

THE DOMESTIC ABUSE REPORT 2024

THE ANNUAL AUDIT



women's aid
until women & children are safe

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Women's Aid

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. For 50 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of approximately 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse, whilst using research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice, and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

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

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Methodological Approach

This report is the 2024 edition of Women's Aid's annual publication on the provision and uptake of domestic abuse services in England, examining the financial year 2022-23. We situate this report in the context of our 50-year anniversary as a federation, and this year have sought to better understand the unique value that specialist domestic abuse services offer to survivors and society. Over this reporting period, many services continued to face challenges that were exacerbated by the wider context, including the rising cost-of-living ('cost-of-living-crisis'), alongside the reduced availability and

rising cost of housing ('housing crisis'), and strained statutory services. Specialist domestic abuse services appear to be filling gaps and working at – or over - capacity more than ever before. It is crucial that we recognise the value of these services and enable them to adopt strategies for long-term sustainability, including greater support for data collection and monitoring. The Women's Aid data sources used in this report are On Track, Routes to Support, the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023, Freedom of Information requests and six key informant interviews.

Key Findings

Section 1: The value of specialist services

The first section of this report explores the value that specialist domestic abuse services bring to survivors and society. Findings in this section demonstrate that specialist domestic abuse services are continually improving the overall response to domestic abuse in a way that both empowers survivors to lead meaningful lives, as well as keeping the community safe and saving money. The ways in which they do this fall under five main categories: recognising diversity of survivors and their experiences; engaging survivors in the community; identifying gaps and filling them;

covering statutory services; and sharing knowledge and expertise.

Over the past financial year, the domestic abuse and wider violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector has worked to fill gaps and reach more survivors. Over forty percent (44.2%) of organisations reported providing a service that should be provided by a statutory agency. These included children's services (28.3%); financial advice (26.1%); mental health support/ counselling (26.1%); employment/careers advice (21.7%); and housing support (10.9%).

Section 2: The organisational challenges facing domestic abuse services

Section two of the report looks at organisational challenges faced by domestic abuse services over the past financial year. Most commonly, this related to funding with almost half (49.0%) of organisations responding to the annual survey telling us they had been running an area of their domestic abuse service in 2022-23 without any dedicated funding. The most common types of services running without dedicated funds were therapeutic support (43.1%); domestic abuse prevention/educational work (41.2%); and community-based domestic abuse services (41.2%). Almost three-quarters (72.5%) of these organisations had resorted to using their financial reserves to cover the costs of providing these services. Whilst a fifth (20.2%) of respondents to the annual survey reported that they had needed to reduce an area of work in their service this year, almost one in ten (9.6%) were even forced to close an area of their service's work. Many organisations we spoke to discussed how complex funding streams and increased costs associated with providing these services were exacerbating the problem of insufficient funding.

Higher demand was a key challenge identified this year, including both the quantity of cases, complexity of cases, as well as case lengths. These increasing caseloads and complexities were linked to wider challenges in the sector, including requiring multi-agency support from stretched statutory agencies, the reduced availability of suitable housing, and increased cost-of-living.

Despite the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 bringing about a legal definition of domestic abuse that now recognises children as victims, multiple organisations raised concerns that they had not received any additional funding to provide children's services, despite expectations that they should. The annual survey found that almost a quarter (23.5%) of those who were running a service without dedicated funding were running 'children and young people's domestic abuse services in refuge' and/or 'children and young people's domestic abuse services in the community' (15.7%). This equated to 11.5% and 7.7%, respectively, of all annual survey respondents, indicating how specialist services are attempting to fill these gaps for children, sometimes at their own expense.

Similarly to last year, staff recruitment and retention has remained a prominent concern across much of the sector. A trend towards short-term commissioned contracts has meant that services are unable to offer prospective staff long-term employment security and struggle to attract staff with enough expertise for contracted positions of sometimes only six months. The rising cost-of-living has limited services' ability to raise their salaries in line with inflation, causing many to seek employment elsewhere.

Lastly, the housing crisis continues to impact the sector, with services reporting that the lack of move-on accommodation has reached crisis point. As a result, survivors are needing to stay in refuge for longer and waiting lists continue to rise.

Section 3: The effect of the rising cost-of-living on survivors and services

Section three of the report details the effects of cost-of-living increases on both survivors and services. Services most commonly reported that survivors had been impacted by the crisis by not having enough money to pay for essentials needed for them and/or their children (79.8%); an increased number of survivors accessing foodbanks (78.8%); and negative impact on health and wellbeing (73.1%). A concerning 62.5% of services also reported that survivors had been unable to leave the perpetrator, and 57.7% felt that survivors had been reporting that they had experienced economic abuse more frequently.

Organisations also faced specific challenges linked to the rising cost-of-living, including staff struggling with increased and more challenging workloads (63.5%); organisations struggling to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries they can pay (57.7%); staff experiencing financial hardship (52.9%); losing staff who needed to move to higher paid roles elsewhere (48.1%); and staff morale becoming lower (34.6%). Around a third (32.7%) of organisations reported that they had received some financial

relief related the crisis, including additional grants; uplifts from commissioners based on a cost-of-living percentage; and the Home Office Emergency Fund, disseminated by Women's Aid.

A proportion of services reported that they were able to introduce benefits or help to mitigate the impact of the rising cost-of-living on staff and survivors. These included cost-of-living pay increases and/or payments to staff (64.4%); providing food bank vouchers to survivors (61.5%); and payments to survivors (41.3%). Three organisations (2.9%) reported not being able to take any mitigation actions to support survivors or staff around the cost-of-living crisis. However, it is important to note that even where some mitigations have taken place, funding for these often come from the financial reserves of organisations, which are failing to be replenished and are therefore unsustainable. Furthermore, the figures below indicate that large proportions of the workforce would not have received cost-of-living pay increases and/or payments, or other mitigations.

Section 4: The impact of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the statutory duty on the provision of safe accommodation

Section four explores the impact of the statutory duty, finding mixed experiences overall. Over forty percent (42.5%) of organisations had noticed that there was more funding available as a result of the statutory duty, a quarter (25.0%) felt that it had improved local partnership working, 12.5% had noticed longer term funding, 11.3% reported more secure funding, and 10.0% noted better access to funding. Meanwhile, 22.5% reported delays in receiving funding and 17.5% noted shorter-term funding. Over a third of organisations (33.8%) reported more demands for data. Whilst recognising the importance of better availability

of data in the sector, concerns were raised about the lack of resources to meet these demands. Regular data collection and reporting can help to ensure services are meeting the needs of diverse survivors and create a data-rich sector based on continual learning. However, respondents also discussed how the current processes and requirements for monitoring and data collection were creating increased pressures on their already high workloads, without adequate resourcing.

Through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, we asked local authorities about changes to their

total commissioned spend on domestic abuse provision over the past year, finding that 74.1% are spending more on domestic abuse provision than the last time they commissioned services, 14.9% are spending the same as the last time they

commissioned services, and 6.3% are spending a lower amount. Services, however, raised a number of concerns about how local authorities were allocating this funding in their area, including concerns around transparency and accountability.

Section 5: Commissioning

The final section of this report looks at the commissioning landscape during the 2022-23 financial year and presents the current commissioning levels for refuge and community-based support services from local authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

We asked organisations what impact they felt domestic abuse commissioning in their local area had had over the past year for survivors. The majority (41.3%) reported that there was a 'mostly positive' impact. However, concerningly, over a third (36.5%) believed there had been a 'mixed impact'; 3.8% felt there had been a detrimental impact; and 2.9% said there had

been little to no impact. Evidently, overall, experiences of commissioning were varied. When asked about challenges with domestic abuse service commissioning in their local area, organisations most commonly reported short-term contract lengths (33.7%), tenders not recognising quality (32.7%), and complex commissioning processes (32.7%), which are explored in more detail in section five. Alongside challenges, respondents noted many successful examples of commissioning. These included positive collaboration and relationships with other partners (44.2%), commissioners consulting well with local stakeholders (29.8%), and more funding available for their service this year (22.1%).

Concluding remarks

This report demonstrates the invaluable support the domestic abuse and VAWG sector continues to provide to survivors despite the challenging circumstances. Over the past year, specialist domestic abuse services have continued to save statutory services money and kept the wider community safe. It is vital that the knowledge and expertise of these providers are adequately recognised when it comes to commissioning processes, so that local authorities can ensure the

statutory duty is implemented meaningfully and consistently across England. Examples of good practices, including conducting comprehensive and consultative needs assessments and strategies, adequate funding, and enabling efficient data collection and reporting, demonstrates how this can be achieved.

Glossary

Bedspace: a unit of accommodation for one woman and her children, regardless of how many beds/cots are in the unit.

Specialist ‘by and for’ services: Specialist ‘by and for’ services are run by and for the communities they serve, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so they offer a uniquely empowering experience to the communities they support, as the client group is reflected in staffing, management, and governance structures of these organisations. For the full Women’s Aid definition of a specialist ‘by and for’ service see *Appendix D*.

Dedicated provider: an organisation constituted for the sole and specialist purpose of delivering domestic abuse services.

Entry/entries: one service listing on Routes to Support. A service provider may have multiple entries where they operate in more than one local authority or have services in the same local authority with different referral criteria, for example a general access refuge and another for Black and minoritised women only.

No recourse to public funds: if someone’s residence permit to live in the UK includes the condition ‘no recourse to public funds’ then that person will not be able to claim most state benefits.¹

Service provider: any organisation providing a domestic abuse service. This could be a dedicated provider or a larger organisation running a domestic abuse service, for example a housing association.

Service types: Routes to Support details which service types are offered against each entry, an entry can contain multiple service types.

Service user: any woman who is accessing/has accessed domestic abuse support services.

Specialist women’s domestic abuse services: Specialist women’s domestic abuse services are run by women’s, feminist organisations. They are run by women, and for women and their children. Their core business and organisational purpose it is to support survivors and/or children and young people impacted by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The services they deliver are specifically designed to support women and children affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG. Specialist services differ from generic services because they are independent from the state. They were established as local, grassroots and independent organisations, which is critical for women survivors’ ability to trust them. For the full Women’s Aid definition of a specialist women’s domestic abuse service specialist see *Appendix D*.

Survivor: At Women’s Aid, we use the term ‘survivor’ rather than ‘victim’ as it speaks to the strength of people experiencing domestic abuse, is less criminal justice focused and more empowering.

¹ Our research has shown that survivors with insecure immigration status may sometimes be misunderstood as having no recourse to public to funds when this is not the case, limiting their access to support to which they are entitled (Women’s Aid, 2022a).

Definitions of service types

Accommodation

Refuge: Offers accommodation and support only for women experiencing domestic abuse which is tied to that accommodation. The address will not be publicly available. It will have a set number of places. Residents will receive a planned programme of therapeutic and practical support from staff and access peer support from other residents. This will include:

- ▶ Access to information and advocacy
- ▶ Emotional support
- ▶ Access to specialist support workers (e.g. drugs/ alcohol use, mental health, sexual abuse)
- ▶ Access to recovery work
- ▶ Access to support for children (where needed)
- ▶ Practical help
- ▶ Key work and support planning (work around support needs including parenting, finances and wellbeing)
- ▶ Safety planning
- ▶ Counselling

Accommodation (other than refuge): Any accommodation offered to women experiencing domestic abuse which does not meet the definition above. For example, this may be move-on accommodation, a shelter where the address is disclosed or dispersed accommodation without the planned programme of support.

Resettlement: Only available to refuge residents moving on to independent living. A service is available to women staying in the refuge prior to move-on and post move-on.

Community-based support (CBS) services

Floating support: Tied to accommodation, but the accommodation is not offered as part of the service. Will also have a set number of places. These services are primarily about supporting women and children to maintain their accommodation.

Outreach: Not offered in the project's building and it does not have a set number of spaces. The support offered is broader and not focused on accommodation. Women can access these services in a range of community centres, or the service may come to the women in their home or other venues (e.g. cafes or neutral meeting places).

Domestic abuse advocacy project (including IDVA): Involves the provision of advice, information and support to survivors living in the community based on an assessment of risk and its management. Operates within an inter-agency context and is usually part of a multiagency risk management strategy or MARAC process. It focuses on providing a service to victims judged to be at medium to high risk of harm, aims to address their safety needs and help manage the risk that they face.

Open access services

These services are available without a planned programme of support and can be accessed anonymously as and when the woman needs to.

Helpline: A helpline is a support and referral service that is accessed by phone and can be accessed anonymously. It needs to have a designated telephone line and be a specific service offered at fixed advertised times. The service is delivered by dedicated staff or volunteers trained for that purpose and not engaged in other tasks.

Drop-in service: Women can access support at a specified venue without a pre-arranged appointment from trained staff.

Advice and information service: Other open access support projects, this would include crisis intervention services and other advice services whether accessed by telephone or in person.

Online chat: Online chat is a support and referral service that is accessed via the web. It needs to be a specific service offered at fixed advertised times by dedicated staff or volunteers trained for that purpose and not engaged in other tasks.

Recovery work

These services do not offer accommodation but may be offered to refuge residents. A woman and/or child has to attend the project's building to access these services.

Counselling: Counselling is formal counselling offered by qualified practitioners.

Group work programmes: Group work programmes are defined groups facilitated by trained staff.

Support groups: Support groups are attended by survivors within a refuge or community-based support setting and offer peer support/self-help work.

Dedicated children and young people's service

Children's work: Staffed by trained children's workers. A service where they provide emotional support, group work, activities, afterschool clubs or holiday clubs for the children or do specific outreach work.

Young people's work: Staffed by trained youth workers. A service where they provide emotional support, group work, activities.

Other

Prevention work: Work carried out in community groups such as schools aimed at prevention/awareness raising. Clients do not self-refer but the service may be booked by professionals.

Foreword



Farah Nazeer
Chief Executive,
Women's Aid

Each year, our Annual Audit provides a comprehensive overview of the state and health of domestic abuse services in England, demonstrating what has been achieved, but also, where there are gaps that need to be addressed to ensure that women and child survivors are kept safe. This one-of-a-kind report gives a unique opportunity for gaining up-to-date information on the challenges faced by domestic abuse services, helping us to work towards truly effective and impactful change.

This year's Audit is particularly poignant, as it marks 50 years since the federation was established. That's 50 years of supporting survivors, raising awareness and campaigning for change. We could not do this without our incredible members. Since the beginning of our network in 1974, Women's Aid has grown to encompass over 170 member organisations. Each individual member organisation provides survivors and children with life-saving support, from refuges and dispersed accommodation, through to counselling and 1-2-1 support. Many of our members are specialist services led 'by and for' marginalised communities, helping those who might face additional challenges to accessing this vital support. Each and every one of these services works tirelessly to help survivors take those first steps into a life free of abuse.

Our organisation is rooted in the international women's rights movement, growing in response to patriarchy, sexism and male violence against women, which, even 50 years on, is still sadly prevalent in our society. Having been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse for 50 years, we are especially interested in understanding the unique value of specialist women's domestic

abuse services, both to survivors and the wider community, something that we have delved into in our latest Annual Audit. The findings demonstrate that specialist services are valuable because they are continually improving the overall response to domestic abuse in a way that both empowers survivors to lead meaningful lives, as well as keeping the community safe and saving money.

This year, survey respondents highlighted the ongoing challenges presented by increases in the cost-of-living, as well as a shortage of funding. Half (49.0%) of the organisations surveyed told us that they had been running an area of their domestic abuse service in 2022-2023 without any dedicated funding. Many services continued to face sustainable funding challenges, including the amount of funds not reflecting increased costs and the short-term nature of contracts. This has been especially challenging for those 'by and for' services supporting Black and minoritised women, an area that we know is historically underfunded and under-resourced, often ignored in favour of larger organisations that might not have the required expertise to help women from marginalised communities. This forces specialist services to fill the gaps in any way they can, working at, or even over, capacity, more than ever before. A recent ground-breaking report by Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice, 'Life or Death? Preventing Domestic Homicides and Suicides of Black and Minoritised Women', found that 'by and for' services can be critical in preventing the deaths of Black and minoritised women in the context of domestic abuse. Funding these services is therefore a matter of life or death (Centre for Women's Justice and Imkaan, 2023).

As evidenced in our Annual Audit reports, specialist women's domestic abuse services across England have been facing a funding crisis for over a decade, resulting in a postcode lottery of support for women and girls who are being turned away daily at the point of need. Local government budget cuts, the rising cost-of-living and an increase in the complexities of cases is having severe impacts on the sustainability of the sector. These are acute concerns as we head into 2024; a Local Government Association (LGA) survey found

that half of local council leaders surveyed were not confident they will have enough funding to fulfil their legal duties next year (2024-25) (Local Government Association, 2023). This includes the delivery of statutory services, such as refuges and safe accommodation. There are also severe concerns about the funding of community-based support services, for which there is no statutory duty. Types of support that are seen as 'less essential' - such as therapeutic support - may be under severe threat.

In addition to showing us where improvements must be made, the Annual Audit has also highlighted some brilliant success stories, especially when it comes to good practice within commissioning that we hope will be replicated and applied more widely. For example, adopting long-term strategies, which is essential for funding contracts, has proven to be successful, especially when they account for inflationary increases, including for staff costs. It is also important and beneficial to ensure that needs assessments are thorough and include a good level of consultation with a variety of stakeholders, including survivors and 'by and for' services. As this report demonstrates, good practices in commissioning have had tangible results, for example, filling gaps in critical services for older women. It is vital that we recognise the value of specialist women's services and the unique knowledge that they possess, collaborating with them more often wherever possible. Lastly, it is important that going forward we ensure greater support for data collection and monitoring, and for funding for this to be reflected in contracts.

While this Audit has showcased some of the ongoing challenges facing the domestic abuse sector, it has also shown us a clear path for improvement and imperative to take action. It is only by working together, and ensuring that the needs of those providing vital, life-saving services are met, that we can work towards a society which has no place for domestic abuse.

Introduction

This report is the 2024 edition of Women's Aid's yearly publication on the provision, usage and work of domestic abuse services in England, examining the financial year 2022-23. The Women's Aid data sources used in this report are On Track, Routes to Support, the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023, six semi-structured interviews, and a number of Freedom of Information requests.

The report is framed around a number of interrelated research questions that were used to explore current trends within the domestic abuse sector, and which can be found listed in the *Methodology* section. A summary of the key findings from the data from On Track and Routes to Support around the provision and usage of domestic abuse services during 2022-23 can be found in the subsequent section, *Service users and service provision in 2022-23*, and full data can be found in the appendices. Sections one, two, three, four and five present the narrative findings from the Annual Survey 2023, key informant interviews and Freedom of Information requests to local authorities. This report is situated, in particular, within the context of the statutory duty to provide support for survivors of domestic abuse, including children, within safe accommodation, which was introduced in October 2021.² Furthermore, the report seeks to explore both the challenges that services have experienced with regards to local commissioning over the past year, as well as the good practices that were reported and aims to consider how these positive trends could be replicated.

Note on comparisons: We would advise caution when making comparisons between findings from different Annual Reports. Although differences in findings may suggest year-on-year change, because of differences in sample composition each year, these would require further investigation. Additionally, with more organisations joining On Track, the sample is changing year on year. Although we are consistent with our methodology and analysis, we cannot be sure that differences between them are the result of change due to time passing rather than other factors, for example structural inequalities faced by minoritised people, and differences in representation of minoritised people in each sample.

Copies of all editions of The Domestic Abuse Report, along with Women's Aid's other research, can be downloaded for free online at:
www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub

² Introduced through Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Methodology

Findings in this report drawn upon five data sources: On Track (the Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system); Routes to Support (the UK-wide online database for domestic abuse and other violence against women services); the annual survey; six semi-structured interviews with key informant organisations; and Freedom of Information requests. Full details on each of these data sources are described below.

This year, the Annual Audit findings are structured around a number of central research questions, which were developed to try to provide an in-depth picture of the provision, usage and work of domestic abuse services in England during the 2022-23 financial year, ensuring to demonstrate both the challenges *and* what is working well. Full data tables from On Track and Routes to Support can be found in the Appendices, or on our online data dashboards. This report answers the following key research questions:

1. What are the needs and experiences of survivors accessing domestic abuse support services, and what is the scope and nature of domestic abuse service provision in England?
2. What is the value of specialist services?
3. What are the organisational challenges facing domestic abuse services and what do they need to support them with this?
4. What has been the impact of increases in the cost-of-living for survivors and services, and what is needed to mitigate this?
5. What has been the impact of the statutory duty on refuge provision, and what is needed to improve the rollout?
6. What does good practice look like in local commissioning, and to what extent does current commissioning reflect this?

On Track: The Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system

Throughout the report, data is included on the profile, needs and experiences of women accessing domestic abuse support services. To do this, we have used data from On Track, a case management and outcomes monitoring system developed by Women's Aid. On Track is used by 100 local domestic abuse services to record information about service users. Every region in England is represented by services using On Track.

Through the information they collect in their daily work, services contribute to an anonymous national dataset which is held by Women's Aid. This national data includes a range of information about survivors' journeys. For adults and children and young people accessing domestic abuse support services, On Track records data on referral patterns, experiences of abuse, support need, profile of survivors, support provided,

outcomes, feedback, negative experiences of external services (e.g. housing, legal services, local authority safeguarding, NHS, police).

As of October 2023, the On Track national dataset contained information on 213,376 survivors, 198,283 of whom are female³, who have accessed domestic abuse services since the system was launched on 1st April 2016. This makes On Track the largest dataset in the country containing information on survivors of domestic abuse. This report provides data on a sample of 39,698 female survivors recorded on On Track who finished a period of support from a refuge or community-based service using On Track in the year 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, and who consented for their anonymised data to be shared with Women's Aid. Of these:

- ▶ 3,771 accessed refuge services.
- ▶ 36,540 accessed community-based support (CBS) services.⁴

Throughout the analysis presented, we show information across the whole sample of 39,698 women (each woman represented only once even where she accessed more than one service type).⁵ We only highlight comparative demographics between refuge and CBS services where there is a noteworthy difference in the results. Where sub-samples are used, this is highlighted in the report.

Women and children escaping abuse come from all backgrounds, have a diverse range of experiences, and require specialist support that meets their needs. While this report presents demographic information on service users, it does not set out to explain or analyse the needs and experiences of different groups of women. However, we know that for many women and girls, their experiences and support journeys will be shaped by multiple, often intersecting, inequalities.

On Track is only able to look at women who have successfully accessed support services. There are many survivors of domestic abuse who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to access specialist help, or are delayed in doing so for a long time. If we were to look at a profile of support needs and demographic background for such survivors, it would likely be different to that of the survivors in our sample from On Track. This is because accessibility is about more than just availability of space in a refuge or a place in a CBS service. Therefore, when looking at whether provision meets need, we need to consider whether services that are available can meet a diversity of needs for women.

