive control [21] and other domestic abuse offences;
- Reduced rates of cases dropping out of the criminal justice system at all points;
- Increased number of perpetrators meeting national outcomes [22] to ensure survivors are safe and that their wellbeing is prioritised;
- A comparable attitude survey focusing on respect and acceptance of women in all age groups;
- Media analysis on violence against women and girls reporting.

About Women's Aid

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of approximately 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across England. For almost 50 years, we have campaigned on behalf of our members and survivors to shape policy and practice, and to raise awareness of domestic abuse. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse and carry out ground-breaking research to inform our work.

Our support services, which include our **Live Chat**, 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 **Women's Aid Directory** and our **advocacy projects**, help thousands of women and children every year.

[17] Women's Aid. (2022). Come Together to End Domestic Abuse: a survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse 2022. Bristol: Women's Aid. [Available online](#).

[18] Women's Aid. (2022). Come Together to End Domestic Abuse: a survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse 2022. Bristol: Women's Aid. [Available online](#).

[19] Developed by Respect in partnership with Women's Aid - [Make a Change](#).

[20] Effective coordination between: teaching and learning; school ethos and environment; and family and community partnerships.

[21] An act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

[22] Respect (2022) The Respect Standard. [Available online](#).