As this report shows, not all services are resourced to provide for women with specific support needs such as substance use, mental health support, communication, or accessibility/mobility, nor to accommodate a service user's children and any support and access needs the children may have. This includes the needs of minoritised women and children whose experiences will have been shaped by multiple forms of oppression and discrimination.

Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project has consistently found that the most minoritised women tend to face the greatest barriers in their search for refuge provision, with intersecting structural barriers and inequalities (such as poor agency responses or exclusion on the basis on immigration status) impacting on women's ability to access appropriate safety and protection (Women's Aid, 2023a).

³ On Track collects information about female and male survivors and survivors who do not define as either male or female. This report will only present information on female survivors.

⁴ Community-based support services include floating support, outreach, IDVA and advocacy services.

⁵ It is important to note that this only applies where a woman has accessed more than one service in the same organisation. The data provided from each organisation is independent and therefore if a woman accessed different services from different organisations she would be counted twice in our analysis.

Routes to Support

Throughout the report, data is included from a snapshot of the available provision in England on 1st May 2023 and analysis of change during the year from 1st May 2022 along with analysis of refuge referrals and vacancies during that same year.⁶ Tables showing a full range of data on service provision are available in *Appendix B*. Information about the services (in England only) was taken from Routes to Support. Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation of England and Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland.

Routes to Support is part funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The resource provides violence against women and girls services with 24-hour access to information that supports their work. Sophisticated search tools can identify the most suitable service for the women, children and men they are supporting. It facilitates referrals through national, regional and local helplines as well as between local services, and has been an integral part of the work of the domestic abuse sector since its creation in 2003.

During the year 2022-23, there were over 180,000 logins to the site by staff at domestic abuse support services in England alone, demonstrating how widely it is used. The directory gives Women's Aid comprehensive data on the full range of all domestic abuse services including, but not limited to, those run by Women's Aid members. This includes information about the types of domestic abuse services provided, the number of bedspaces

available in refuge services, the people supported by these services and changes to provision over time. The directory is updated on a rolling basis by dedicated staff at Women's Aid, meaning each entry is fully updated every year in addition to any updates received from services during the year. Entries are added and removed throughout the year as providers change.

Referral estimates used in the report are calculated by using baseline data from On Track. The following steps were taken:

- a. **Refuge:** ratio of women housed to refuge space for services using On Track applied to services that are listed on Routes to Support for the same region which are not using On Track.
- b. **Community-based support (CBS) services:** ratio of women supported to individual service type (e.g., outreach, IDVA, floating support) for responding services applied to services not using On Track that are listed on Routes to Support for the same region.
- c. **Number of children:** average number of children per woman accessing services from On Track applied to above two estimates.
- d. **Estimated number of referrals declined to refuge and community-based support services:** the percentage of referrals accepted and declined from our baseline data was applied to the estimated numbers of women accepted in steps A and B above to give an estimated number of referrals declined to each service type.

⁶ Vacancies posted to Routes to Support from April 2022 to March 2023.

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023, Key Informant Interviews and Freedom of Information request data

Each year, Women's Aid collects data on the work and experiences of support services over the past year, using responses to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023, key informant interviews with service providers and Freedom of Information (FOI) request data. The findings from these data sources are used throughout the report.

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

The Women's Aid Annual Survey is a national survey of the whole range of specialist domestic abuse services for women and children in England. The online survey was sent in June 2023 (with a deadline of mid-July) to all domestic abuse services in England that run either or both refuge and/or community-based support (CBS) services, listed in Routes to Support (426 services in total). Respondents were self-selecting. The survey contained both open and closed questions. Open-text questions were categorised according to common themes. We received responses from 104 organisations who were running 188 service entries on Routes to Support. This gives a response rate of 41.1%.⁷ Of these 104 respondents:

- ▶ 80 responded that they ran refuge services (21 indicated that they did not, and three did not respond to the question).
- ▶ 76 responded that they provided community-based services (15 indicated that they did not, and 13 did not respond to this question).

This year, the survey asked questions to all domestic abuse and VAWG services about the value that they felt they had contributed to survivors and the wider community over the past year. From this, we pulled out the benefits associated with characteristics of specialist

services. In addition, the survey asked questions about specific challenges, such as significant increases in the cost-of-living, and how they have impacted service delivery and survivors. Similarly to the Annual Audit 2023, we also asked questions regarding the impact of the statutory duty to provide support for survivors of domestic abuse (including children) within safe accommodation, as well as how services were funded in 2022-23, and their experiences of commissioning processes. Due to concerns around inconsistent implementation of the duty, the questions this year focused on examples of good practice in order to demonstrate and disseminate best practice.

Key informant interviews with service providers

To explore in further detail the themes emerging from the survey, between September and October 2023, Women's Aid conducted semi-structured interviews remotely with representatives of six organisations who had completed the survey. Key informants were selected based on a purposive sample that included organisations in different geographical locations, working locally and/or nationally, those who could provide information on wider trends, and organisations of varying sizes, including one service provider 'by and for' minoritised women. Some organisations were also selected based on their responses to the annual survey, particularly in relation to their experiences of commissioning and if they had had particularly difficult, or particularly positive, experiences of commissioning to show diversity of experiences. The organisations that participated in interviews are as follows:

⁷ 188 out of 426 services responded.

Organisation name	Local authority(ies)
Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Project	Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, and Westminster
Crossroads Derbyshire	High Peak, Derbyshire
Independent Domestic Abuse Service (IDAS)	Barnsley, Harrogate, Scarborough, Sheffield, York.
Newcastle Women's Aid	Newcastle upon Tyne
Trafford Domestic Abuse Services (TDAS)	Salford, Trafford
Wight DASH	Isle of Wight

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

To provide a comprehensive picture of local authority refuge commissioning in England, we gathered additional evidence sources that were used alongside the snapshot of domestic abuse refuge services in England listed on Routes to Support and the responses to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023.

Women's Aid submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all local authorities in England in May 2023. The purpose of the FOI request was to build up a picture of national commissioning trends, for example how many local authorities commission refuge services and the provision of in-house services run directly by local authorities. The FOI request was sent to 315 local authorities and of these, 305 local authorities responded. 100% of County Councils responded to our requests.

A targeted email survey of selected domestic abuse service providers was sent to providers where it had not been possible to determine (through the other data sources outlined above) whether their refuge service was local authority commissioned in 2022-23.

Analysis and comparison of these data sources, along with Women's Aid sector expertise and specialist knowledge about domestic abuse service providers, has enabled us to confirm the numbers and proportion of refuge services and bedspaces in England that are funded through local authority commissioning arrangements.

To find out more about Women's Aid's evidence base, including On Track and Routes to Support, and how they might support you visit our online Evidence Hub at www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub

Key findings from On Track

39,698 women ended their time in either a refuge or community-based service (CBS) using On Track between **1st April 2022 - 31st March 2023**.

In refuge services

3,771



In community-based services

36,540



61.5% of women had **children**



1.3 children per service user



0-10
60.6% of children were aged between **0-10**



6.1% of women were **pregnant**



30.2% had a **disability**

21.3%

mental health disability

8.6%

physical disability

8.1%

multiple disabilities

12.1% were **not British nationals**

28.8% of these women **did not** have recourse to public funds.

9.1% **did not know** if they had recourse to public funds.



Overall, **5.7%** of services users needed an interpreter: **10.9%** in refuge services, and **5.2%** in CBS services.



Women reporting feeling depressed/having suicidal thoughts:

all women

34.4%



in refuge

47.4%



in CBS

33.4%



30.2% experienced **financial abuse**.



21.4% experienced **attempted strangulation/suffocation**



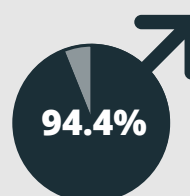
52.6%

in refuge services

29.2%

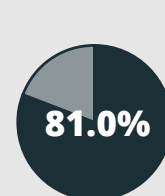
in CBS services

Domestic abuse continues to be gendered. Perpetrators were:



94.4%

male



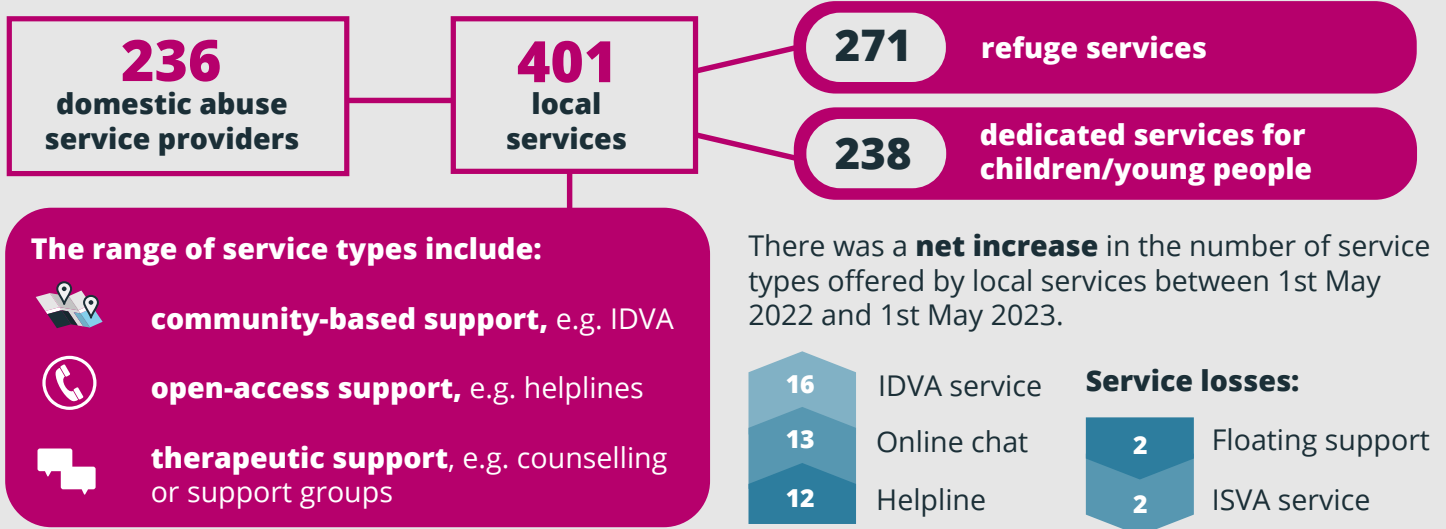
81.0%

current, intermittent or ex intimate partner

Key findings from Routes to Support

1 Domestic abuse services continue to offer a wide range of service types.

On 1st May 2023, throughout England, there were:



2 The number of refuge spaces has increased but there is still shortfall.



*This **net change** does not give a full picture of change in the sector as it does not account for services opening or closing during the year.

3 More needs to be done to make sure refuge spaces are sustainable and accessible to all.



Of vacancies posted on Routes to Support from April 2022 to March 2023:



Service users and service provision in 2022-23

This section outlines the key findings about the service users who accessed support services and the available service provision across England using our On Track and Routes to Support datasets. The infographics above contain an overview of each of the datasets with the main trends discussed below. Further details, data tables and graphs can be found in *Appendices B* and *C*.

Additional support needs and specialist services provision

Survivors in the On Track sample reported having a range of additional support needs including mental health (42.1%), physical health (12.3%), alcohol and/or drugs (9.9%) and offending (2.4%). Furthermore, 16.9% of survivors had multiple additional support needs. As noted in the *Methodology* section, the sample relates to women who have accessed support services. Where women have additional support needs these create specific barriers to accessing support services, so these figures likely underestimate the actual demand from women with additional support needs experiencing domestic abuse. *Appendix C* has a full breakdown of the differences in support needs between those accessing refuge and those accessing CBS services as well as information on the experiences of abuse and access requirements of survivors.

In recognition of the diverse needs of women experiencing domestic abuse, there were 65 services run exclusively for particular groups of survivors, including for Black and minoritised women (43) and women with substance use and mental health support needs (3). There were 45 refuges in England which are run for a specific group of women. Not all these services are run by 'by and for' expert organisations led by women from the group they support. Of the 33

refuges which are run exclusively for Black and minoritised women, 20 are run by organisations that are members of Imkaan. Availability of these services is very low: spaces in dedicated services made up just 12.1% of all refuge spaces in England, and just under half of these are in London. On Track data shows that many survivors have additional support needs and this number is likely underestimated due to the specific barriers these women face when accessing support services. We know that demand for dedicated services outweighs the provision which is currently available. Domestic abuse service providers are constrained by the resources available to them in the scope of provision they can offer. This means the limited availability of specialist provision may be due to a lack of sufficient resource, rather than indicating a lack of need from survivors with additional support needs. There has been an overall increase in the numbers of community-based and refuge services with mental health and drug and alcohol use specialist support workers. This may reflect additional funding being made available due to the statutory duty (see section four). More information about specialist provision for survivors from particular groups or with additional support needs can be found in **Tables B2, B8 and B9** in *Appendix B*.

Rejected referrals

We estimate that 61.0% of referrals into refuge services and 50.7% of referrals into CBS services were rejected. The most cited reason for rejection by refuge services was that the service did not have the space or capacity to support (24.7% of all rejected referrals and 14.6% of all referrals into refuge services). A further 17.3% of rejected referrals were rejected due to the refuge service being unable to meet the service users specific support needs, including around disability, drugs and alcohol, no recourse to public funds, and having a large family. 18.8% of rejected referrals were rejected due to the service user declining support. Of the rejected referrals into CBS services, 26.8% were rejected due to the survivor not wanting support, 23.7% were rejected due to the service being unable to contact the survivor and 21.9% were rejected due to the survivor already being active in service. For more detail, see **Tables B10** and **B11** in *Appendix B*.

There are many reasons why a survivor may turn down support or not respond to communications from a service after the initial referral has been made. For example, after receiving more information about a service, it may become clear that the location of a refuge

would not enable a survivor to continue her caring responsibilities and/or job. It may be that a survivor's circumstances change, and they move out of area or that the referral was made without their consent. Where someone is still experiencing abuse and coercive control it will also be very difficult for them to access support, especially when a perpetrator becomes aware she is attempting to access a service and controls her access to technology.

These estimates are unlikely to provide the full picture of the demand for domestic abuse services. Routes to Support shows (**Table B7** in the *Appendix B*), 11.7% of refuge vacancies could consider referrals from women with no recourse to public funds, 2.4% could consider survivors who required full wheelchair access or had limited mobility and 15.3% could consider a woman with three or more children. It is likely that many referrals are not made in the first place because the referral agency knew the service was not resourced to meet the survivor's support needs. In addition, many survivors do not reach out for support as they are unaware of the services available to them, or they are prevented from doing so by controlling perpetrator(s).

Decrease in vacancies

The number of new vacancies posted on Routes to Support has been going down each year since 2019-20, despite there being a year-on-year increase in the number of bedspaces (Women's Aid, 2022b, 2023a). Routes to Support data in 2022/23 showed a 26.5% decline in vacancies in services across England as compared to 2019/20. This has particularly affected the East of England, North East England, South East England, and South West England, all of which have seen over a 35.0% decrease in the number of vacancies posted in 2022/23 as compared to 2019/20 (Women's Aid, 2022b, 2023a).

To investigate this decline in vacancies, we asked respondents in the annual survey to provide their thoughts as to the possible reasons for this trend. Out of 72 organisations that answered this question, 43 (59.7%) said they were seeing difficulties in sourcing move-on accommodation, which was impacting length of stay, as discussed in section 2.4. One respondent said:

“It is taking us much longer to move people on to permanent accommodation. It is taking up to two years where previously it would take us up to one year.” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

Just under a fifth (16.7%) of organisations said they were seeing increased complexity of cases which impacted length of stay, further discussed in section 2.2. Five of these organisations specified supporting women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) or insecure immigration status as a reason for complexity. Five organisations (6.9%) said that they had an arrangement where local authorities had some form of prioritised access to vacancies, for example, bedspaces being reserved for local authority referrals, or vacancies being made available to local authorities prior

to being advertised on Routes to Support. See **Table 1** for full details. These findings show that despite the number of bedspaces increasing year-on-year, strains on other sectors such as housing and immigration may be impacting the support that refuge services are able to provide. We will continue to monitor this emerging trend and further investigate the factors discussed in this section, such as availability of move-on accommodation, which may be impacting the numbers of new vacancies in refuge services.

Table 1: Do you have any thoughts about why there might be fewer vacancies being made available on Routes to Support?		
Annual Survey 2023		
Reason for decrease in vacancies	Number of organisations listing reason	% of organisations that responded to the question (72)
Difficulties in sourcing move-on accommodation	43	59.7%
Trend not seen/unsure	15	20.8%
More complex cases	12	16.7%
Local Authority has prioritised access to vacancies	5	6.9%
Spaces becoming available less frequently (no reason given)	5	6.9%
Vacancies advertised/filled elsewhere	4	5.6%
Rise in referrals from other organisations	2	2.8%
Limiting referrals as cannot accommodate high numbers of children	1	1.4%
Open text question – respondents could specify more than one reason.		

1

The value of specialist services

In previous years, the annual audit has asked services about their successes, as well as challenges. This year, to better understand their successes, questions were asked specifically about the value that their services provided. The findings demonstrate that specialist services are valuable because they are continually improving the overall response to domestic abuse in a way that both empowers survivors to lead meaningful lives, as well as keeping the community safe and saving money. This is because keeping women and children safe ultimately extends to keeping the wider community safe. Through empowering survivors, these services enable many to go on to lead fulfilling lives where many help others in their communities. The ways in which specialist services do this comes under five main categories:

- ▶ Recognising diversity of survivors and their experiences
- ▶ Engaging services in the community
- ▶ Identifying gaps and filling them
- ▶ Covering statutory services
- ▶ Sharing knowledge and expertise

1.1 Recognising diversity of survivors and their experiences

Providing specialist domestic abuse services requires an in-depth understanding of domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG. This knowledge and expertise enable services to better understand survivors' experience of intersecting and overlapping systems of oppression.

Specialist 'by and for' services have emerged as distinct from wider specialist services in that they are led by, and seek to support, further minoritised and marginalised groups. Specialist 'by and for' services are run by and for the communities they serve, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so, they offer a uniquely empowering experience to the communities they support through a comprehensive understanding of the additional structural inequalities these survivors may face.

“

“We understand the excuses that perpetrators or families can use to try and justify abuse, especially religious concepts as well, and not just with Islam, but also with Coptic Christianity as well [...] we're able to respectfully challenge religious and cultural misconceptions.” - Interview, 2023

As well as 'by and for' services, many organisations provide specialist provision to support survivors around difficulties such as substance misuse or mental health, recognising the role that these support needs can play in both the dynamics of domestic abuse and as a barrier to seeking support for some survivors (Women's Aid, 2021a; Thiara and Harrison, 2021; Women's Aid, 2022a; Women's Aid, 2022d; Women's Aid, 2023d). Many organisations reported being flexible in their approach to service delivery, with a willingness to

adapt to survivors needs. For example, running an open access women's centre with varying opening hours to suit different groups of survivors, supporting survivors' at various levels of risk, as well as tailoring specific support for survivors who wish to remain living with the perpetrator.

Tables B1 and C1, and **Charts C1 and C4 to C11** in the appendices show the diversity of survivors supported and that despite the need for specialist services, the availability of these is very low.

“It's absolutely flexible and we achieve great outcomes. That's how we get the great outcomes because we're there from beginning to whenever it needs to end, or not end - it's open. It's what women and girls told us that they needed [...] we don't see repeat victimisation like we used to in some of the more rigid services where you come in at one end and you get that bit of support and then off you go. And people come back in and out and repeat victimisation. We don't see that.” - **Interview, 2023**

1.2 Engaging survivors in the community

Organisations reported supporting survivors to access training, education, and employment, with many providing dedicated services to do so. Domestic abuse organisations and refuges were originally created by and for women – many of whom were survivors themselves. Organisations told the annual survey that survivors sometimes continue to engage with services in this way through peer support programmes, volunteering, and paid employment.

Along with this, domestic abuse organisations often run and participate in public engagement events to raise awareness of their services in the community. Holding these events ensures that more members of the community are aware of the services that are available and know where to encourage others to seek support if they need it. This can be especially helpful for marginalised survivors who may be less aware of how and where to access support (Women's Aid, 2022e).⁸

“Many people that we've supported [have gone] onto volunteer that we've then employed as well.”
- **Interview, 2023**

1.3 Identifying gaps and filling them

“There's a whole group of women who were not getting any support. There were barriers for them accessing support and those women are like serving police officers, doctors, lecturers, mental health workers, social workers – there are a lot of professional women who come to us.”

- **Interview, 2023**

Specialist domestic abuse services keep the community safe and save money by identifying gaps in support for survivors and filling them. For example, one service began providing a counselling and art therapy service for children following on from the COVID-19 lockdowns. The local authority has since recognised the need for this service and now it is a fully commissioned service. Another service reported that through

⁸ Five out of the nine women interviewed for the Nowhere to Turn 2022 thematic report on Financial Hardship stated that friends and family had told them about where to access support. Women's Aid, 2022. Experiences of financial hardship whilst seeking a refuge space. Bristol: Women's Aid. Available at: www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Financial-Hardship-report-FINAL.pdf

census data they had been able to understand that they were not sufficiently reaching older women in their area and were able to adapt their services to improve on this. The annual survey also heard from services that provide pet fostering schemes recognising the link between domestic abuse and pet abuse, and how having a pet can prevent survivors from leaving. Evidently, services are using their data to improve and sometimes expand their service provision based on need, in an agile and responsive way, although this must be better recognised in funding.

As discussed, many organisations reported being flexible in their approach to service delivery and adapting to survivors needs. In one case, an organisation told us they had developed a post-separation abuse course for survivors after recognising a need for one. Similar to recognising the diversity of survivors and their experiences, by identifying gaps and filling them, specialist domestic abuse services demonstrate an ability to reach more survivors and keep more of the community safe as a result.

“We have run a post-separation abuse course, identifying there was a need for this.” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

On Track data highlights the varying and complex support survivors receive throughout their time in service. **Table C3** in *Appendix C* shows a breakdown of the different outcomes of support survivors had accessed when they left a service. Some key findings were that 64.5% accessed housing support, 30.5% were supported with a criminal justice issue, and 51.6% received support for their mental health.

Unfortunately, one organisation reported that they had been continuing to provide a service to survivors after losing their funding to a new generic provider. They had heard from survivors that this new service was both very difficult to access and had a very rigid eligibility criteria when it came to survivors accessing support.

“We have continually picked up the pieces after this service. [We have] women contacting us, saying ‘nobody answers the phone’ or ‘they’ve told me I can’t have a service because nothing’s happened in the last four weeks.’” - **Interview, 2023**

1.4 Covering statutory services

“There was one client [...] I helped her with the solicitor on the phone from say 6:30 until about 8:30 [...] doing [...] the legal aid paperwork, getting information, filling out forms again. [...], I don’t know how much interpreters charge, but I’m guessing it’s like not £10 an hour [...] maybe they’re like £50 an hour. So, there you go. That’s like maybe £200 that we’ve just saved the government with just one client.” - **Interview, 2023**

Along with identifying gaps in support for survivors and filling them, many organisations expressed that in some areas they were saving the government money by covering the work of statutory services. This included providing interpreters for appointments with statutory agencies, support with immigration and NRPF, counselling services, and providing keywork support for children and young people. As noted

by Imkaan and the Centre for Women’s Justice (2023) in their recent report on the deaths of Black and minoritised women in the context of domestic abuse, ‘Life or Death? Preventing Domestic Homicides and Suicides of Black and Minoritised Women’, the availability and use of good quality interpreting services are not only critical to women’s access to safety and protections but a legal requirement.

“Because the support from children’s social services has been variable, our specialist staff have ended up providing keywork services in lieu of social workers. No funding for this.”

- Annual Survey, 2023

“Service users have also had access to counselling without having to wait for the NHS.”

- Annual Survey, 2023

A high proportion of organisations (44.2%) reported that they had been providing a service that should be covered by a statutory agency, under a public statutory duty. **Table 1.2** details the types of services being provided by these organisations, with the most common being children’s services (28.3%); financial advice (26.1%); mental health support/ counselling (26.1%); employment/ careers advice (21.7%); and housing support (10.9%).

Unfortunately, many organisations told us that they were needing to provide these due to limited resources within statutory agencies that, as a

result, have very high thresholds for support and very long waiting lists. Several organisations told us they were finding it difficult to make successful contact with social care agencies, and 61.5% reported increased delays in accessing statutory services since the rising cost-of-living. Services also reported receiving an increasing number of inappropriate referrals from these agencies where the client would be better supported by the referrer.

“Every agency we work with [...] feels like they’re on the knees [...] we can’t refer in, getting referrals into particularly CAMHS, but also adult services for mental health is nigh on impossible. Thresholds are so high.” - Interview, 2023

“We identified an increase in referrals where mental wellbeing was the primary support need, and those referrals were experiencing long waiting times for mental health support so were looking for something else to bridge the gap.”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Table 1.1: In 2022-23, did you provide a service that should be provided by a statutory service? Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

Response	% of total respondents (104)
Yes	44.2%
No	51.9%
Missing data	3.8%
TOTAL	100.0%

**Table 1.2: What service did you provide that should be provided by a statutory service?
Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Type of service	% of those who provided a serviced that should be statutory (46)
Children's services	28.3%
Financial advice	26.1%
Mental health support / counselling	26.1%
Employment / careers advice	21.7%
Housing support	10.9%
Support for those with NRPF	6.5%
Fitness & Wellbeing	4.3%
IT skills	2.2%
Legal advice	2.2%
Language support	2.2%
Other	10.9%
No response	8.7%

Five respondents who said they provided a service that should be statutory did not reply to this question.
Open text question – respondents could specify more than one service.

1.5 Sharing knowledge and expertise

“We can challenge the potential victim blaming beliefs and ways of working [of] other organisations.”

- Interview, 2023

Specialist domestic abuse services provide invaluable knowledge and expertise on domestic abuse to other stakeholders, including through institutional advocacy and by challenging harmful myths and beliefs about domestic abuse, which can have tangible impacts on funding and commissioning decisions and, in turn, profoundly affect survivors. As one organisation put it, “we have one mission. It’s a singular mission,” and this enables specialist services to place survivors needs at the centre of their work and advocate for their needs. One organisation reported that their local authority, who appeared to recognise their unique competencies in this area, were now funding a ‘dedicated victim voice facilitator.’ This professional attends the local domestic abuse partnership board and brings feedback from survivors regarding their interactions with statutory agencies.

Many organisations reported providing training to both professionals and the public, helping to share knowledge about services both locally and nationally. This included training statutory organisations, such as the police and social services, to help improve responses to domestic abuse. Although the introduction of the statutory duty has brought about concerns of increased in-house commissioning by local authorities (see section 5.3.5), one organisation reflected positively that many staff working in these places would have been trained initially by specialist services, hopefully, therefore, bringing that knowledge and expertise with them.

Ultimately, it is impossible to distinguish between the value that specialist domestic abuse services have brought to survivors and the wider community. The domestic abuse and wider VAWG sector has continued to work to improve the overall response to domestic abuse. Whilst the rising cost-of-living continues to impact both statutory and non-statutory organisations, the domestic abuse and wider VAWG sector is working tirelessly to develop new and innovative ways to fill gaps and reach more survivors.

2

The **organisational challenges** facing domestic abuse services

The annual survey asked organisations to reflect on the challenges they had faced in 2022-23. Their responses focused on four central and interconnected issues relating to funding, meeting demand, staff retention and recruitment, and lack of move-on accommodation.

2.1 Funding

This year, 49.0% of organisations responding to the annual survey told us they had been running an area of their domestic abuse service in 2022-23 without any dedicated funding (see **Table 2.1** on page 31 for full details). The most common areas of work run without dedicated funding were:

- ▶ Therapeutic support services (counselling, group work) (43.1%).
- ▶ Domestic abuse prevention/educational work (41.2%).
- ▶ Community-based domestic abuse services (outreach, floating support, advocacy) (41.2%)
- ▶ Children and young people's domestic abuse services in refuge (23.5%) and children and young people's domestic abuse services in the community (15.7%).
- ▶ Domestic abuse refuge provision (17.6%).
- ▶ Specialist domestic abuse services for women with complex needs (15.7%) (see **Table 2.2** for full details).

Survey respondents told us about the variety of ways that running an area or areas of work without dedicated funding had impacted on them.

Their responses painted a picture of uncertainty, suggesting that the sector is facing a trajectory of diminishing resources to meet demand, to the detriment of survivors and children in particular. These areas are essential forms of service provision for women and children experiencing abuse and harm, and the fragile and uncertain funding they receive presents huge risks to keeping women safe. Of those respondents running work areas without dedicated funds (n=51):

- ▶ 72.5% were using their financial reserves⁹ to cover costs, which is not a solution that can be relied on indefinitely and are usually not significant.
- ▶ 35.3% reported being unable to plan for the future.
- ▶ 25.5% relied on volunteers to deliver the service.
- ▶ 23.5% felt the service could only continue for a limited amount of time.
- ▶ 23.5% had to reduce the number of women they could support in the service (see **Table 2.3** on page 32 for full details).

⁹ Financial reserves are funds set aside to protect a charity from loss of income, therefore they must be replenished to protect from future uncertainties.

Table 2.1: Were you running an area(s) of your domestic abuse service for women WITHOUT dedicated funding in 2022-23?**Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Running an area(s) without dedicated funding	% of total respondents
No	51.0%
Yes	49.0%
Missing data	0.0%
TOTAL	100.0%

Table 2.2: Which areas of your domestic abuse service were you running without dedicated funding in 2022-23 ?**Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Area of service ran without dedicated funding	% of respondents running an area of service without dedicated funding (51)
Therapeutic support services (counselling, group work)	43.1%
Domestic abuse prevention/educational work	41.2%
Community-based domestic abuse services for women (outreach, floating support, advocacy)	41.2%
Children and young people's domestic abuse services in refuge	23.5%
Domestic abuse refuge provision	17.6%
Children and young people's domestic abuse services in the community	15.7%
Specialist domestic abuse services for women with complex needs	15.7%
Accommodation-based services (other than refuge)	9.8%
Specialist domestic abuse services for women with disabilities	9.8%
Specialist domestic abuse services for Black and minoritised (BME) women	7.8%
Specialist domestic abuse services for Lesbian Bisexual Trans (LBT) women	2.0%
Other	7.8%

Two respondents running an area of work without dedicated funding did not reply to this question.
 Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.

Table 2.3: Please tell us how this lack of dedicated funding impacted on your delivery of the service. Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

Impact	% of respondents running an area of service without dedicated funding (51)
We used reserves to cover the costs	72.5%
We are unable to plan for the future and this impacts on the service we deliver	35.3%
We relied on volunteers to deliver the service	25.5%
Service can only continue for a limited amount of time	23.5%
We have had to reduce the number of women we can support in the service	23.5%
We are unable to support women with more complex needs due to the level of support available	21.6%
We lost staff as a result of job insecurity	19.6%
We have had to reduce staff hours within the service	15.7%
We have had to reduce the number of children and young people we can support in the service	13.7%
Other	13.7%
Two respondents running an area of work without dedicated funding did not reply to this question. Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.	

2.1.1 Insufficient funding

Despite reports from some organisations of increased funding in specific areas, a large number of respondents to the annual survey and the key informant interviews noted that the funding they were receiving was still insufficient for their needs. Funding and finances were explicitly identified as an urgent priority this year by a large number of annual survey respondents, but also related more generally to the challenges faced by many other respondents (such as increases in the cost-of-living, reduced charitable income, increased demand on services, etc.). One respondent reflected that this felt contradictory to government messaging that they felt gave the impression that there had been a significant increase in funding levels since the statutory duty. Considering their greatest challenges this year, respondents noted, for example:

“[It was] funding, as always, short term funding. Not quite sure where LA [local authority] spends its government funding”

- Annual Survey, 2023

“Our biggest challenge in our services is always securing funding in order to be able to sustain our services”

- Annual Survey, 2023

“The biggest challenge the service faced was the lack of funding to evolve our services”

- Annual Survey, 2023

“It has been a very difficult year for fundraising, with notably fewer successful bids than in previous years. This means that we continue to use our reserves to prop up some key services”

- Annual Survey, 2023

In particular, some services found that minimal or no funding was provided for staff training or clinical supervision to support them in their work. The interviews reflected these concerns, with one organisation noting that clinical supervision and reflective practice have been one of the last things to fund and one of the first things to be

cut, despite being so important to the skills and wellbeing of staff. At the same time, with services experiencing a particularly high level of traumatic situations on a daily basis, clinical support and training are more important than ever for providing a safe service.

As explored in more detail in sections four and five, services felt that current funding structures are not supporting their long-term security, especially now that the previous influx of funding after the COVID-19 pandemic has almost completely diminished. Organisations reported they are also facing greater expectations for information from funders, alongside the funding itself being reduced.

Complex funding streams and structures

Some survey respondents noted they are finding that large quantities of service provision are being put into one single contract, which often means that smaller organisations cannot compete for these tenders due to the scale. At the same time, even for the successful organisation in these types of bids, if all funding is from one source, then this can increase financial vulnerability for that service if that funding is lost unexpectedly. As such, services felt that this paradigm needed to be challenged.

Meanwhile, other organisations are frequently having to rely on multiple, small funding streams and pots of money. Some were receiving different individual pots of funding across different boroughs, which were difficult to keep separate across services and made it challenging to allocate the funding in line with contracts. These piecemeal funding structures can leave services underfunded and vulnerable, being accountable and reporting to a number of donors under an over-complex funding structure.

Increased costs

Within these concerns around insufficient funding, respondents to the survey and interviews told us about the increased costs they are facing

in order to provide their services. A number of respondents reported no recent uplifts on their existing contracts including, in one case, for eight years, which was causing reduced funding levels in real terms. Another survey respondent told us:

“The amount we get is not based on any logical relationship to demand or supply. It is historical” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

Statutory funding had been renewed for a number of services at historical prices, and contract levels are often set with zero inflationary increases. Alongside this, costs themselves have increased exponentially, partially in relation to the rises in the cost-of-living, but also more generally. Increased case lengths, especially if facing the delays in the criminal justice system, also has had cost implications for service provision (The Law Society, 2023). Rent and utility costs have risen considerably, yet organisations are not able to provide incremental pay rises to staff to enable them to meet these costs. Considering the challenges that they have faced, respondents detailed the financial instability that increased costs can bring to their organisation:

“Financial stability due to increased expenditure, e.g., inflationary increases and not getting this reflected in funding; new funding envelope that doesn’t resource what their specification wants”
- **Annual Survey, 2023**

Together, issues with insufficient funding, complex funding structures and increased costs have created considerable challenges for organisations and, as one participant told us, services are more and more needing to tap into their “disaster money”. Ultimately, the results of struggles with funding are to reduce or close services. As shown in **Table 2.4**, a fifth (20.2%) of respondents to the annual survey reported that they had needed to reduce an area of work in their service this year, almost one in ten (9.6%) were even forced to close an area of their service’s work. Two thirds (66.7%) of those who reduced or closed an area of work this year specified that this was related to funding, which was either insufficient to cover costs, had been reduced or had ended all together, including some who had lost contracts to generic service providers.

Table 2.4: In 2022-23, did you reduce or stop providing an area of work in your VAWG and domestic abuse service?

Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

Status of provision	% of total respondents
No, we have not reduced or closed any areas of work in our service	66.3%
Yes, we closed an area of work in our service	9.6%
Yes, we reduced an area of work in our service	20.2%
Missing data	3.8%
TOTAL	100.0%

2.2 Meeting demand

Large numbers of annual survey respondents identified meeting demand as a key challenge this year. This included the quantity of cases, their complexity, and the length of cases.

2.2.1 Increased complexity

A significant proportion of annual survey respondents reported that cases had increased in complexity over the past year, which has led to longer case lengths and therefore waiting lists, meaning some services felt they have been able to support fewer women. Complex requirements have meant the need for multi-agency support, which can increase difficulty and time in responding. Furthermore, respondents told us how not being able to access services may then exacerbate risk and increase the impact of trauma for survivors.

These complexities were also closely linked with wider challenges that the sector is facing. The reduced availability of suitable housing and the rising cost-of-living were seen to have a direct impact on longer case lengths and greater complexity, with services feeling they were achieving less within the timeframe of working with clients, so were unable to close more cases; some, for example, for over eight years. One survey respondent reported:

“*The cost-of-living crisis is impacting our staff, community and service users putting them in greater vulnerability. This has translated in more complexity in the cases we take and has had an impact secondary trauma for our staff which means they are requiring more support*”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Furthermore, issues in the criminal justice system since 2020 following the COVID-19 pandemic and the barristers' strike in 2022 have created continuous delays that are causing longer case

lengths and greater complexity for domestic abuse support services. Organisations reported how they want to support survivors throughout the time leading up to their criminal cases but, with such significant delays, this is sometimes not possible to do right up until when proceedings finally move ahead, and women may have withdrawn their statements during this time. The cost of the criminal justice system was noted as a challenge by some annual survey respondents, including situations where women cannot afford legal fees and need to represent themselves through civil court proceedings, and may be at risk of losing their children as perpetrators may have access to the most experienced or more expensive lawyers.

Increased pressure to support survivors with their mental health needs has been a key challenge for domestic abuse and VAWG organisations this year, and services reported they are finding more survivors than ever presenting with complex mental health needs, including, but not exclusive to, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Access to suitable mental health support, such as statutory support, is frequently delayed with extremely long waiting lists, delaying recovery. The interviews found that this can be particularly challenging for survivors whose first language is not English, as finding counsellors who speak the same language can be even more limited. Ultimately, services told us that it is them themselves that are needing to fill these gaps. As discussed in section 1.4, 26.1% of respondents that provided a service that should be covered by a statutory agency were providing mental health support/counselling.

Services found that clients sometimes miss their appointments due to mental health crisis episodes, which can increase and delay caseloads for services. At the same time, poor mental health of survivors can be exacerbated by longer stays in refuge, leading to poorer mental health outcomes overall as survivors cannot access the services and move-on accommodation that they need.

2.2.2 Support for children

One of the vital changes as part of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was that the legal definition of domestic abuse now recognises children as victims in their own right. To consider how this was working in practice, the annual survey and key informant interviews asked services to report any changes they had observed. Results were mixed across respondents, with some evidence of children as victims being prioritised in local authority domestic abuse strategies and services being awarded funding with new specialist roles as a result. However, this was not the case for all. As one annual survey respondent said:

“*There’s an expectation from commissioners [that] domestic abuse providers will support children in refuge as they are now recognised as victims in their own right; in some areas, we don’t receive any additional funding to meet this requirement*”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Some told us they had not observed any significant changes in provision for children, and when funding had been awarded, services told us that this was often not covering full costs. As noted above, the annual survey found that almost a quarter (23.5%) of those who were running a service without dedicated funding were running ‘children and young people’s domestic abuse services in refuge’ and/or ‘children and young people’s domestic abuse services in the community’ (15.7%). This equated to a 11.5% and 7.7%, respectively, of all annual survey respondents, indicating how specialist services are attempting to fill these gaps for children, sometimes at their own expense, as discussed in section one. Challenges with the referral process had also been noticed in some areas, with local decisions being made based on capacity rather than risk or need, and very few children’s circumstances meeting an ever-increasing threshold for safeguarding intervention.

2.3 Staff recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention of staff were identified as key challenges by significant numbers of annual survey and interview respondents. There are several interconnected reasons behind this issue that are discussed throughout this report. A trend towards short-term commissioned contracts (as discussed in section 5.3.3) has meant that services are unable to offer prospective staff long-term employment security and struggle to attract staff with enough expertise for contracted positions of, in the case of one respondent, only around six months. Increases in the cost-of-living (discussed in section three) and rising costs more generally has simultaneously limited services’ capacity to raise salaries in line with inflation, whilst also making it more vital than ever for staff. One respondent specifically noted that they had needed to put a recruitment freeze in place due to limited financial resources, and even having to reduce services due to staff shortages. As a largely female workforce, staff working in the domestic abuse support sector are likely to be particularly exposed to the rising cost-of-living. Women are more likely to face precarious economic conditions, with

increased unpaid care work, low savings and tend to be the “shock absorbers of poverty” (Women’s Budget Group, 2022). This can leave women with little choice but to look for higher paid work elsewhere, further exacerbating the significant recruitment and retention issues in the sector.

As such, staff have also been lost from specialist services to the higher wages that local authorities are able to offer (see section 5.3.5). Meanwhile, workplace pressure and exhaustion from the increased demand on services has led to greater pressure on remaining staff and made retention even more challenging. The emotional toll of the job was discussed the interviews:

“*There’s the emotional side of it as well, and I don’t think that everyone is quite ready or prepared to work in this sector with the emotional impact that working with victim survivors can also have*”

- Interview, 2023

2.4 Move-on accommodation

Services reported that the lack of move-on accommodation has reached crisis point. Housing shortages and the high cost of rents, partly as a result of the housing crisis, regularly limits the ability of survivors to find housing and safely move on from refuge (Women's Aid, 2020b). This has meant that survivors are needing to stay in refuge for longer and waiting lists continue to rise.

Some respondents observed social housing "bottlenecks" and blockages with trying to find adequate accommodation. Finding suitable move-on accommodation for survivors with more complex requirements, such as those with large families, was reported as especially challenging within the current housing crisis.

“We work closely with statutory services such as housing and also find that the current housing crisis is posing a challenge in keeping victims safe”

- **Annual Survey, 2023**

3

The effect of the **rising cost-of-living** on survivors and services



“Many of our clients are at rock bottom. How do we help them when benefits are simply inadequate? It is really difficult. Our food bank is overused, and we have children going hungry. How can anyone focus on recovery if they can’t afford food or heat?”

- Annual Survey, 2023

3.1 Impact on survivors

Table 3.1 (on page 39) breaks down the issues that survivors being supported by domestic abuse services are facing because of financial hardship resulting from cost-of-living increases. We know already from our research the devastating impact that this is having on survivors (Women’s Aid, 2022f), so it is unsurprising that a high proportion of organisations are reporting these same struggles for survivors accessing their services. These include not having enough money to pay for essentials needed for them and/or their children (79.8%); an increased number of survivors accessing foodbanks (78.8%); negative impact on health and wellbeing (73.1%); not having enough money to pay for fuel/energy/utility bills (70.2%); and increased delays in accessing move-on accommodation (66.3%).

We know that perpetrators will often use financial hardship as a tool for coercive control and economic abuse is an aspect of coercive control that is explicitly recognised within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (Women’s Aid, 2019; Women’s Aid, 2022e; Women’s Aid, 2022f; Home Office, 2022). Our survey results show that this is very much the case in the context of the increases in

the cost-of-living, with 57.7% of services telling us that survivors are more frequently reporting economic abuse. One organisation noted how many survivors they supported are “going without,” whilst still being under pressure to make purchases for perpetrators.



“Financial abuse and cost-of-living has detrimental impact on women, re. increased incidents of abuse from perpetrators i.e., they are staying at home more due to lack of funds to socialise, women under pressure to continue to buy items perpetrator needs and leaving herself and children without essentials.” - Annual Survey, 2023

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reports that perpetrators were staying at home more often, resulting in increased instances of abuse and greater difficulties in leaving perpetrators (Women’s Aid, 2020d). In a similar pattern, however this time because of rising costs associated with going out, a significant proportion (62.5%) of services reported that survivors have

been unable to afford to leave the perpetrator. Some services reported that they were seeing survivors return to abusive relationships after leaving because they felt unable to survive financially without the perpetrator.

“Survivors returning to domestic abuse relationship, due to not feeling they will financially survive as a single income household.”
 - Annual Survey, 2023.

Table 3.1: Impacts on survivors services support due to the increase in the cost-of-living
Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

Challenges	% of total respondents (104)
Not having enough money to pay for essentials needed for them and/or their children	79.8%
Increased number of survivors accessing foodbanks	78.8%
Negative impact on health and wellbeing	73.1%
Not having enough money to pay for fuel/energy/utility bills	70.2%
Increased delays in accessing move-on accommodation	66.3%
Increased feelings of isolation for survivors, who are less able to access support networks (family/friends) due to increased associated costs	65.4%
Not being able to afford to leave the perpetrator	62.5%
Increased delays in accessing statutory services	61.5%
Not having enough money to make rent or mortgage payments	61.5%
Having to borrow money from family and/or friends to cover essential needs	58.7%
More frequently reporting economic abuse	57.7%
Increased use of credit	45.2%
Not being able to work due to increased childcare costs	31.7%
Not being able to work due to increased travel costs	22.1%
None of the above	0.0%
Other	3.8%

16 respondents did not reply to this question.
 Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.

When it comes to accessing a refuge space, survivors generally must leave paid employment to do so.¹⁰ The rising cost-of-living is putting survivors who would benefit from going to refuge in a difficult position where they are having to choose between accessing support or being financially stable. Difficulties accessing face to face appointments due to travel and childcare costs is also a barrier for women seeking support, which is only being further exacerbated by the current crisis.

Services reported that survivors were less able to “move on generally” from abusers due to increased isolation associated with the rising cost-of-living. Many survivors they were supporting were unable to afford to take their families out for day trips, or to activities such as swimming

and the cinema. Children are missing out on school trips as well as extra-curricular activities which can impede development and isolate them from friends. We know already the impact COVID-19 had on young people’s experiences of loneliness and isolation (Mind, 2021), and our findings demonstrate that many are continuing to experience this as a result of domestic abuse and increases in the cost-of-living.

“*Within our refuge service we are observing an unprecedented number of children and young people who have experienced neglect and are in many cases globally delayed as a consequence.*”
- Annual Survey, 2023

3.2 Impact on organisations

Table 3.2 (on page 41) details the specific challenges that organisations are facing due to rises in the cost-of-living. This includes staff struggling with increased and more challenging workloads (63.5%); organisations struggling to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries they can pay (57.7%); staff experiencing financial hardship (52.9%); losing staff who needed to move to higher paid roles elsewhere (48.1%); and staff morale becoming lower (34.6%).

Some of the challenges most frequently reported by organisations, such as increased workloads and complexity of cases, staff retention and recruitment, relate to the organisational challenges discussed in further detail in section two. Some additional impacts for organisations include the impact on staff morale and loss of donations.

3.2.1 Staff morale

“*We are unable to offer staff competitive salaries, and increased pressure on existing staff is definitely affecting morale and mental health.*”
- Annual Survey, 2023

Many of organisations told us that increases in the cost-of-living were having a direct impact on staff morale, with the increased pressure linked to staff shortages and increased complexity of caseloads impacting staff wellbeing. A notable number related this issue to the fact that they were unable to offer the same salaries being offered by commissioned services, or the local authority, as discussed in further detail in section 5.3.5.

“*Commissioned services are advertising a significant number of roles at higher salaries than what we can pay our staff. This reduces morale.*”
- Annual Survey, 2023

10 This is because they may have to move out of the area, or no longer be able to stay in the refuge if the perpetrator follows them after work and discovers their whereabouts. There is also a financial cost to staying in a refuge and, in most cases, this is funded by housing benefit.

3.2.2 Loss of donations

“Since the cost-of-living we are getting less donations from the public”
- Annual Survey, 2023

A considerable number of organisations told us that the crisis had resulted in them receiving less donations from the public, however, rising costs had meant they needed to dedicate more resources on fundraising activities.

“Contracts are already cut to the bare minimum, and currently we are supplementing costs with additional funding from grants and fundraising endeavours. We are prioritising fundraising activities to try to mitigate the impact of reduced contracts.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

**Table 3.2: Challenges faced by organisations during 2022-23, due to the increase in the cost-of-living
Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Challenges	% of total respondents (104)
Staff are struggling with increased and more challenging workloads	63.5%
We have struggled to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries we can pay	57.7%
We have staff who are experiencing financial hardship	52.9%
We have lost staff who needed to move to higher paid roles elsewhere	48.1%
Staff morale is lower	34.6%
We have had to provide cost-of-living pay increases to staff at a lower level than we would like to	33.7%
Increased numbers of staff have needed time off from work due to stress and/or sickness	25.0%
We have lost staff who have been recruited by the local authority	23.1%
We have staff who are using foodbanks	16.3%
We have lost staff who needed to leave because they could not afford to keep working (e.g. due to childcare costs)	14.4%
We have been unable to provide any cost-of-living pay increases to staff	14.4%
None of the above	3.8%
Other (please explain in the comments below)	1.9%

16 respondents did not reply to this question.
Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.

3.3 Mitigation actions

3.3.1 Additional funding received

Around a third (32.7%) of organisations reported that they had received funding support to assist with the increased cost-of-living. **Table 3.3** (below) details the responses to this question from the survey.

Financial relief from the increased cost-of-living included: additional grants; uplifts from commissioners based on a cost-of-living percentage; additional funding from the local authority; help from the energy bill relief scheme; funding from trusts, foundations, and private funders; and the Home Office Emergency Fund disseminated by Women’s Aid, which enabled domestic abuse organisations to apply to emergency grants, directly received by individual survivors they were supporting (Home Office, 2023a).

To note, the £76 million Community Organisations Cost of Living Fund launched by the Government earlier this year was announced after the annual survey had closed (Home Office, 2023b).

3.3.2 Organisational and staff mitigations

A proportion of services reported that they were able to introduce benefits or help to mitigate the impact of rises in the cost-of-living on staff and survivors. **Table 3.4** (on page 43) demonstrates the different kind of actions taken by organisations. The most common types include: cost-of-living pay increases and/or payments to staff (64.4%); providing food bank vouchers to survivors (61.5%); and payments to survivors (41.3%). A lower proportion of respondents reported that they had been able to provide additional clinical supervision for staff (28.8%); access grant schemes for energy bill support (28.8%); and provide food bank vouchers to staff (8.7%). Three organisations (2.9%) reported not being able to take any mitigation actions to support survivors or staff around increases in the cost-of-living. However, it is important to note that even where some mitigations have taken place, funding for these often come from the financial reserves of organisations, which are failing to be replenished and are therefore unsustainable. Furthermore, the figures below indicate that large proportions of the workforce would not have received cost-of-living pay increases and/or payments, or other mitigations.

Table 3.3: Has your organisation/service received any financial relief to support you through the cost-of-living crisis?

Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

No	44.2%
Yes	32.7%
Don’t know or N/A	8.7%
No response	14.4%
TOTAL	100.0%

Table 3.4: Actions taken by services to mitigate increases in the cost-of-living during the 2022-23 financial year**Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Mitigations	% of total respondents (104)
Cost-of-living pay increases and/or payments to staff	64.4%
Providing food bank vouchers to survivors	61.5%
Payments to survivors	41.3%
Providing additional clinical supervision for staff (to support them around the cost-of-living crisis)	28.8%
Accessing grant schemes for energy bill support	28.8%
Providing food bank vouchers to staff	8.7%
None of the above	2.9%
Other (please explain in the comments below)	7.7%

16 respondents did not reply to this question.
Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.

Salary uplift for staff

“We focused on supporting survivors with rise of cost of living; for staff, we were only able to pay 4% salary increase, which is very small compared to inflation rates.”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Not all organisations were able to offer a pay rise to staff to support with financial hardship as a result of cost-of-living increases, and some had to prioritise supporting survivors. The ones that were able to do so felt that it had been beneficial, however, a consequence of this was increased pressure on budgets, with one organisation reporting having to put a recruitment freeze in place. However, as identified, salary increases during this difficult period likely contributes to staff retention.

“The reason we've put the recruitment freeze in place is actually because we've honoured cost of living pay rises and that's actually made our salary bill go up quite significantly, and I'm glad we've been able to do that, and I'm sure that contributes to us not having a huge staff turnover.”

- Interview, 2023

One-off payment to staff

Some organisations were able to offer a one-off cost of living payment, as opposed to a salary uplift, which would have been unaffordable to do.

“We provided staff with a one-off cost of living payment as we could not afford to increase salaries.” - Annual Survey, 2023

Additional benefits for staff

Two organisations reported being able to provide supermarket shopping vouchers to staff, and in one case this action was taken to help staff particularly through the Christmas period.

“We provided all staff with shopping vouchers at Christmas and again in January.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

One organisation told us that they had introduced a specific health plan for staff to help them access private health support.

“Introduced health plan for staff which pays towards costs of non-NHS funded health support.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

3.2.1 Other mitigations

As discussed, the mitigation actions taken by organisations to support staff around rises in the cost-of-living can contribute to staff retention and therefore overall service delivery in supporting survivors. Many organisations also took specific mitigation actions to support survivors directly with increases in the cost-of-living.

Subsidised service charges

Two organisations told us that they had been able to use additional grants provided to them because of the cost-of-living to subsidise service charges in their refuge. This way these survivors would not be directly impacted by rising energy bills during this difficult period.

Practical and financial support

Organisations ensuring that survivors were supported through rising energy costs extended to community-based support services, to help survivors in their homes.

Along with using additional funding obtained to help survivors heat their homes and afford essentials, organisations also reported using the funds to help survivors keep safe or move on.

Additional support around finances and budgeting

A few services told us that they had been giving more support, or engaging with more survivors than usual, around finances, budgeting, and debt advice.

“We’ve set up a food bank here [...] just because the amount of times the staff are having to go to the food bank, it was almost like we were having to have a revolving door. So, we’ve just set our own up, which is very well used actually by staff and by clients.”
- Interview, 2023

“We received a cost-of-living grant that meant we could subsidise the service charge that was increasing due to high energy bills.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

“We have been successful in attaining additional hardship funding in some areas to support survivors to heat, feed and maintain their households.”
“Things like pay as you go phones and ring video doorbells.”
“Provide £800 of household starter kits to survivors leaving refuge.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

“Been giving more support and advice to survivors around finances, provided budgeting courses, debt management advice, cooking on a budget, budgeting travel costs.”
- Annual Survey, 2023

4

The impact of the **Domestic Abuse Act 2021** and the **statutory duty** on the provision of safe accommodation

Table 4.1 breaks down what organisations feel has been the impact of the statutory duty. Positively, over forty percent (42.5%) of organisations had noticed that there was more funding available as a result of the statutory duty, and a quarter (25.0%) felt that it had improved local partnership working. Some organisations also noted longer term funding (12.5%); more secure funding (11.3%); and better access to funding (10.0%) brought about by the statutory duty.

Overall, responses regarding the impact of the statutory duty varied greatly, with some noting specific challenges, including delays in receiving funding (22.5%); and conversely to the above, shorter-term funding (17.5%). These challenges were of particular concern for specialist domestic abuse organisations regarding the statutory duty, which are explored in further detail below.

Around a third of responding services (33.8%) reported more demands for data. Regular data collection and reporting can help to ensure services are meeting the needs of diverse survivors and create a data-rich sector based on continual learning. However, respondents also discussed how the current processes and requirements for monitoring and data collection were creating increased pressures on their already high workloads, without adequate resourcing. This indicates the importance of ensuring that data collection is adequately resourced and aligned, and the importance of systems such as On Track in enabling this. At the national level, the statutory duty is also having a positive impact on the availability and scrutiny of data, which will be critical in strengthening national as well as local decision-making.

Table 4.1: What do you feel has been the impact of the statutory duty?

Women’s Aid Annual Survey 2023

Impact	% of respondents running refuge services (80)
More funding available	42.5%
Less funding available	7.5%
Longer-term funding	12.5%
Shorter-term funding	17.5%
More secure funding	11.3%
Less secure funding	11.3%
Better access to funding	10.0%
Poorer access to funding	3.8%
More delays in commissioning processes	13.8%
Smoother commissioning processes	2.5%
Less delays in receiving funding	1.3%
Delays in receiving funding	22.5%
Affected other funding streams for your domestic abuse work	17.5%
More demands on services for data	33.8%
Increases in in-house commissioning	8.8%
Improved local partnership working	25.0%
Negatively impacted local partnership working	6.3%
No impact	7.5%
Other	22.5%
Nine respondents running refuge services did not reply to this question. Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.	

4.1 Changes in local authority spending

In order to investigate changes in the spending of local authorities on domestic abuse provision, we used data from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. We asked local authorities whether their total commissioned spend on domestic abuse provision was higher, lower, or the same as when they last commissioned domestic abuse provision.

Of the 174 councils that answered the question, 74.1% (129 out of 174) stated that they are spending more on domestic abuse provision than the last time they commissioned services. This was followed by 14.9% (26 out of 174) of responding local authorities who stated that they were spending the same as the last time they commissioned services, and 6.3% (11 out of 174) who stated that they were spending a lower amount. There were eight answers that were unclear regarding their spending on domestic abuse provision.

FOI data found that 42 local authorities provided further information about their levels of domestic abuse spending. Of the 36 local authorities that both provided further information and reported higher spending on domestic abuse provision, 14 specifically mentioned that 'New Burdens' funding from DLUHC allowed them to increase

their spending, including one local authority which reported that their spending was nearly 200% higher as a result. Six local authorities reported that they had increased their total spending due to expanding service provision in their area, for example, funding a new refuge and a new Cyberstalking Clinic. Eight local authorities reported factors such as inflationary uplifts, the higher cost-of-living, and increased financial pressures on services as contributing to their increased spending on domestic abuse provision. Other local authorities reported additional grant allocation, increased demand for services, and the continuation of additional funding allocated during the pandemic as reasons their spending had increased.

Six local authorities provided further information on the reasons they had a lower total spend compared to the last time they commissioned domestic abuse services. These local authorities cited reasons including a reduction in the services being commissioned, services being brought in-house, gaps in commissioning timelines, commissioning responsibilities being moved to another local authority, and additional COVID-19-related funding being made available from outside the local authority coming to an end.

4.2 Challenges around the statutory duty for services

4.2.1 Increased admin

“I call it monitoring season. When it's monitoring season [...] I can only deal with urgent inquiries and urgent calls.” - **Interview, 2023**

Over a third (33.8%) of organisations told us that the statutory duty had resulted in more demands for their data. Regular data collection and reporting can help to ensure services are meeting

the needs of diverse survivors and create a data-rich sector based on continual learning. However, respondents also discussed how the current processes and requirements for monitoring and data collection were creating increased pressures on their already high workloads, without adequate resourcing. Many commented on the impact this was having on service delivery as staff would have to put other work on hold to complete these requests. One organisation commissioned by the local authority remarked upon how much more burdensome data requests and reporting

requirements were from the local authority compared to other funders.

“*The reporting requirements are ridiculous, really time consuming, really onerous. Effectively they’re a full-time job for about three weeks of every quarter. So that that’s a real downside, much worse than any of our other funders.*” - **Interview, 2023**

The difficulty organisations had in carrying out these requests were sometimes compounded by unclear guidance and monitoring forms that organisations found impractical and “not fit for purpose.” One organisation also felt under pressure to commit time to attending forums and meetings without any financial benefit.

“*The local council actively engaged our service in needs assessment and discussions, but when it came to issuing funding, we were only funded a small amount, for short term posts. [...] Yet we are still forced to commit so much time toward attending forums and meetings in order to stay up to date, but with no financial benefit.*” - **Interview, 2023**

Unfortunately, more than one organisation commented on the fact that increased demands of data did not reflect the funding they were receiving from the local authority.

4.2.2 Concerns with local authorities

Organisations raised various concerns regarding how local authorities were implementing the statutory duty in their area. This included feeling that some were failing to enact their new responsibilities, perhaps as a result of not fully understanding the need for their services, or the needs of survivors.

“*Authorities we work with still aren’t meeting, or sometimes even understanding their statutory duties under the DA Act.*” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

For example, one organisation discussed how in their area there was a period in which the local authorities were unclear on what role the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) would play in refuge provision, resulting in a lack of clarity around recommissioning timeframes.

A prominent theme was a lack of transparency around how local authorities were making decisions when it came to commissioning, and where they were spending the funds allocated from the duty. A specific requirement from the duty is to establish a partnership board and strategy, which should enable transparent mechanisms for outlining commissioning decisions for safe accommodation, based on needs assessments. As discussed in section 4.2.1, over a third of organisations reported more demands for their data, some of whom had not received any additional funding as a result. One organisation told us how they felt deceived, after having been excluded from participating in the domestic abuse forum, and only later invited back when they wished to access their data.

“*But I think it’s not transparent anymore since the statutory duty was put on. It’s not transparent. They do what they want to do, the local authorities. They use us. In the very simplest form. They use us and claim the stage.*” - **Interview, 2023**

Conversely, another organisation who had not been commissioned by the local authority expressed concerns that data from their services was not being collected by the local authority. This organisation raised concerns of how this limitation could lead to an inaccurate representation of the need for domestic abuse services in their local authority.

“*Everything’s concentrated on just their commissioned services and what they are doing [...] we’re doing amazing work and [...] they’re not collecting that data.*” - **Interview, 2023**

These concerns ultimately resulted in some organisations feeling that the local authorities held all the power when it came to commissioning funds from the statutory duty, and that they were not being acknowledged for their expertise around delivering these services. Several organisations discussed a need for an effective accountability mechanism for when local authorities are failing to meet this duty so they can be supported to meet it.

“Even though we appreciate the pressure local authorities are under, we feel there should be a mechanism for reporting when local authorities are failing to meet their duty, so that support can be given to them to fully understand and meet these duties.”
 - Annual Survey, 2023

Local partnership boards

The annual survey found that 63.8% of respondents running refuge were part of their Local Partnership Boards (LPB). **Table 4.2** (top right) shows the full breakdown of these responses.

Experiences of LBPs were mixed. Whilst most organisations reflected positively that they had found them engaging, informative, and felt they had led to effective multi-agency working, others perceived them to be poorly run, lacking in strategy, and felt that they had no agency or voice in discussions.

“The statutory duty to do a needs assessment, [having] a strategy, and [having] a partnership board does not mean that any of these arrangements locally are actually fit for purpose or of any quality. Our boards in the county are still not operating effectively – and the needs assessment that was not actually published in full format as far as I am aware is truly awful.” - Annual Survey, 2023

Yes	63.8%
No	23.8%
Missing data	12.5%
TOTAL	100.0%

4.2.3 No additional funding

As discussed in section 2.2.2, one of the vital changes as part of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was that the legal definition of domestic abuse now recognises children as victims. However, some respondents told us that they had not received any additional funding to provide services to children and young people as a result of the statutory duty. As demonstrated by the following quote below, this means that many organisations providing services to children and young people are still in no better a position for funding these than they were prior to the Act.

“In terms of the children’s work that we do in refuge, the domestic abuse Act hasn’t had any noticeable difference at all on our services. [...] Our children’s worker post within the refuge was funded separately [...] it’s one of been one of those things that we’ve been able to attract funding fairly regularly but short term. [...] I think we have 12 months funding at one time [...] it’s generally been funded by sort of small-ish to medium-ish charities, charitable funds.”
 - Interview, 2023

5

Commissioning

The final section of this report looks at the commissioning landscape during the 2022-23 financial year and presents the current commissioning levels for refuge and community-based support services from local authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

The annual survey asked respondents to consider what impact domestic abuse commissioning in their local area had had over the past year and whilst most respondents thought that there had been a 'mostly positive' impact (41.3%), over a third (36.5%) believed there had been a 'mixed

impact' (see **Table 5.1** for full details). Therefore, this section highlights both the challenges that services have experienced with regards to local commissioning over the past year, as well as the good practices that were reported and considers how these positive trends could be replicated.

Table 5.1: Which of the following statements do you feel aligns most closely with your views?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Statements	% of total respondents (104)
'Domestic abuse commissioning in my local area during 2022-23 has had a mostly positive impact for survivors'	41.3%
'Domestic abuse commissioning in my local area during 2022-23 has had a mixed impact for survivors'	36.5%
'Domestic abuse commissioning in my local area during 2022-23 has had a mostly detrimental impact for survivors'	3.8%
'Domestic abuse commissioning in my local area during 2022-23 has had little to no impact for survivors'	2.9%
Missing data	15.4%
TOTAL	100%

5.1 Local authority commissioned funding

5.1.1 For refuge provision

To determine the level of local authority funding for domestic abuse refuges, we used responses to our annual survey and to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests we sent to local authorities in England. To address any gaps, we sent emails to refuge providers asking for information about local authority commissioning. (See section on *Methodology* for more details.)

Over three quarters of refuge services were commissioned by their local authorities for all of their bedspaces in 2022-23 (77.1%), see **Table 5.2**. This is an increase on the previous year (71.1% in 2021-22). There were 32 refuge services (11.8% of all refuge services) that received no commissioned funding from their local authority, which was a slight decrease on the previous year (13.0% in 2021-22). There were also 14 'partially commissioned' refuge services that received funding through a local authority commissioning process for some of the bedspaces in their refuge service, but were also running additional bedspaces that were not included in their commissioned contract and were funded through other means.

There has been an increase in the number of bedspaces in England each year since 2010. There was an increase of 35 spaces from 4,344 bedspaces at 1st May 2022 to 4,379 spaces at 1st May 2023. Despite the increase in spaces, the figure of 4,379 spaces still falls short (by 1,257) of the Council of Europe's minimum recommendation¹¹ and represents a 22.2% shortfall. As shown in **Table 5.2** (page 51), 11.2% (491) of the total 4,397 bedspaces running at 1st May 2023 were not funded through local authority commissioning arrangements. If these non-commissioned spaces were not available, the level of refuge shortfall in England would increase from 22.2% (1,257) to 30.9% (1,748). The number of bedspaces here refers to the number of bedspaces

in refuge, as per the service definitions above. This does not include the category of floating support, which is associated with maintaining tenancies.

Members of Imkaan (the UK-based umbrella women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and Minoritised women and girls) were less likely to be commissioned by the local authority, with only eight out of 20 services being fully commissioned (see **Table 5.3** on page 52).

We asked annual survey respondents who were commissioned for refuge services by the local authority to what degree all of the costs involved in providing the service were covered by this funding, broken down by the type of cost. Local authority funding is related to the 'support costs' of running a refuge, which includes staff salaries, training and clinical supervision, along with 'activity costs' and 'central costs' involved in running the organisation and premises. The costs associated with accommodation in refuge services, such as rental and service charges, are usually covered by housing-related benefits claimed by refuge residents. It should be noted that this is a major barrier to survivors with no recourse to public funds who are unable to claim state benefit, as well as women who want to keep their employment while resident in refuge, as this would prevent them from being able to claim the benefits needed to pay for their accommodation costs (Women's Aid, 2023b). As below, funding for 'support costs' was found to be higher than for 'activity costs' and 'central costs' and highlights how receiving funding from the local authority does not mean that all costs are necessarily covered by that contract (see **Table 5.4** on page 52). This illustrates that even where refuges are commissioned and contracted to provide all the bedspaces in their service (see **Table 5.2** on page 51), they often need to source additional funding to meet the full costs of running the service in a safe and efficient way.

¹¹ Council of Europe (2008): "...safe accommodation in specialised women's shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10,000 head of population." (p. 51). Based on the ONS mid-year population estimate for 2021: 56,536,419.

Table 5.2: Local authority commissioning of refuge services and bedspaces in 2022-23
FOI Requests 2023

2022-23	Number	% of Total	2021-22	Number	% of Total
Commissioned refuge	209	77.1%	Commissioned refuge	192	71.1%
Non-commissioned refuge	32	11.8%	Non-commissioned refuge	35	13.0%
Partially commissioned refuge	14	5.2%	Partially commissioned refuge	23	8.5%
Other	4	1.5%	Other	4	1.5%
No data	12	4.4%	No data	16	5.9%
TOTAL	271	100.0%	TOTAL	270	100%
2022-23			2021-22		
Commissioned bedspaces	3,533	80.4%	Commissioned bedspaces	3,501	80.6%
Non-commissioned bedspaces	491	11.2%	Non-commissioned bedspaces	522	12.0%
Bedspaces - Other	60	1.4%	Bedspaces - Other	60	1.4%
Bedspaces - No data	313	7.1%	Bedspaces - No data	261	6.0%
TOTAL	4,397	100.0%	TOTAL	4,344	100.0%

Notes: Four refuge services have been classed as 'other'. Two of these services are located in crown dependencies outside of England and therefore do not operate under the same local government commissioning arrangements. The other two refuge service classed as 'other' are managed and provided directly by the local authority rather than the contract being awarded to another organisation.

Table 5.3: Imkaan members - Local authority commissioning of refuge services and bedspaces in 2022-23**FOI Requests 2023**

2022-23	Number	% of Total	2021-22	Number	% of Total
Commissioned refuge	8	40.0%	Commissioned refuge	9	45.0%
Non-commissioned refuge	10	50.0%	Non-commissioned refuge	11	55.0%
Partially commissioned refuge	2	10.0%	Partially commissioned refuge	0	0.0%
TOTAL	20	100.0%	TOTAL	20	100.0%
2022-23			2021-22		
Commissioned bedspaces	146	55.9%	Commissioned bedspaces	140	50.9%
Non-commissioned bedspaces	115	44.1%	Non-commissioned bedspaces	135	49.1%
TOTAL	261	100.0%	TOTAL	275	100.0%

Table 5.4: How much funding did you receive through being commissioned by the local authority for your refuge services in 2022-23?**Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Amount of funding received from local authority	For activity costs (Direct activity costs, accessibility costs, external contractors)	For central costs (Admin/finance staff, management/governance staff, premises/other)	For support staff costs (Salaries, additional employment costs, clinical supervision, staff training)
All costs	8	8	22
Half or less of costs	13	27	9
More than half of costs	14	15	27
None	25	10	2
Missing data	5	5	5
TOTAL	65	65	65

5.1.2 For CBS service provision

We gained information on local authority funding for community-based support services from the annual survey only (this is different to the methods used to calculate the level of local authority funding for refuge provision detailed above). Fifty-five of the 76 survey respondents (72.4%) that had CBS service provision told us that they had received funding from their local authority in 2022-23 (21 had received no local

authority funding and there were no missing responses). We asked these 55 respondents to give details about how much of the CBS service provision this local authority funding covered. Again, the results in **Table 5.5** show that funding rarely covered all costs and that 'being commissioned' should not be mistaken for being fully funded.

Table 5.5: How much funding did you receive through being commissioned by the local authority for your community-based support services in 2022-23?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Amount of funding received from local authority	For support staff costs (Salaries, additional employment costs, clinical supervision, staff training)	For activity costs (Direct activity costs, accessibility costs, external contractors)	For central costs (Admin/finance staff, management/governance staff, premises/ other central costs)
All costs	22	14	11
Half or less of costs	9	14	26
More than half of costs	21	13	8
None	2	13	9
Missing data	1	1	1
TOTAL	55	55	55

5.2 Other commissioned funding

5.2.1 Police and Crime Commissioner funding

Most annual survey respondents with refuge provision did not receive any commissioned funding for their refuge services from their local Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) in 2022-23 (75.0% - No; 15.0% - Yes; 10.0% - Missing data). However, over half of responding organisations with CBS service provision had received PCC commissioned funding for their CBS services in 2022-23 (40.8% - No; 57.9% - Yes; 1.3% - Missing data). Community-based support services may include IDVA provision that is co-located in police forces, so this may explain why domestic abuse support in the community appears to be

better funded by PCCs than refuge provision. At the same time, there has been a national focus on IDVA roles through legislation and funding, alongside major increases in Ministry of Justice funding for IDVAs and independent sexual violence advisors (ISVAs), which is delivered via PCCs, in recent years. It is important to note that any funding is unlikely to cover full costs of providing the service (refuge or CBS) and may even only cover a small percentage of the costs (see Fragile Funding Landscape - Women's Aid, 2021b, 14-16).

Table 5.6: Did you receive any commissioned funding for your refuge services from a PCC (Police and Crime Commissioner) in 2022-23?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Response	Number of respondents	% of those with refuge provision
No	60	75.0%
Yes	12	15.0%
Missing data	8	10.0%
TOTAL	80	100.0%

Table 5.7: Did you receive any commissioned funding for your community-based support services from a PCC (Police and Crime Commissioner) in 2022-23?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Response	Number of respondents	% of those with CBS service provision
No	31	40.8%
Yes	44	57.9%
Missing data	1	1.3%
TOTAL	76	100.0%

5.2.2 Integrated Care Board funding

A vast majority of the annual survey respondents with refuge provision (69 out of 80) did not receive any commissioned funding from an Integrated Care Board (ICB) for their refuge services in 2022-23 (No – 86.3%; Yes – 2.5%, Missing data – 11.3%). Most respondents with community-based provision (62 out of 76) also had not received any commissioned funding from an ICB for their

community-based support services in the last financial year (No – 81.6%; Yes – 17.1%; Missing data – 1.3%). Again, it is important to note that any funding is unlikely to cover the full costs of providing the service and may even only cover a small percentage of the costs (see Fragile Funding Landscape - Women's Aid, 2021b, 14-16).

Table 5.8: Did you receive any commissioned funding for your refuge services from an ICB (Integrated Care Board) in 2022-23?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Response	Number of respondents	% of those with refuge provision
No	69	86.3%
Yes	2	2.5%
Missing data	9	11.3%
TOTAL	80	100.0%

Table 5.9: Did you receive any commissioned funding for your community-based support services from an ICB (Integrated Care Board) in 2022-23?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Response	Number of respondents	% of those with CBS service provision
No	62	81.6%
Yes	13	17.1%
Missing data	1	1.3%
TOTAL	76	100.0%

5.3 Challenges with commissioning

In the 2023 annual survey, we asked services what challenges they had faced with being commissioned for domestic abuse services in their local area during the 2022-23 financial year. Most common responses were short-term contract lengths (33.7%), tenders not recognising

quality (32.7%), and complex commissioning processes (32.7%) (see **Table 5.10** for full details). Respondents were also given space to consider these issues with open text answers, and their most frequently highlighted concerns are reported here.

Table 5.10: In 2022-23, what challenges have you faced with being commissioned for domestic abuse services in your local area?

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Challenging practices	% of total respondents
Short-term contract lengths	33.7%
Tenders do not recognise quality	32.7%
Complex commissioning processes	32.7%
Smaller specialists have lost contracts	21.2%
Relationships with commissioners / councillors	12.5%
No challenges	10.6%
Other	12.5%

16 respondents did not reply to this question.
Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.

5.3.1 Funding application issues

Challenges reported by survey respondents begin at the tender application stage. Services had experienced a mixture of “very slow” processes and delays in some cases, alongside the pressure of short and unrealistic deadlines in others, which are particularly extreme when multiple contracts go out for tender at the same time and can especially exclude smaller organisations. Some respondents noted they had observed that the organisations who were winning the contracts have specific bid writing teams, which are

unrealistic for smaller services who do not have this capacity.

Application processes were in some cases considered to be unnecessarily complex and described as “not fit for purpose”. Services felt that the processes were not a level playing field and the over-use of technical jargon in particular was misleading. At the same time, the amount of information requested was deemed to be unnecessarily complicated and requires

a large time commitment potentially with no financial recompense. Services reported that the implication of these complex demands was that they had less time to spend on a personal level with their clients. Delayed tendering processes more generally also were felt to impact their services available to survivors.

“The amount of information that needs to be gathered and processed to give to commissioners has meant that we have spent less time on a personal level with clients as we have to complete paperwork that includes a vast amount of data collection”

- Annual Survey, 2023

5.3.2 Commercial opportunity and increased competition

Services also reported tenders becoming more competitive and, in some cases, more of a commercial opportunity for bidders with a focus on price, rather than based on the quality of service. Whilst the higher popular profile and increased funding available for domestic abuse service provision had increased level of buy-in amongst commissioners, in the views of some respondents, this has created an environment where business or economic considerations were prioritised over outcomes or needs. With greater numbers of organisations bidding for contracts from local governments and other commissioners, one service noted:

“It has been a challenge to justify to commissioners, why we are more expensive and to get them to understand we are a specialist service with over 40 years’ experience in providing DVA support in the community and in refuge”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Key informant interviewees were also concerned that domestic abuse services were commonly considered as a ‘business’, and particularly that the implication was that everyone feels they have ‘expertise’, without perhaps having experience within the sector. The threat of generic

services and housing associations claiming ‘specialist service’ status alarmed respondents, who wanted the sector as a whole to ensure greater protections and understanding of this term. Organisations expressed concerns that commissioners were coming to tendering decisions with priorities that do not align with services’ on-the-ground experience, and that only “crumbs of funding” were left for smaller, specialist services, whilst generic services, without ‘by and for’ expertise, were taking the majority of contracts. These concerns reflect the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s 2022 mapping report that found ‘by and for’ services were six times less likely to receive statutory funding than non-‘by and for’ domestic abuse services (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022).

To avoid their increased vulnerability and even closure, services suggested emergency ring-fenced funding for ‘by and for’ services as a means of protecting them and recognising their value, to sustain their unique services.

5.3.3 Short-term and disjointed commissioning

Annual survey respondents and interviewees described the challenges they felt with where funding had been allocated in their local areas and expressed concerns that it was not going to the most appropriate places, or with a long-term approach. Respondents observed there was often a lack of coordinated commissioning with joined-up service pathways, and that local authorities were not necessarily funding the service that has the most long-term impact or positive feedback, such as counselling services, and choosing to fund, for example, an IDVA position instead. As one respondent described:

“Local commissioning still follows a bizarre pattern of breaking up provision so that with every round, it becomes more fragmented and confusing for survivors; who then come to us who they know and trust, and we then use our resources linking them up with other commissioned services”

- Annual Survey, 2023

Overall lack of long-term strategy, seen especially through the commissioning of piecemeal, short-term contracts, concerned services as they then felt it was hard to strategically plan provision themselves because of this lack of clarity. Short-term contract lengths were identified as a key challenge by over a third (33.7%) of survey participants, the most commonly reported response. Some respondents felt that long-term funding was only restricted to closed commissioning and for pre-decided preferred partners, however, they felt that specialist services were excluded from this. Short-term contracting was particularly common for counselling and outreach services, often for only one year at a time. This was seen as particularly damaging as these services need long-term planning to ensure staff retention and to have the greatest impact for real change. Services felt their capacity to support more complex cases was reduced from short-term contracting, as well as to increase their bedspaces of safe accommodation due to difficulty finding properties with short timescales.

Short-term contracting was also having repercussions for staffing and capacity of services, some of which reported they were running “hand to mouth”. Already strained resourcing was further exacerbated by short-term commissioned funding, who cannot offer staff long-term contracts, making it challenging to recruit meaningfully and for staff with the right expertise. Coupled with the additional pressure and extra psychological stress of not knowing what funding will look like, short-term funding made staff retention even more challenging for organisations this year.

5.3.4 Relationships and communication with commissioners

A significant portion of annual survey respondents considered the relationships they had with commissioners this year as successful, which will be discussed later in this section. However, 12.5% of respondents noted their relationships as a key challenge, and this was further highlighted in their open text answers and in the interviews.

In particular, some services felt that communication was not a two-way process and even that they were being deliberately left in the dark from decision making. This was thought to especially be the case around larger pots of money, which could even be perceived as “secretive”. Rather than working in collaboration, some services reported that decisions were already made without consultation based on what local authorities want, or after poorly arranged and attended public engagement events. This has led to less autonomy over what service organisations deliver, because they feel restricted to run their area’s VAWG service in the specific way that the commissioners expect.

When delays have occurred, these were not well communicated, including around banding decisions or changes in procedures. One interview participant noted that this lack of consultation and communication has created negative outcomes in the service.

5.3.5 Increased in-house commissioning

Responding to the annual survey, 8.8% of services felt that since the statutory duty they had noticed an increase in in-house commissioning at their local authority.

‘In-house’ service provision refers to domestic abuse support services which are delivered directly by staff employed by the local authority and not contracted to another organisation. In order to investigate levels of in-house domestic abuse service provision, we used Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to collect information from local authorities. We asked local authorities what domestic abuse services they delivered in-house, how long these services had been running for, whether their in-house services had replaced services previously run by an alternative provider, and if the service was a refuge or safe accommodation service, how many bedspaces for adults it provided. This was the first time we had collected this information from local authorities.

Of the 196 local authorities who responded to the FOI request and answered these questions, 94 (48.0%) reported delivering no in-house services and 102 (52.0%) reported delivering one or more in-house service. Some local authorities reported providing multiple service types. The most common types of domestic abuse services local authorities reported they were providing in-house were: community-based or open access services (62, 60.8% of local authorities providing an in-house service), housing support services (28, 27.5%), children's social care (25, 24.5%), and domestic abuse safe accommodation (21, 20.6%). See **Table 5.11** for full details.

21 local authorities reported providing domestic abuse safe accommodation services. Two of these services are listed on Routes to Support and included in the 271 refuge services running at 1st May 2023. 18 of the local authorities running safe

accommodation services provided information about the numbers of bedspaces they offer, with a cumulative total of 226 in-house bedspaces being reported. We cannot be sure from the information provided in the FOI responses whether these safe accommodation services meet the Women's Aid definition of refuge.

Nine local authorities reported running services that had replaced existing services run by an alternative provider. The information provided showed that these had been replaced over a period of the last 15 years. Of these, two services had been taken-in house during the 2022-23 financial year. In both cases, different local authorities in the North West of England reported delivering community-based support services which had previously been run by a specialist domestic abuse organisation.

Table 5.11: Number of local authorities listing various types of in-house domestic abuse service provision

FOI requests 2023

Service type	Number of local authorities with in-house provision	Percentage of local authorities with in-house provision
Community-based/Open access	62	60.8%
Housing support	28	27.5%
Childrens Social Care or CYP	25	24.5%
DA Safe Accommodation	21	20.6%
Sanctuary scheme	14	13.7%
Perpetrator service	14	13.7%
Strategic function (e.g. commissioning)	14	13.7%
MARAC	10	9.8%
Professionals training	3	2.9%
Not domestic abuse specific	2	2.0%
Services for men	1	1.0%
Total local authorities reporting in-house provision	102	

The annual survey and follow up interviews explored in more depth how services were experiencing the increase in in-house commissioning, which found some variety between counties:

“We cover a county, and all four areas are very different. One is excellent and two do not prioritise domestic abuse. The fourth does everything in-house and poorly” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

Lack of consultation and collaboration was again reported, with instances of local authorities allocating funding without consultation to their own commissioned services and “swallowing money up”. The implications of taking services in-house pose a significant threat to specialist services, especially as they face losing experienced staff to the higher wages than local authorities can offer, rather than having these opportunities available through adequately funded positions in specialist services themselves:

“Local authorities are using the Domestic Abuse Act money to set up their own services so established local organisations are at risk of losing staff and funding. Loss of specialist support services poses a risk to the voluntary sector”

- **Annual Survey, 2023**

Ultimately, services were worried that this will lead to an overall loss of expertise which could weaken the sector. For survivors, the trust they have for independent services, which are valued in the community and separate from the state, would be under threat:

“As a specialist, if I leave us to go and work in a statutory environment, they’re not going to be able to deliver or use their specialisms. Specialisms are going to be stifled, working within the generic kind of frameworks. Again, it might look good ticked on paper, but you’re not going to be valued and you’re going to be stifled”

- **Interview, 2023**

5.3.6 Threatened specialist services

In section one, this report discussed the unique value that specialist services offer the domestic abuse sector. Unfortunately, a number of respondents to the annual survey and participants in the key informant interviews felt that specialist services and their role were being increasingly threatened and that this could be seen in a number of areas, including the move towards more ‘universalistic’ service provision, and tokenistic involvement in decision making. This was seen even more acutely amongst ‘by and for’ service provision and those supporting women with NRPF. As previously discussed in section 5.3.2, specialist services - and particularly ‘by and for’ services - are especially worried about local authorities that seem to be prioritising the financial ‘bottom-line’ at the expense of recognising the valuable service that they are providing.

Universal services

The desire to homogenise service provision had been seen more and more by annual survey respondents, with an approach of ‘one size fits all’, which was concerning as it does not enable tailored approaches to meet need. Services told us:

“There is a constant strive for generalism within the contracts, rather than focusing on one specialism.” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

One service that participated in the key informant interviews was especially concerned about the quality of support that survivors would receive if they closed their service, as the remaining support would mostly be universal. Others noted that provision under a generic domestic abuse service can be poorer and offer much less holistic support and that specialist services often pick up the work that universal services are not doing.

These concerns were reflected in the data that services were being asked for, and the data that was considered to ‘matter’ to local authorities.

Services were frustrated at commissioners about this trend:

“Commissioners are non-specialists and do not understand domestic abuse nor the evidence-base for good practice. This will start to become more problematic as commissioning strategies get less and less concerned with a gendered view of domestic abuse.” - **Annual Survey, 2023**

Ultimately, services are concerned how will they be able to deliver their specialisms in the future and want greater clarity on what the term ‘specialist’ means and its specific value within the sector. Otherwise, they fear ‘specialist’ is in danger of being inappropriately claimed, devalued and diminished by generic services.

Tokenistic inclusion

When specialist services are not being excluded in favour of universal services, they are concerned that instances of their inclusion are being done in a tokenistic manner. Rather than being consulted in a meaningful way, some specialist services feel they are not really being listened to, and that the voices of women and children in particular areas are not being represented.

“It seems clear that the only reason we are included into discussions is so that they can show inclusion and collaboration, but when it comes to crunch and providing tangible support for services such as ours, funding is allocated [away from expert specialists].”

- **Annual Survey, 2023**

Examples included asking specialist, and particularly ‘by and for’ specialist, services to sit on strategic partnership boards, but excluded from decision making and attending only in a tokenistic way.

‘By and for’ services

We know that services that are ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women are less likely than other domestic abuse services to receive local authority commissioned funding and face significant funding challenges (Women’s Aid, 2023a). These services tend to be even smaller and have less resources than other domestic abuse providers, meaning they can be at an ever-greater disadvantage in competitive procurement processes. These experiences were acutely felt by respondents in the annual survey and key informant interviews. Some thought ‘by and for’ services are being ignored by the statutory duty and are usually the first to be unfunded by commissioners. At the same time, the unique expertise of ‘by and for’ services were felt to be depended on by generic services, for example, by relying on their interpreters and staff who are more familiar with a client’s cultural background.

“It feels like services like ours that are really doing the hard work are just getting the crumbs of funding. And we’re fighting. We’re fighting for it. And other services - just because they’re more well known - are getting a lot of the funding and yet they’re relying on our interpreters and they’re relying on people who don’t really understand the client’s cultural backgrounds” - **Interview, 2023**

Services also felt that ‘by and for’ services were being excluded from decision making processes even more generally and that the voices of Black and minoritised women are not being heard. Moreover, some raised concerns that their unique value is being eroded, as shown in this annual survey response:

“The definition of ‘by and for’ has widened and this makes it harder for specialist or by and for services to access grants that are being made available to wider groups”

- **Annual Survey, 2023**

No Recourse to Public Funds

Some annual survey respondents and key informant interviewees reported that they had faced increased cases of women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) alongside the continued underfunding to support this group and felt that their service provision was being neglected from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

“Migrant women are facing additional challenges because of the Brexit laws, women with NRPF are facing greater challenges under the DDVC [Destitution Domestic Violence Concession] application schemes, which also represents a challenge for the women that we work with and the organisation”

- Annual Survey, 2023

“There is also the ongoing issue of no recourse to public funds as we’re still finding many women falling through the gaps, such as those on Tourist or student Visas”

- Annual Survey, 2023

They noted that the sector struggles legislatively and equitably to support women with NRPF. ‘By and for’ specialist services often fill gaps in providing the required additional support to

women with NRPF, which have a different level of complexity, length and expertise needed, particularly in areas such as immigration advice. Without increased provision and funding for experts to support women with NRPF, services reported that clients can get conflicting information when not supported by specialists:

“There are services out there, but I think there’s a lot of misinformation. And people are not really experienced and then the client ends up getting themselves in a bit of a muddle”

- Interview, 2023

There has been an increase in the proportion of vacancies posted to Routes to Support which are available to women with NRPF every year since 2019-20. Just 4.0% of all vacancies posted to Routes to Support in 2019-20 could consider accepting a woman with NRPF in the space. This has risen to 11.7% of all vacancies posted in 2022-23. As noted previously this does not mean that a woman will necessarily be accepted into the vacancy, but only that she is eligible. It is positive to see that the number of vacancies available to women in this group has increased, however being denied recourse to public funds is still a significant barrier to accessing safety in a refuge.

5.4 Good commissioning practices

Alongside these challenges, there were a number of key areas where respondents described commissioning practices over the past year that had been particularly successful. By looking at these examples in greater depth, it is hoped that we can find practices that should be replicated and expanded on in the sector. As shown in **Table 5.12**, 44.2% of respondents had experienced positive collaboration and relationships with other partners, and almost a third (29.8%) thought that

commissioners have consulted well with local stakeholders. Around a fifth reported that there was funding available for their service this year (22.1%), and that this funding was long-term (18.3%). These practices are explored further in this section, including in the context of the statutory duty, as well as what services feel should be replicated or expanded on within domestic abuse commissioning practices more widely.

Table 5.12: In 2022-23, what do you feel has been particularly successful in terms of commissioning practices of domestic abuse services in your area?**Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023**

Successful practices	% of total respondents (104)
There has been positive collaboration and relationships with other partners	44.2%
Commissioners have consulted well with local stakeholders	29.8%
There is more funding available for our service this year	22.1%
Funding is long-term	18.3%
Nothing has been particularly successful for our service	12.5%
Funding is easy to access	6.7%
Other	10.6%

16 respondents did not reply to this question.
 Tick box question – respondents can tick more than one category.
 'Other' responses included examples of direct consultation, recognising gaps and addressing them, and long-term contracts. These are further explored below.

5.4.1 Comprehensive needs assessments and strategies

Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment is a crucial element of the statutory duty on Tier One local authorities in providing accommodation-based domestic abuse support in their local area for adult and child survivors. Needs assessments involve assessing the demographics of those needing support, mapping existing provision and identifying gaps. To ensure needs assessments are accurate and robust, they should involve consultation with both commissioned and non-commissioned providers operating in the local area to understand the level and types of need, including needs of those who come from outside the area. Including survivor voices can help commissioners understand what quality service provision looks like and which providers are delivering this in their area.

Annual survey respondents emphasised the positive impact of when local authorities have

undergone thorough needs assessments and have robust commissioning strategies that are long-term. Examples described where learning from the needs assessment resulted in funding being delivered to the most-needed service areas that were not previously funded, including children's services being funded in specific areas, as well as pet fostering services. Other services noted instances of local authority commissioners who were particularly responsive to need initiating a number of working groups to address specific gaps in provision. The benefits of a thorough needs assessment were evident in some annual survey responses:

“Where funders have asked us directly what gaps we have identified in the services we offer. This has resulted in us receiving funding for an older persons IDVA role. The funding is for a longer period which means it will be more impactful and achieve better outcomes for survivors”

– Annual Survey, 2023

“It works best when you are seen as an equal partner and when the commissioner understands the need locally” – **Annual Survey, 2023**

Using quality marks within this, such as the Women’s Aid National Quality Standards¹² and Imkaan’s Accredited Quality Standards¹³, as a benchmarking tool ensures that commissioners can identify good quality service provision in procurement processes, and one service in particular felt this was a practice that should be replicated:

“They understand the value of specialist services. They tailor their commissioning, they request Women’s Aid accreditation or equivalence, they do understand what we’re trying to deliver”
– **Annual Survey, 2023**

5.4.2 Collaborative relationships that recognise the value of specialist services

In comparison to the experiences above, other services felt they had formed strong and collaborative relationships with commissioners this year. The annual survey found evidence of commissioners who were sensitive to the views of services and had a good understanding domestic abuse and VAWG more generally. When positive experiences were reported, they largely hinged on how well commissioners communicated with service providers and how meaningfully they collaborated and consulted with organisations and the survivors they support. Almost a third (29.8%) of annual survey respondents thought that commissioners had consulted well with local stakeholders. Good partnership working was highlighted in the following annual survey response:

¹² Members of Women’s Aid can apply for the Women’s Aid National Quality Standards (www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/national-quality-standards/) that demonstrate the unique quality of dedicated specialist services for women and children survivors. (Women’s Aid, 2018).

¹³ Members of Imkaan can apply for Imkaan’s Accredited Quality Standards (Imkaan, 2014) and their Safe Minimum Practice Standards (Imkaan, 2016).

“Commissioners have made a concerted effort to listen to and engage with us as a service. We are part way through a contract that was commissioned pre-covid and our main contacts at the local authority are more engaged with us than we have previously experienced.” – **Annual Survey, 2023**

To services, this meaningful consultation and collaboration indicated that the value of specialist services as trusted sector experts was recognised and appreciated by commissioners:

“Good partnership working, sharing best practice, taking the voluntary sector views on board.”
– **Annual Survey, 2023**

“A good working relationship with a commissioner takes time and work. It requires them to treat us as a trusted partner”

– **Annual Survey, 2023**

“Good VCS [voluntary and community sector] representation; we have a strong voice and are being listened to and have been able to influence strategic and commissioning intentions.”

– **Annual Survey, 2023**

As described above, the experience of partnership working in general was highlighted as a successful practice by 44.2% of annual survey respondents. For example, one respondent noted that joined-up commissioned services have, in some cases, meant a complementary mix of professional skill sets and partnership working across co-located roles:

“[We have noticed] improved funding for co-located roles which has created new pathways into support and improved partnerships.”
– **Annual Survey, 2023**

Within the context of the statutory duty, local authority commissioners that meaningfully engaged with existing providers and recognise the value to specialist services were considered to be even more vital. Services felt that good relationships and partnership working were built on two-way communication with shared beliefs and values, meaning their core objectives are aligned. Listening to and trusting the expert women's services in the area and recognising the historical impact and knowledge they have had has resulted in a good working relationships and more reliable funding for some services from their local authority. One interviewee described an example of a local authority specifically wanting to commission a specialist service and ensuring that the criteria and quality requirements enabled this:

“We are out to tender at the moment and with services to be renewed ... Very much they wanted specialist services, they really have made it very difficult for an outside generic provider to come in and undercut us. It's not a lowest bidder, contracts, it's all based on what you can deliver for the amount that they're offering”

– Interview, 2023

Local Partnership Boards (LPB) were noted in some cases as positive forums for consultation and collaboration, giving stakeholders an equal voice. Elements of LPBs that worked particularly well were when meetings focused on a key theme and when members of the Survivor Advisory Board were invited to attend. One service in particular noted how having multiple voices around the table, including survivors and services, as well as different statutory agencies (health and social care, etc.) allows consideration to be given to what each of these multiple agencies can offer in response to the issues, rather than just being the responsibility of the police and the domestic abuse service.

Survivor perspectives provide a deeper understanding of domestic abuse dynamics and experiences, which leads to more informed commissioning approaches and decision making that delivers the right support. The positive impact

of including survivor perspectives in LPBs can be seen in the following response in the annual survey:

“Really supportive and wanting to make a difference. Feels more than a tick box meeting. The fact we have a victim voice facilitator who attends the meeting makes a real difference”

– Annual Survey, 2023

A wide range of survivor voices should be included; it is important to remember that one marginalised person does not speak for all marginalised people, and commissioners should ensure that survivor engagement is safe, meaningful and not tokenistic. This will require dedicated resources and ongoing support for the survivors involved. An annual survey respondent described a positive practice whereby the Domestic Abuse Lead from their local authority attends their service's Peer Support Group monthly, to understand on-the-ground experiences and come back with solutions or explanations.

5.4.3 Longer-term and increased funding

Long-term contracts provide stability and allow services to embed in the local community. They reduce pressure on services to repeatedly find capacity to prepare bids and enable providers to offer longer-term staffing contracts, which can reduce issues with recruitment and retention of staff. However, less than a fifth (18.3%) of respondents reported that long-term funding had been a successful part of the commissioning they had experienced in 2022-23.

Nevertheless, some providers highlighted contracts of seven or eight years as an example of successful commissioning practice in the annual survey (see below). Where possible, local authorities should consider whether they can award contracts of this length to established quality service providers.

“We have had some success when community services have been commissioned on an 8-year basis (showing this is an option for local authorities)”

– Annual Survey, 2023

“Long-term meaning 5 - 7 years, whereas in previous years contracts have been 3 -5”

– Annual Survey, 2023

The New Burdens funding from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and statutory duty has, for some respondents to the annual survey, meant that funding for their services has increased, based on the identified needs of that community, and they have been able to support more survivors with more bedspaces. As detailed in section 4.1, 74.1% of responding local authorities reported that their spending on domestic abuse services was higher compared to the last time they commissioned domestic abuse services, illustrating that a higher amount of funding has been available. Commissioners should also ensure there are inflationary increases (including for staff costs) built into contracts, to allow adequate funding for providers over the duration of the contract – including to increase salaries in line with rises in the cost-of-living and incremental pay scales. The benefits of this increased funding based on needs and real costs can be seen here:

“Having the money connected to the new duty has meant that we have been able to get more funding to increase our capacity to meet our demand which we have seen increase by 33%”

– Annual Survey, 2023

“Our accommodation service before the statutory duty came in, we were funded around 60K per year, whereas now ... it's over 200K per year and it's a longer contract as well, which is fantastic. And so, we've been able to really increase capacity as well, and it's part of the contract is to accrue six additional properties over five years”

– Interview, 2023

5.4.4 Efficient data collection and reporting

Data collection and reporting enable local authorities to evaluate how well services are meeting the needs of diverse survivors, and the learning from this should inform future development. However, as discussed in section 5.3.1, the annual survey responses and the key informant interviews highlighted that current processes for monitoring and data collection requirements are putting significant strains in terms of time and resources on already stretched domestic abuse services, without the additional funding to do this in a context where the complete cost of a service is often not reflected in the contract value.

“The reporting requirements are ridiculous, really time consuming. Really onerous, effectively they're a full-time job for about three weeks of every quarter. So that that's a real downside, much worse than any of our other funders”

– Interview, 2023

“I understand the positives because without this key information, we don't really know the trends and the patterns and what's really happening. But it is very time consuming, and it takes me away from my client work for a few days while I'm trying to focus on it. So, when it's 'monitoring...' - I call it monitoring season - when it's 'monitoring season', I can only deal with urgent inquiries and urgent calls.

– Interview, 2023

Instead, engaging specialist women's domestic abuse services in early discussions around reporting mechanisms can ensure that they are meaningful, capture a diversity of experience, and do not place an additional burden on already stretched services' time and resources. Specialist services will then be able to share their unique knowledge and expertise with other partners and agencies, as described in section 1.5, and establish vital feedback loops. Local authorities should fund this data collection, analysis and reporting, including support for services to strengthen

their own monitoring and evaluation. This could include funding systems such as the Women's Aid On Track¹⁴ case management system, which enables services to collect data to demonstrate impact as part of their routine work. One interview discussed, as below, how additional funding associated with the statutory duty enabled their service to recruit a data analyst post, improving access to information for both the service and the commissioner.

“It's helped us to have somebody with the time and ability to really dig into the stats that we provide and create a narrative ... It helps us to be able to build a better, more holistic picture of what the trends are. We can now use that data because we have somebody with the time to do it and to think, 'right, we've got a problem here' or 'we need to fill this gap', and really plan what we're going to do about it. We've done heat mapping for certain groups of people. It really brings the data alive and helps people to engage with it more”

- Interview, 2023

14 On Track is Women's Aid's case management and outcomes monitoring system: www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/ontrack/. The system is used by 100 local domestic abuse services to record information about service users they work with.

Conclusion

During this reporting period, the domestic abuse and VAWG sector have continued to provide invaluable support to women and children despite challenging circumstances. Data from the Annual Audit gives us a valuable insight into how changes in legislation and new funding streams are filtering down to services and survivors. In some cases, it is clear that they are having a positive impact. For example, in a number of cases increased available funding could be observed, with 74.1% of local councils reporting they were spending more on domestic abuse provision this year than the last time they commissioned services, and this was also observed by over forty percent (42.5%) of organisations surveyed, who had noticed that there was more funding available as a result of the statutory duty. Some organisations surveyed also felt the statutory duty had given greater funding security for their service, highlighting cases of contracts for seven or eight years as an example of successful commissioning practice. Elsewhere, some had experienced stronger partnership working and relationships this year, with a quarter (25.0%) of annual survey respondents reporting improved local partnership working as a result of the statutory duty, compared to 6.3% who reported a negative impact.

However, as these findings have shown, in other areas there is still a lot to be done. This report has evidenced that the implementation of the statutory duty is inconsistent between different areas and local authorities, and that commissioning continues to be a challenge for a number of services. The accessibility of the increased available funding is a critical barrier, with only one in ten (10.0%) of annual survey respondents experiencing 'better access' to statutory duty funding this year and only 6.7% reporting that they had found commissioned funding 'easy to access' in general. Issues in particular were highlighted with commissioning

and procurement processes, which were reported to be extremely slow and unnecessarily complex in some cases. Furthermore, for a large number of services, their funding continues to be fundamentally insufficient and unsustainable. Some cases within the dataset for 2024 even had no choice but to close services. There is an ongoing need to recognise specialisms in services and to focus in particular on strengthening the 'by and for' sector.

In practice, changes from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 that legally recognised children as victims of abuse in their own right could only be noticed inconsistently, often without great changes to service provision. Some respondents had not received any additional funding to provide services to children and young people as a result of the statutory duty, and almost a quarter (23.5%) of those who were running a service without dedicated funding were running 'children and young people's domestic abuse services in refuge'.

This said, the examples of good commissioning practices show that better results are possible, so we want to see those rolled out more consistently. Through conducting comprehensive and consultative needs assessments and strategies, collaborating with experts in the specialist domestic abuse support sector and recognising their value, commissioning longer-term, adequate funding, and enabling efficient data collection and reporting, local authorities can ensure that the statutory duty is implemented meaningfully.

We cannot neglect to acknowledge the interconnected layers that make up the barriers that services are facing. To address these interconnected issues, multiple areas of intervention are needed. Increases in the cost-of-living ('cost-of living-crisis'), alongside the reduced availability and rising cost of housing in the UK

over the past ten years ('housing crisis'), have worsened the precarious situation for survivors and put greater numbers of women and children at risk. Lack of suitable move-on accommodation is a continuous concern for services with two thirds (66.3%) reporting how this exacerbates the rising demand on services creates delays and longer waiting lists. Services continue to put measures in place to mitigate this context has much as possible, but a number feel they are at breaking point, as staff recruitment and retention worsen as a result. On the ground, high demand, longer and more complex cases are exacerbating existing difficulties in meeting the needs of survivors, often at the expense of staff wellbeing, who are facing burnout and exhaustion. Trends within commissioning practices are also worsening staff recruitment and retention in the sector and this has been a key challenge for many services. The Annual Audit 2024 has highlighted multiple reasons behind this, including short-term commissioned contracts and increased in-house commissioning.

This report has showcased the multiple ways that specialist services are filling gaps and working at - or even over - capacity more than ever before. Now, in the 50th year of Women's Aid's history, it is essential that the entire sector recognises the unique value of the specialist services that many of our members provide, both to survivors and the wider community, in keeping the community safe and saving money. Through empowering survivors, these services enable women to go on to lead fulfilling lives and help others in their communities.

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Appendix A

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023 respondents' regional distribution

Table A1: Regional distribution of survey respondents

Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023

Region	Number of respondents	% of total respondents (104)
East of England	9	8.7%
East Midlands	13	12.5%
London	19	18.3%
North East England	8	7.7%
North West England	17	16.3%
South East England	20	19.2%
South West England	5	4.8%
West Midlands	12	11.5%
Yorkshire and Humberside	12	11.5%

Respondents could choose more than one region.

Appendix B

Data tables on service provision from Routes to Support

Table B1: Services (with number of refuge bedspaces) exclusively for groups, May 2023
Routes to Support

Service dedicated for	London	All England
Black and minoritised women	22 (200)	43 (398)
d/Deaf women	1 (0)	2 (0)
Eastern European women	1 (0)	3 (0)
LGBT+ survivors	2 (0)	5 (8)
Women from specific religious group	0 (0)	1 (0)
Women aged over 45	0 (0)	1 (4)
Women with insecure immigration status	0 (0)	2 (69)
Women with learning disability	2 (12)	2 (12)
Women with substance use/alcohol use/ mental health support needs	2 (14)	3 (22)
Women who have experienced/are experiencing forced marriage (no refuge services)	0 (0)	1 (19)
Young women (aged 16-25)	0 (0)	2 (532)
TOTAL	30 (226)	65 (1,064)

Table B2: Provider types of services run exclusively for groups, May 2023**Routes to Support**

Service dedicated for	Dedicated provider	Housing Association	Other	All
Black and minoritised women	39	3	1	43
d/Deaf women	0	0	2	2
Eastern European women	3	0	0	3
LGBT+ survivors	4	1	0	5
Women from specific religious group	1	0	0	1
Women over 45	1	0	0	1
Women with insecure immigration status	1	0	1	2
Women with learning disability	0	1	1	2
Women with substance use/alcohol use/mental health support needs	3	0	0	3
Women who have experienced/are experiencing forced marriage (no refuge services)	1	0	0	1
Young women (16-24)	2	0	0	2
Total (%)	55 (84.6%)	5 (7.7%)	5 (7.7%)	65

Table B3: Types of support services for women available in England, May 2023

Routes to Support

Service types	Number of services	Change from May 2022
Refuge	271	+1
Resettlement	220	+8
Floating support	78	-2
Outreach	210	+10
IDVA service*	162	+16
Prevention work	171	+5
Helpline	165	+12
Drop-in	99	+6
Online chat	59	+13
Formal counselling	145	+7
Support groups	268	+7
CYP service	238	+1

*This is the number of Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) services, not the number of individual staff members working as IDVAs.

Chart B1: Service types in refuge services for women available in England, May 2023 (Routes to Support)

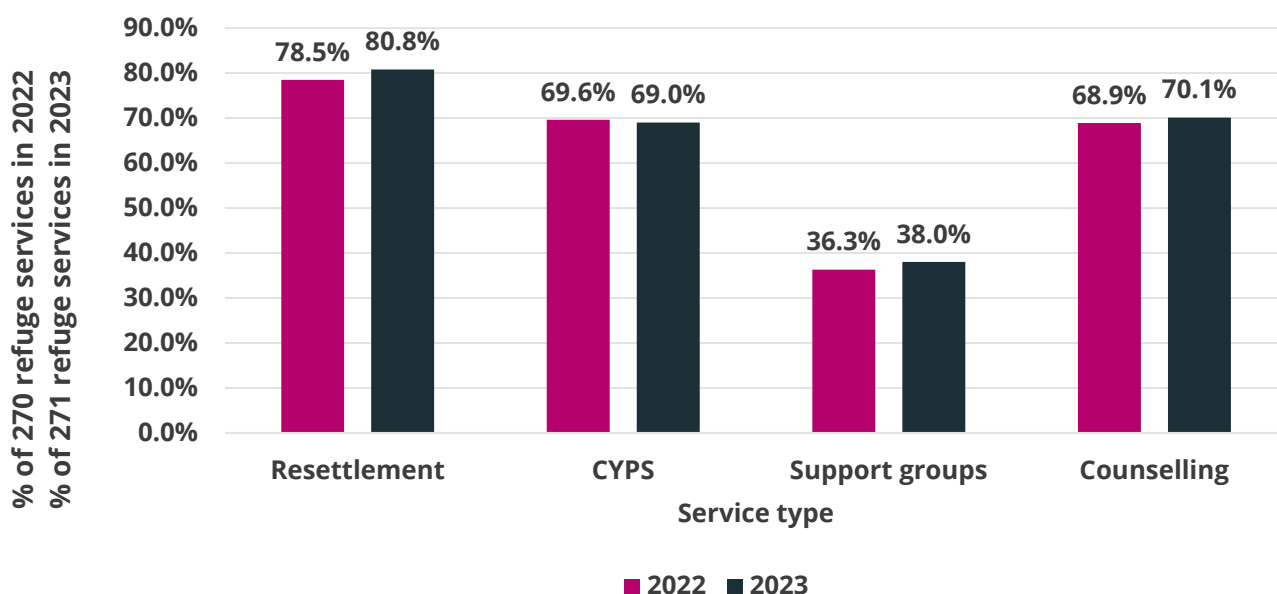


Table B4: Refuge bedspaces and level of shortfall, May 2023

Routes to Support

Year	Number of bedspaces	Number of bedspaces recommended*	Shortfall	% shortfall
2023	4,397	5,654	1,257	22.2%
2022	4,344	5,655	1,311	23.2%

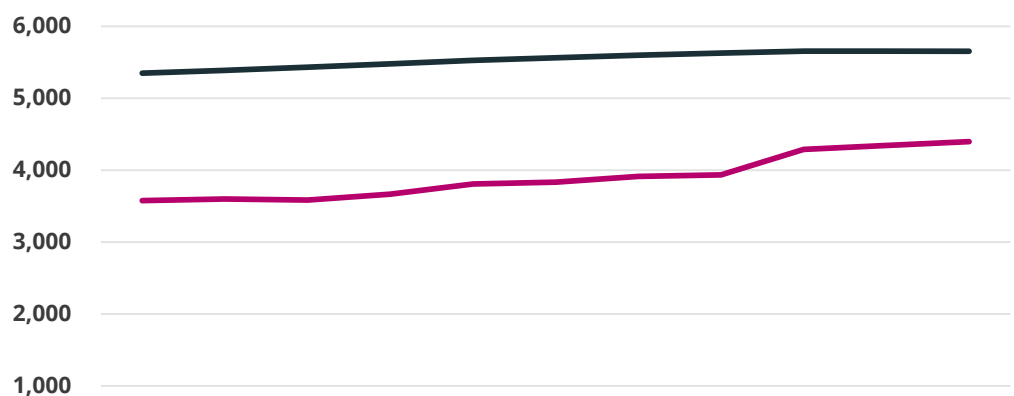
*This is based on the number of spaces recommended by the Council of Europe 2008): "...safe accommodation in specialised women's shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10,000 head of population." (p. 51) and calculated using ONS mid-year population estimates.

Table B5: Refuge bedspaces for women and numbers available for men, May 2023

Routes to Support

Year	Total bedspaces for women	Bedspaces for women only	Bedspaces available for women or men	Dedicated bedspaces for men
2023	4,397	4,063	334	27
2022	4,344	4,059	285	22

Chart B2: Refuge bed spaces since 2013 by year (Routes to Support)



	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
— Refuge spaces	3,577	3,599	3,585	3,666	3,809	3,833	3,914	3,935	4,289	4,344	4,397
— Recommendation (one space per 10k pop.)	5,349	5,387	5,432	5,479	5,527	5,562	5,598	5,629	5,655	5,655	5,654

Table B6: Bedspaces and vacancies on Routes to Support (change from 2019-20 before the Covid-19 pandemic)**Routes to Support**

Year	#bedspaces	#vacancies	Change from 2019-20	% decrease from 2019-20
2019-20	3,935	10,340	-	-
2020-21	4,289	8,280	-2,060	-19.9%
2021-22	4,344	8,051	-2,289	-22.1%
2022-23	4,397	7,600	-2,740	-26.5%

Table B7: Refuge vacancies posted to Routes to Support in 2022-23. % vacancies for each group (change from 2021-22)**Routes to Support**

Types of vacancies	Vacancies available to different groups	Change since 2022-23
# All vacancies posted, England	7,600	-
Woman plus two children	37.8%	-1.2%
Woman plus three children	15.3%	+1.6%
No recourse to public funds	11.7%	+2.6%
Full wheelchair access	1.0%	+0.1%
Person with limited mobility	1.4%	+0.3%

Table B8: Community-based support services with specialist support workers, May 2023**Routes to Support**

Specialist worker type	Mental health support needs	Drug use support needs	Alcohol use support needs
Number of community-based services	39	21	21
Change from 2022	+4	+2	+3

Table B9: Refugees with specialist support workers, May 2023**Routes to Support**

Specialist worker type	Mental health support needs	Drug use	Alcohol use
Number of refuge services	48	31	34
Change from May 2022	0	+2	+2

Table B10: Referrals to all services in 2022-23 (estimates calculated from baseline data from On Track)

	Refuge services	CBS services
Women		
Estimated referrals accepted/women supported during the year	10,824	120,518
Estimated referrals declined during the year	16,930	123,940
Estimated total referrals received during the year	27,754	244,458
Children		
Estimated children supported during the year	12,989	156,673

Table B11: Reasons for rejected referrals 2022-23 (estimates calculated from baseline data from On Track)

Reasons	% of rejected referrals into refuge	CBS Services
Already active in service	0.9%	21.9%
Child was not brought to service by Parent / Carer	<0.0%	<0.0%
Client / survivor does not want support	18.8%	26.8%
Client / survivor was referred by agency without their consent	0.2%	1.0%
Identified as perpetrator	0.1%	0.4%
Identified as unsafe to work with	2.0%	0.1%
Ineligible for support (age)	0.2%	0.1%
Ineligible for support (borough)	1.1%	3.3%
Ineligible for support (not domestic abuse)	2.6%	1.5%
Ineligible for support (service description)	1.0%	1.6%
Needs better met elsewhere - already supported by DV agency	3.6%	2.3%
Needs better met elsewhere - referred to a partner agency	4.3%	4.4%
No response from referral agency	1.7%	0.1%
No space / capacity to support	24.7%	0.4%
Other	14.0%	12.1%
Previous convictions for violent / sexual offences / arson	0.7%	0.03%
Unable to contact client / survivor	6.8%	23.7%
Unable to meet support needs around disability	2.1%	0.1%
Unable to meet support needs around drug and alcohol	5.1%	0.02%
Unable to meet support needs around language	1.2%	0.04%
Unable to meet support needs around large family	1.9%	<0.0%
Unable to meet support needs around mental health	4.6%	0.1%
Unable to meet support needs around NRPF	2.4%	0.02%

Table B12: Journeys made by women accessing refuge services 2022-23**Routes to Support**

Previous locations of women	Number of women	% of women
Same local authority as refuge	750	21.5%
Different local authority to refuge	2,731	78.5%
Total women (where previous local authority home was known*)	3,481	
Previous locations of women	Number of women	% of women
Same region** as refuge	2,766	68.3%
Different region to refuge	1,281	31.7%
Total women (where previous region home was known***)	4,047	

* In addition to the 3,481 women for which a previous location was recorded, there were 1,829 women placed in refuge during 2022-23 for which their previous local authority was not known.

** Region here refers to another region of England, for example, the North West of England, or another country in the UK (Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales)

*** In addition to the 4,047 women for which it was possible to determine whether they had travelled to another region, there were 1,263 women placed in refuge during 2022-23 for whom it was not possible to determine their journey.

Table B13: Dedicated services for children and young people (CYP) in refuges, May 2023**Routes to Support**

Service	Number of refuges	% of refuges	% change from 2022
Dedicated emotional support	201	74.2%	-0.3%
Outings/activities/play sessions	198	73.1%	+0.8%
Individual support	182	67.2%	+0.5%
CYP worker	182	67.2%	+1.6%
Advocacy	91	33.6%	+22.8%
Play therapy	110	40.6%	+0.2%
Support group	88	32.5%	+1.4%
Mentoring	31	11.4%	-3.7%
CYP counselling	31	11.4%	-0.4%
Family support worker	5	1.8%	0.0%
Art therapy	3	1.1%	+0.4%
Refuges with a dedicated CYP service	187	69.0%	-0.6%
Total number of refuges	271		

Table B14: Services for men in England*, May 2023 (and change from May 2022)**Routes to Support**

Service types	Number of services in England in May 2023	Net change since May 2022
Refuges with bedspace for men	48	+5
Floating support	32	+6
Helpline	112	+14
Outreach	133	+13
Project based	32	+6
Domestic violence advocacy project	110	+11
Sexual violence advocacy project	36	+4
Information and advice	134	+15
Total entries with one or more services for men	208	+17

*This is not an exhaustive list of the services provided for male victims, rather these numbers are for services offering support to women who also work with male victims

Appendix C

Data tables and graphs on service users access support services from On Track

Chart C1: Age of service users 2022-23 (On Track)

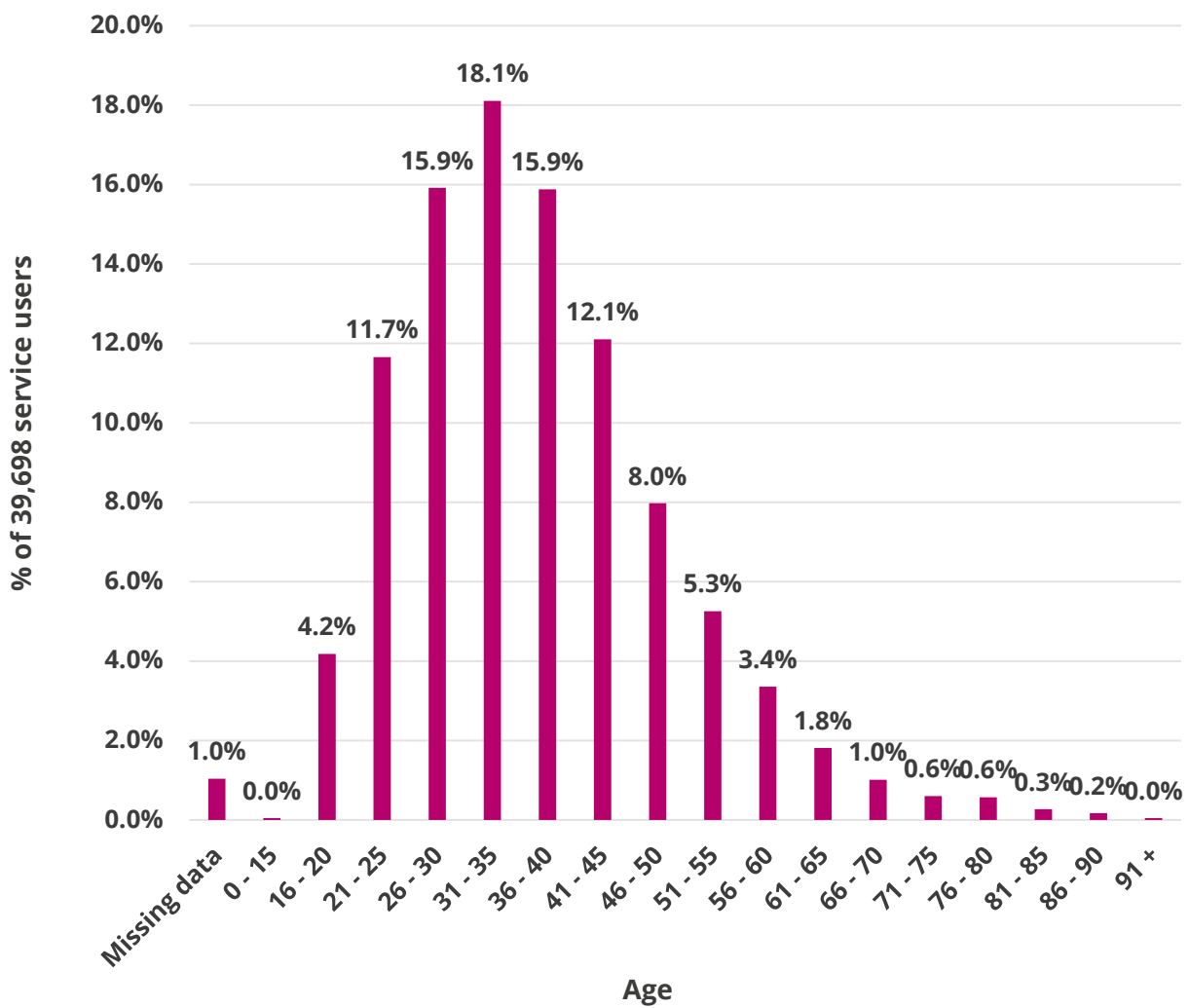
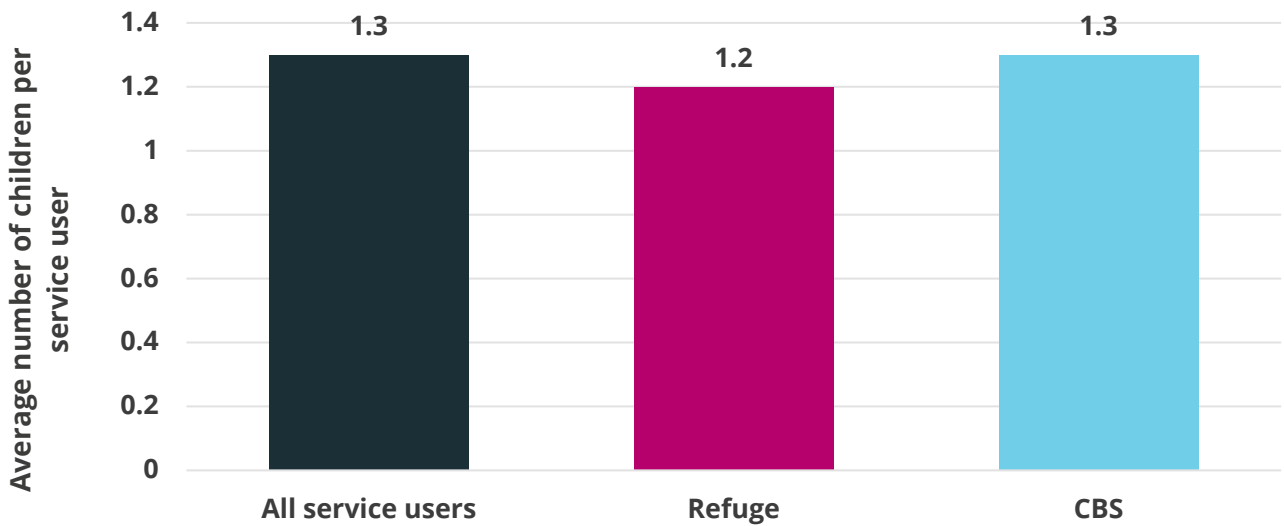
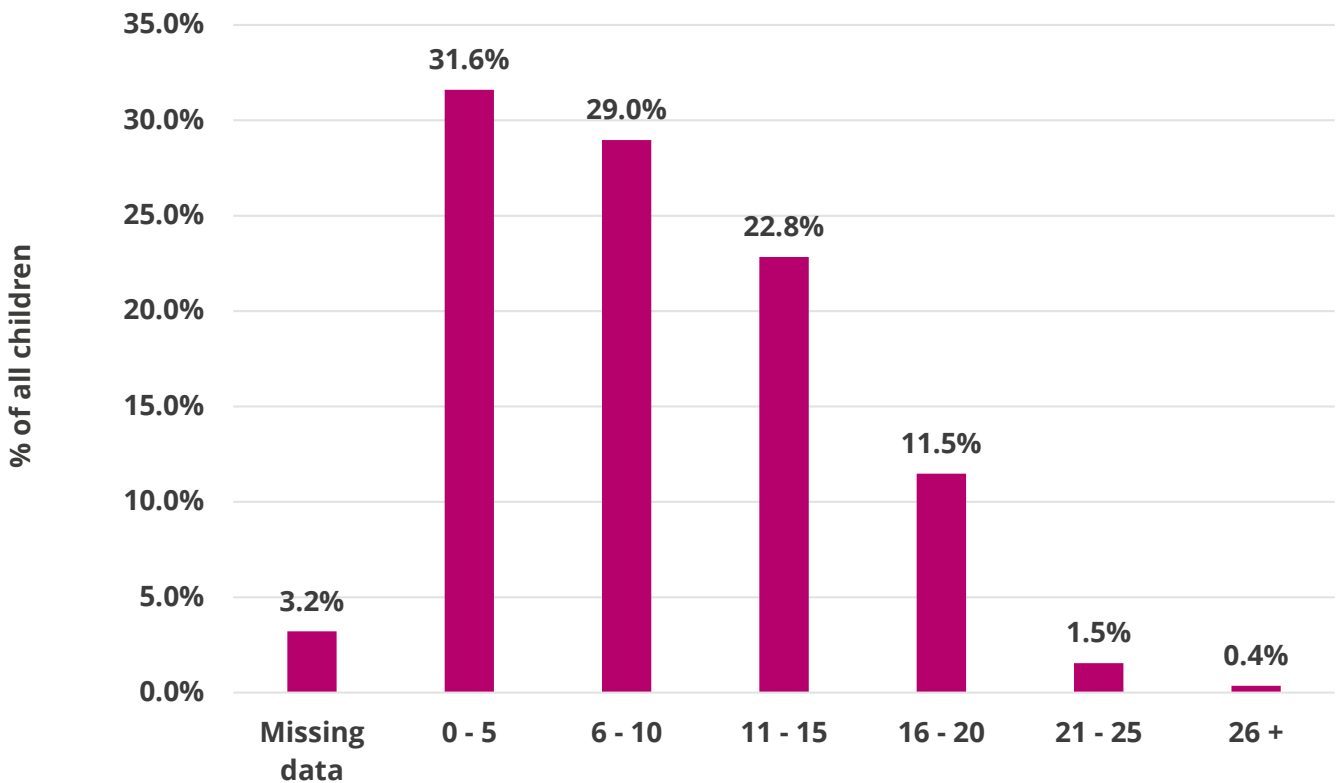


Chart C2: Average number of children per service user 2022-23 (On Track)*



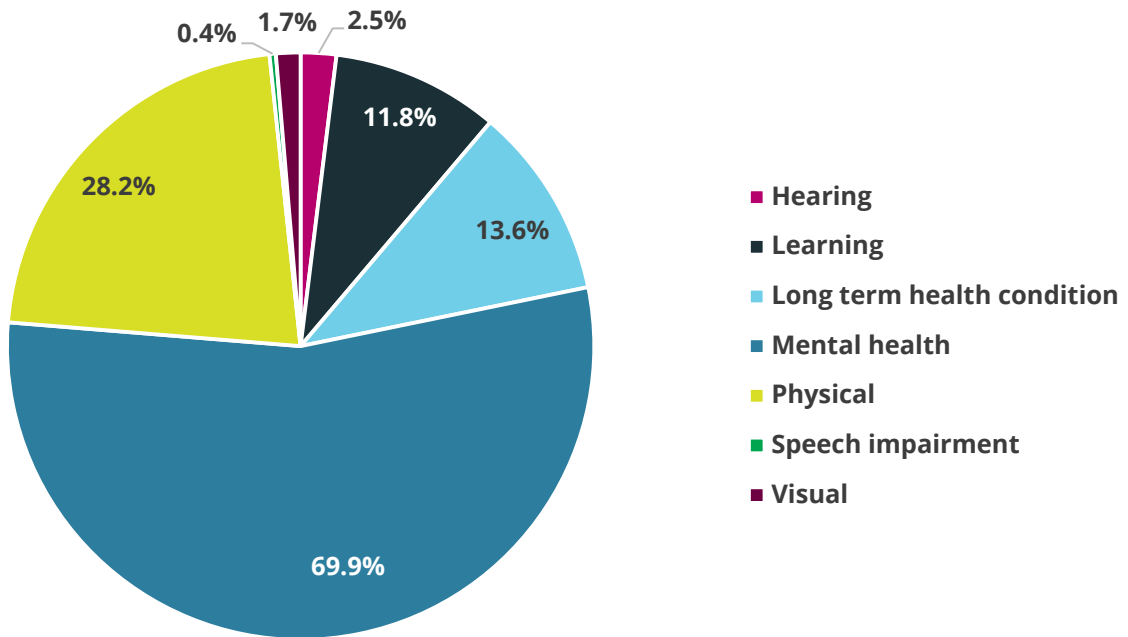
*Average number of children per service user in our sample of 39,698 (Refuge = 3,771; CBS = 36,540)

Chart C3: Age of children of service users 22-23 (On Track)*



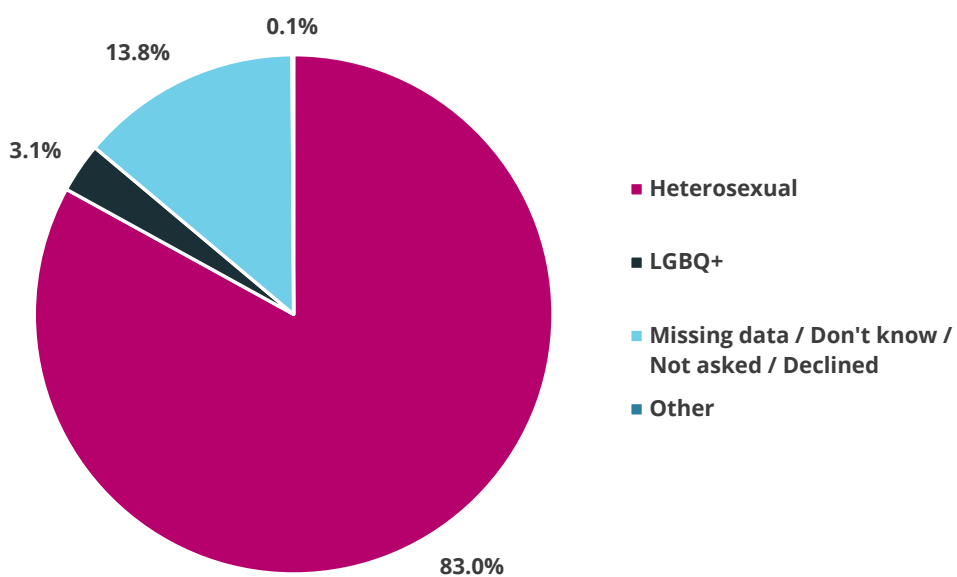
* Percentage of 50,654 children in our sample.

Chart C4: Types of disabilities reported by service users 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of a sub-sample of 12,100 service users who reported having a disability.

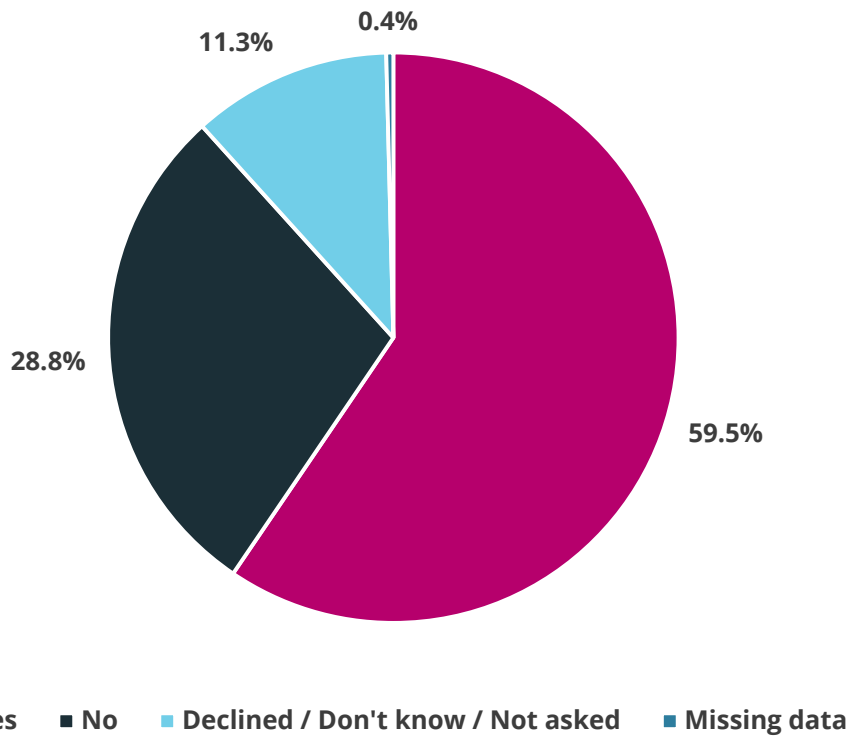
Chart C5: Sexual orientation of service users 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of 39,698 service users in our sample

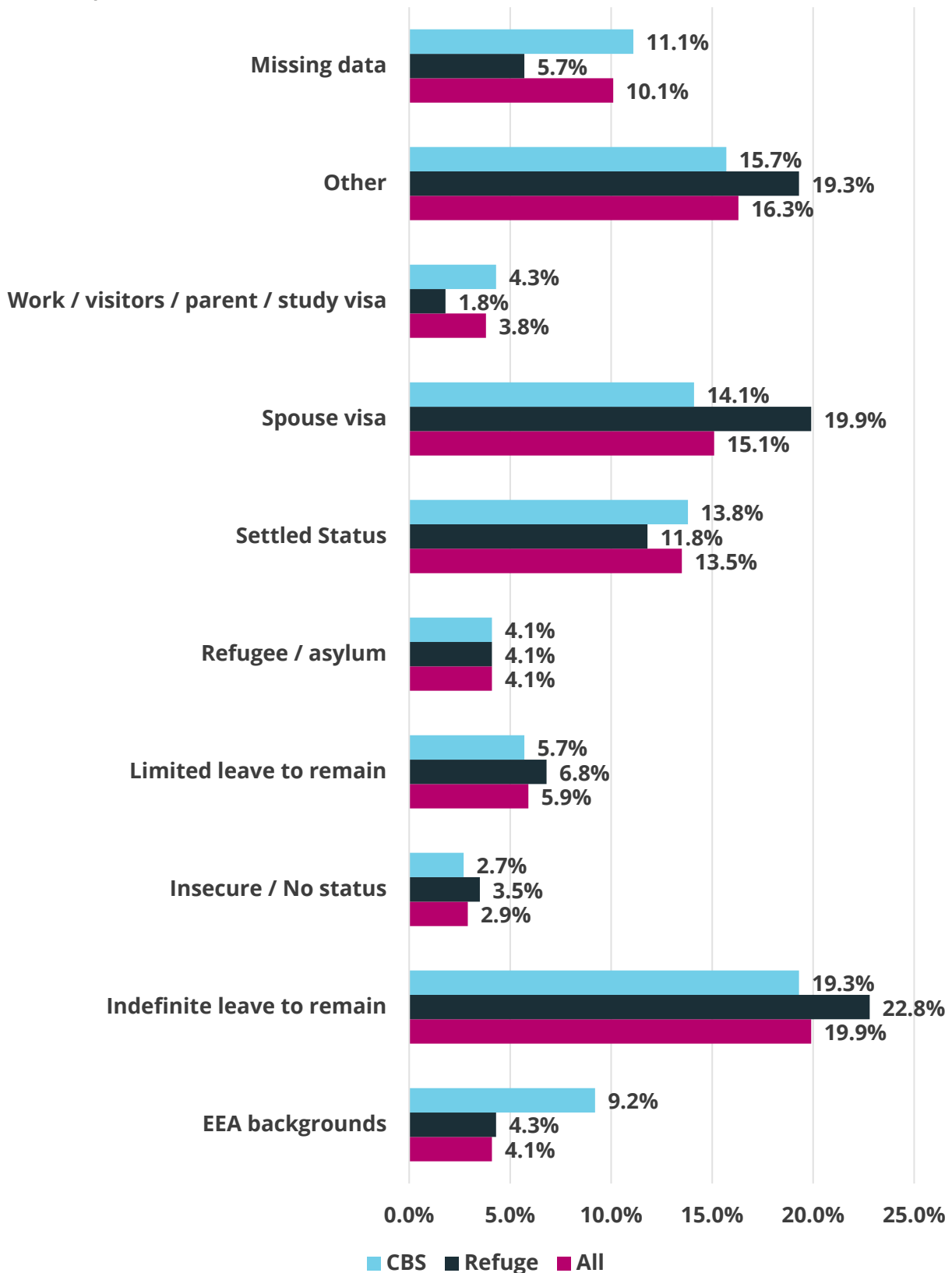
Table C1: What are the ethnic backgrounds of service users? 2022-23 (On Track)	Percentage of 39,698 service users in our sample
Missing data	0.5%
Asian/Asian British	
Indian	1.8%
Pakistani	4.6%
Bangladeshi	1.4%
Chinese	0.3%
Any other Asian background	2.2%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	
African	3.6%
Caribbean	1.5%
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	1.3%
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Background	
White and Black Caribbean	1.4%
White and Black African	0.4%
White and Asian	0.4%
Any other Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Background	1.2%
Other Ethnic group	
Arab	0.8%
Any other ethnic group	1.4%
White	
British	62.9%
Irish	0.6%
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0.4%
Eastern European	3.2%
Roma	0.1%
Any other White background	3.4%
Don't know	4.5%
Not asked	1.9%
Declined	0.2%

Chart C6: Recourse to public funds for those who are not British nationals 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of 4,790 service users who are not British nationals

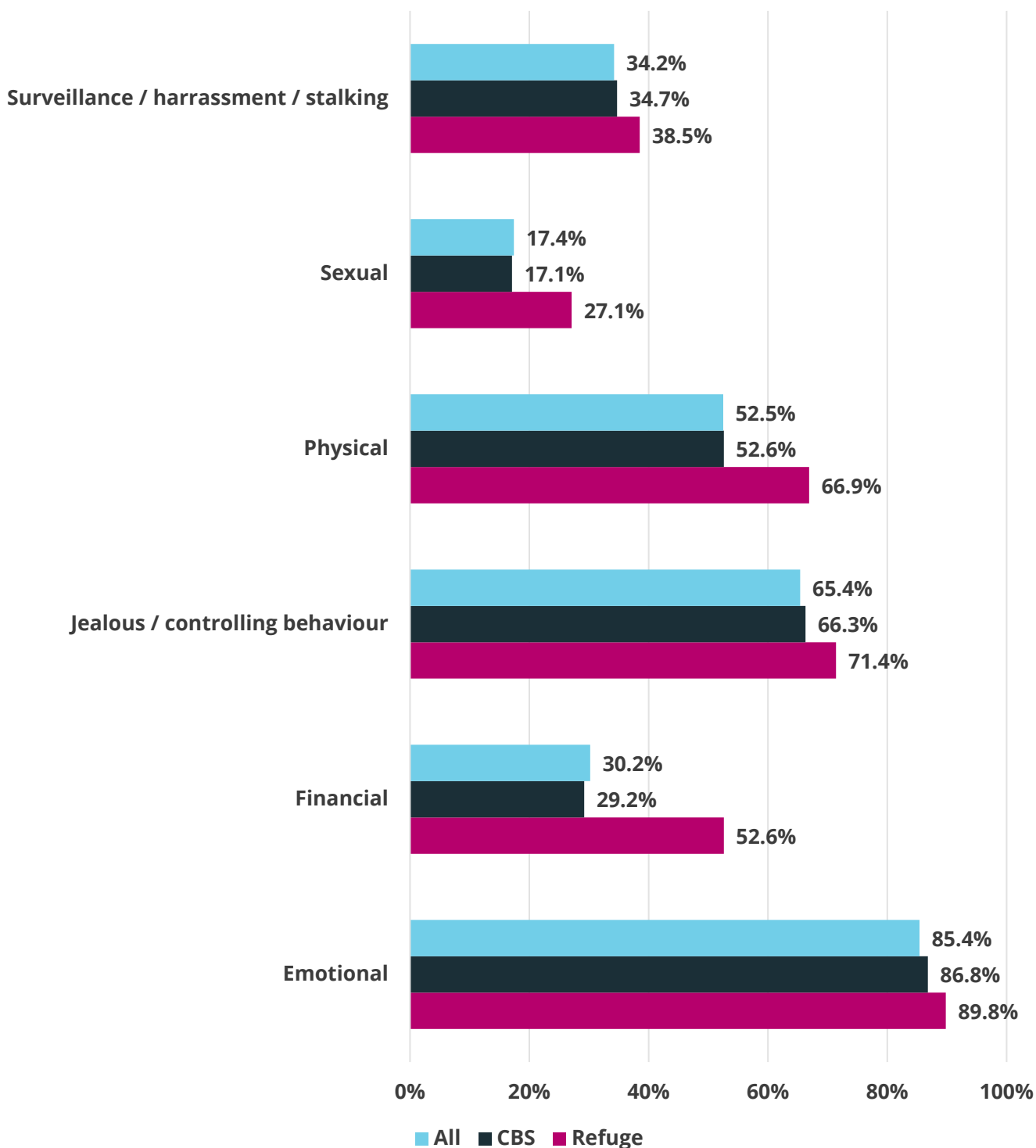
Chart C7: Immigration statuses of services users who are not British nationals 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of 4,790 service users who were not British nationals

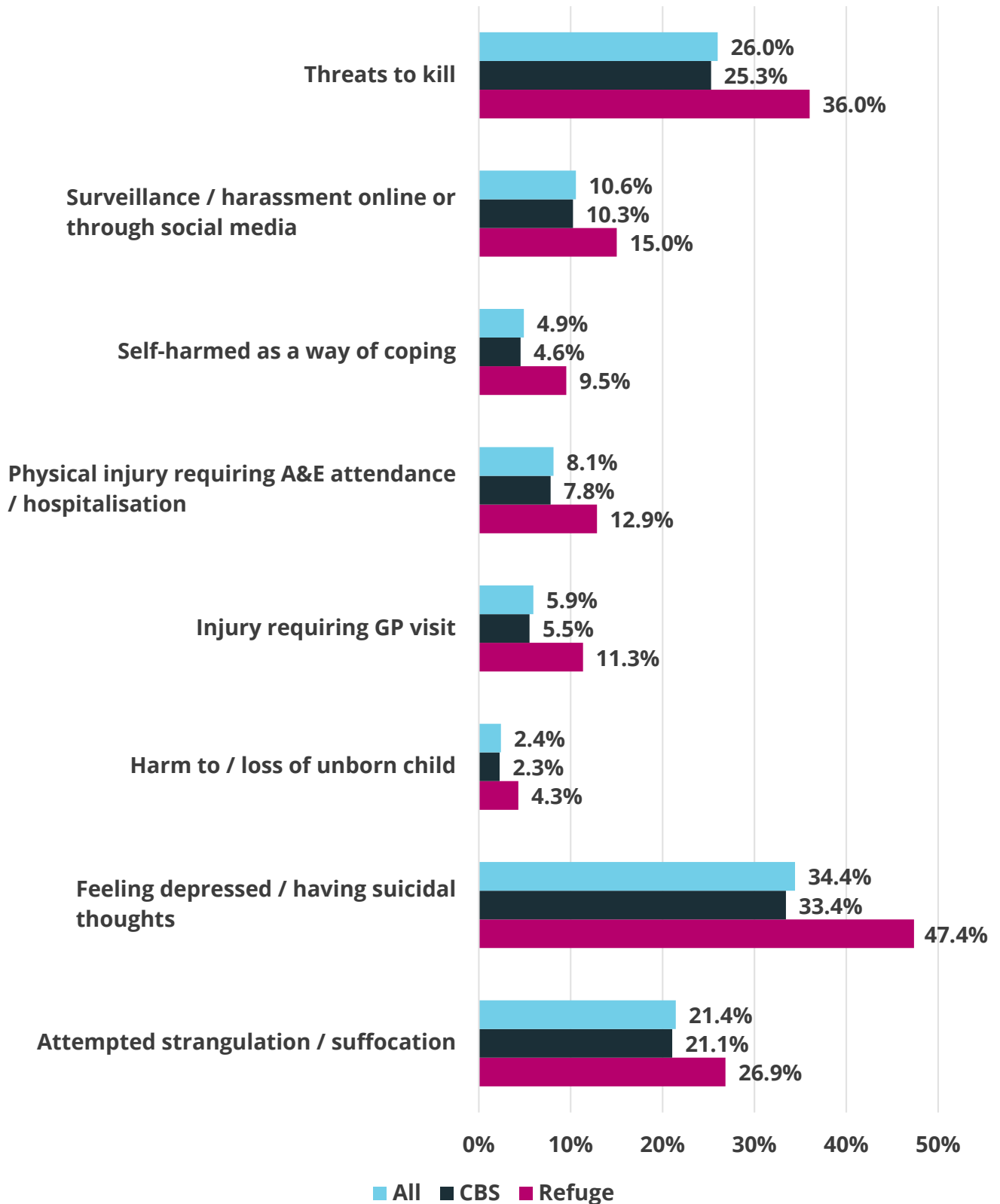
Table C2: What are the immigration statuses of service users (of those who are not British nationals)? 2022-23 (On Track)	Percentage of 4,790 who are not British nationals
Indefinite leave to remain (ILR)	19.9%
Spouse visa	15.1%
EEA national currently working	3.0%
EEA national other	1.7%
EEA family member	1.3%
EEA national financially self-supporting	0.3%
EEA national in UK studying	0.1%
EEA national receiving welfare benefits	1.9%
UK nationals	5.5%
Limited leave to remain	5.9%
Insecure / no status	2.9%
Dependent on husband / wife's visa	2.7%
Asylum seeker awaiting decision	2.2%
Discretionary leave to remain	1.1%
Humanitarian protection	0.3%
Refugee	1.6%
Study visa	1.8%
Work visa(s)	1.3%
Visitor's visa	0.5%
Pre-Settled Status	7.0%
Settled status	13.5%
Family reunification	0.3%
Parent visa	0.3%
Not asked	2.6%
Missing data	0.3%
Declined	0.1%
Unclear/unknown	7.1%

Chart C8: Type of abuse experienced by service users 2022-23* (On Track)



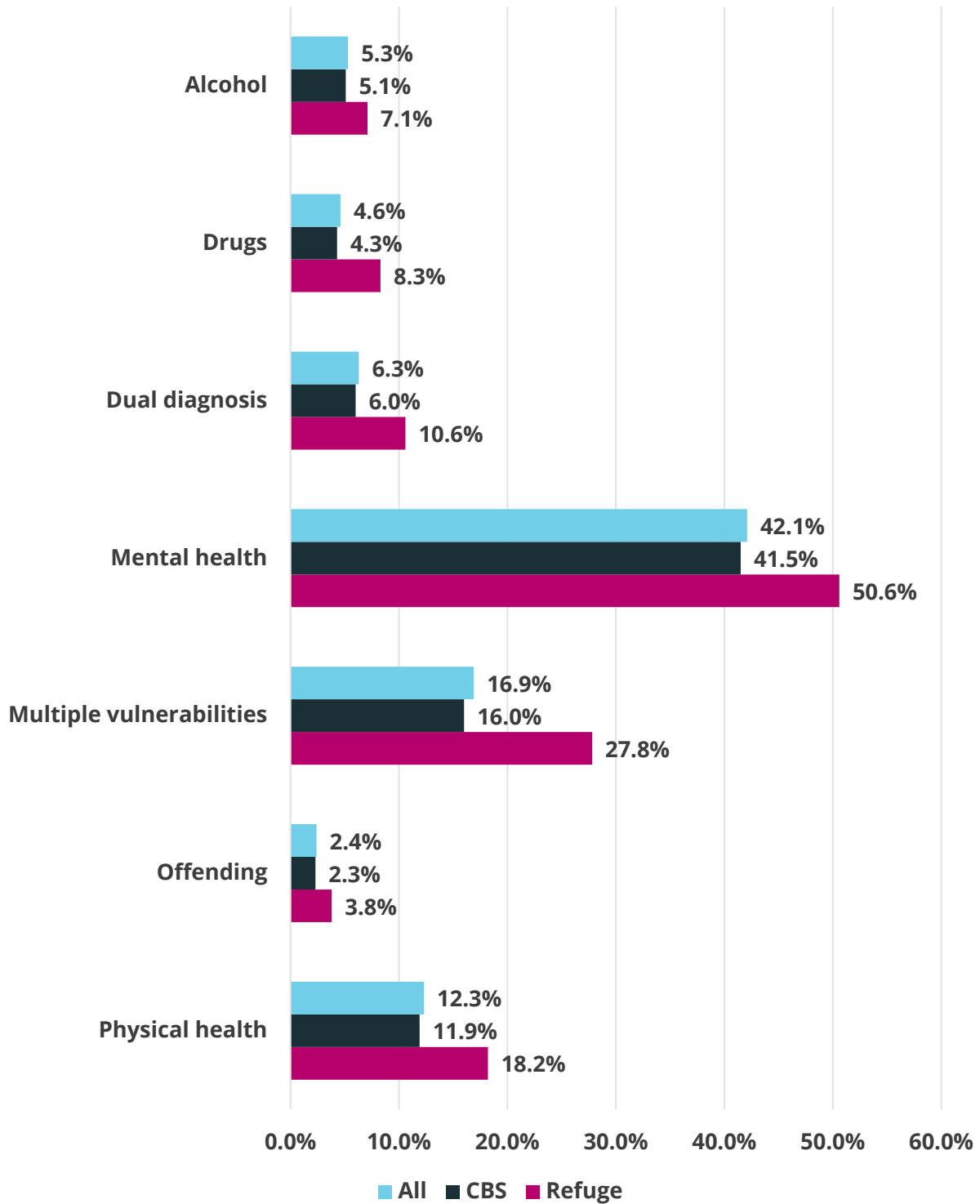
*From a sub-sample of 33,461 service users within the overall sample of 39,698 service users for whom an abuse profile on current abuse is available. When considering this data, it is worth noting that a service user is likely to experience multiple abuse types and many types of abuse are underpinned by controlling behaviour. Multiple abuse profiles may be recorded if a survivor accesses more than one service or returns to a service.

Chart C9: Experiences of abuse of service users 2022-23* (On Track)



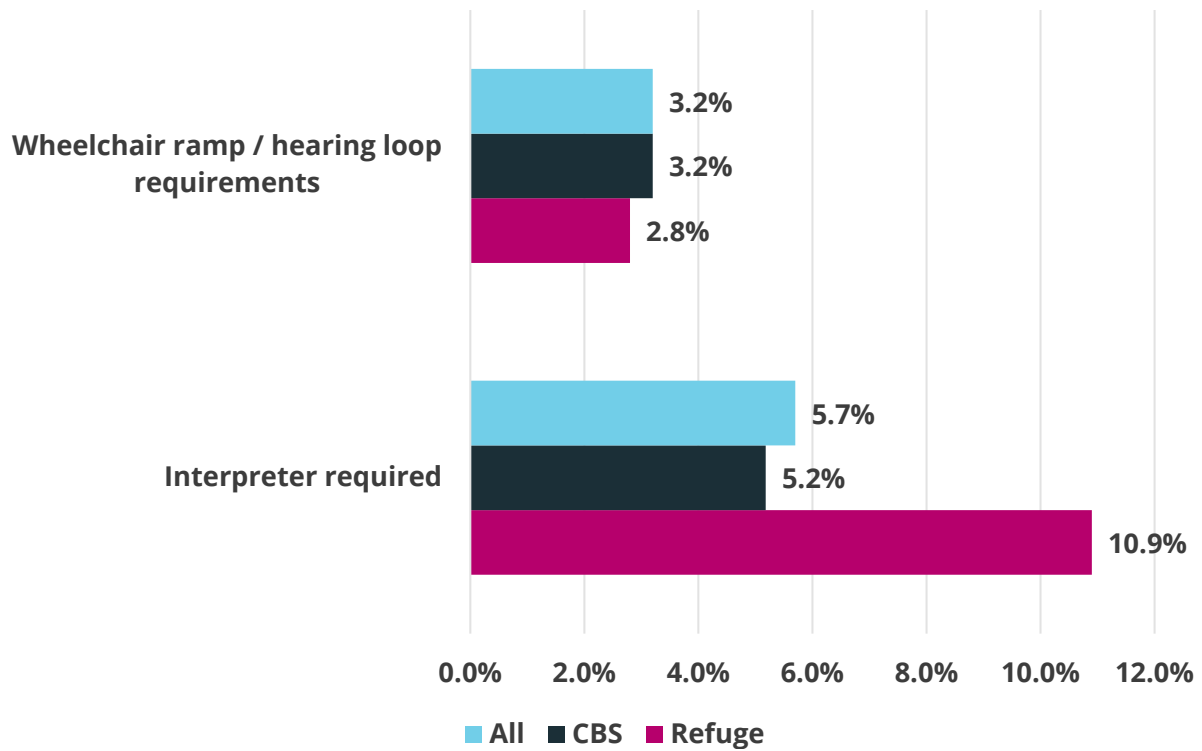
*From a sample of 39,729 abuse profiles. Note that there can be multiple abuse records recorded per service user. Of these 39,698 service users, 25,277 were seeking support for current abuse and 7,117 were seeking support for historic abuse. This information was missing for 2,573 service users (some service users were seeking support for both current and historic abuse). Multiple abuse profiles may be recorded if survivors access multiple services or return to a service within the reporting period.

Chart C10: Support needs of service users 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of 39,698 service users in our sample.

Chart C11: Access requirements of service users 2022-23* (On Track)



*Percentage of 39,698 service users in our sample

Table C3: What were the outcomes of support of service users accessing refuge services? 2022-23 (On Track)	% of service users in refuge*
Child(ren) (For example, supporting children access education and other support agencies)	37.8%
Criminal justice system (For example, supported to gather evidence and report abuse to the police)	30.5%
Mental health (For example, improving coping strategies and access mental health treatment)	51.6%
Financial (For example, accessing benefits or public funds)	54.8%
Education, training, work (For example, starting new employment and accessing work experience)	18.9%
Immigration (For example, support with regularising immigration status)	12.2%
Better manage physical and sexual health	22.9%
Accessed physical and sexual health treatment	35.0%
Housing (For example, support with finding social housing and avoiding eviction)	64.5%
Other (For example, improving relationships with friends and family and supported to access cultural activities)	42.1%
*Based on a sample of 4,176 completed outcomes monitoring forms. Some services users will have completed more than one form if they had multiple stays in refuge throughout the year.	

Appendix D

Women's Aid Definitions

Specialist Women's Domestic Abuse Services & 'By & For' Services

Contents

Background and context	1
Purpose	2
A. Definition of a specialist women's domestic abuse service	2
How is this evidenced?	3
B. Definition of specialist 'by and for' services	6
How is this evidenced?	7

Background and context

Within the domestic abuse and wider violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector there is a shared understanding of 'specialism'. This concept is based on established knowledge and practice and has developed through the years with the expansion of services for women experiencing male violence - from refuges, support in the community, to rape crisis services and many more.

There is currently no legal definition of a 'specialist' or 'by and for' service in the context of domestic abuse, although the government have adopted the following definition:

“Specialist services are those which are specifically designed and whose primary purpose is to support someone who is, or has been affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or any other form of VAWG.

By and for services are specialist services that are led, designed, and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve in responding to VAWG (for example victims and survivors from ethnic minority backgrounds, Deaf and disabled victims and survivors, and LGBT+ victims and survivors).

Communities can be both by virtue of characteristic and/or shared experience. Therefore, by and for services can likewise offer support based on characteristic (e.g., LGBT+ victims) or based on shared experience of a particular VAWG crime type (e.g surviving FGM.”¹⁵)

We are concerned that these definitions lack clarity, specificity and crucially lack any mention of the gendered nature of specialist domestic abuse services. Women's Aid therefore sets out its own definitions in order to ensure that the value and work of specialist women's domestic abuse services and 'by and for' specialist services are understood.

Purpose

This paper sets out Women's Aid's definitions of:

- A. a specialist women's domestic abuse service;**
- B. a specialist 'by and for' service**

These proposed definitions have been informed by research and publications from Women's Aid, Imkaan¹⁶, the Welsh Government's Violence Against

Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Commissioning Statutory Guidance¹⁷, and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention).¹⁸ They are supported by criteria, and indicators, which evidence the definitions.

A. Definition of a specialist women's domestic abuse service

1. Specialist women's domestic abuse services are run by women's, feminist organisations. They are run by women, and for women and their children.
2. Their core business and organisational purpose it is to support survivors and/or children and young people impacted by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The services they deliver are specifically designed to support women and children affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG.
3. Specialist services differ from generic services because they are independent from the state. They were established as local, grassroots and independent organisations, which is critical for women survivors' ability to trust them.
4. The lived experience of women experiencing domestic abuse (survivors) is represented within their governance and staffing structures.
5. Their delivery of support and services is needs-led and gender-responsive. Support is delivered by specially trained staff, with an in-depth knowledge of domestic abuse and VAWG - and the way it impacts women and children.
6. Specialist services understand how sex and other intersectional inequalities - including ethnicity, class, gender identity, age, ability, sexuality, religion, and belief - drive wider patterns of VAWG. This equips them with the technical knowledge required to understand the nuances of domestic abuse and how it manifests.
7. Specialist services provide significant added value to their local communities and fundraise from a range of different sources to meet the needs of women and children. In most cases they have developed as a response to the particular needs of the area and contain within them years of specialist knowledge and expertise relevant to the communities they serve.
8. Specialist organisations operate within an established framework of sector best practice and accredited quality standards led by second tier organisations, which provide benchmarks for training, quality, and safeguarding.

¹⁶ Imkaan, The State of the Sector: Contextualising the current experiences of BME ending violence against women and girls organisations. [Available online.](#)

¹⁷ Welsh Government, Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV), Statutory Guidance for the Commissioning of VAWDSV Services in Wales, May 2019. [Available online.](#)

¹⁸ Council of Europe, Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011. [Available online.](#)

How is this evidenced?

Unless specified otherwise, specialist women’s domestic abuse services are required to meet all of the indicators below to be defined as such.

The below information will be split into two headings, “Criteria” and “Indicators to evidence” per criteria point.

Criteria 1:

Specialist women’s domestic abuse services are run by women’s, feminist organisations. They are run by women, and for women and children.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. Founding documents demonstrate or specify that the organisation holds feminist values and principles.
- ii. The organisation is led by women; the chair and vice chair of the board, the chief executive, senior managers, and a majority of the trustees are women.
- iii. Services deliver support for women and children separately from men and where refuge services are available, provide either single sex or single gender safe accommodation.

Criteria 2:

Their core business and organisational purpose is to support survivors and/or children and young people impacted by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The services they deliver are specifically designed to support women and children affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. Founding documents specify that the organisation has been established/ specifically designed to support women and children affected by domestic abuse, and their core business is domestic abuse/ VAWG.
- ii. Charitable objectives or constitution includes a strategic commitment to ending VAWG and achieving gender equity. Where refuge services are provided, accommodation meets the definition of a refuge on Routes to Support¹⁹, and critically, must be solely for survivors of domestic abuse or VAWG.

¹⁹ Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls service directory run in partnership with Women’s Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women’s Aid and Welsh Women’s Aid.

Criteria 3:

Specialist services differ from generic services because they are independent from the state. They were established as local, grassroots and independent organisations.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. The organisational governance structure is independent from any statutory body.

Criteria 4:

The lived experience of women experiencing domestic abuse (victims and survivors) is represented within their governance and staffing structures.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. Survivors are involved in the planning and evaluation of services and there is a mechanism for the board to consult with current survivors to inform its decision making.

Criteria 5:

Their delivery of support and services is needs-led and gender-responsive. Support is delivered by specialist staff, who have an in-depth knowledge of domestic abuse and VAWG - and the way it impacts women and children.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. The organisation promotes a gendered understanding of domestic abuse as a cause and consequence of women's inequality, in its publicity and promotional material.
- ii. Staff members are trained in line with the National Occupational Standards addressing Domestic and Sexual Abuse.
- iii. Support plans for survivors demonstrate a needs-led approach.

Criteria 6:

Specialist services understand how sex and other intersectional inequalities - including ethnicity, class, gender identity, age, ability, sexuality, religion, and belief - drive wider patterns of VAWG.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. The organisation's constitutional and strategy documents explicitly recognise the gendered nature of domestic abuse and wider forms of VAWG.
- ii. The organisation's publicity and promotional material recognises the ways in which domestic abuse manifests for different groups, such as Black and minoritised women, and the additional barriers and inequalities they face.

Criteria 7:

They add significant value to local communities, and fundraise from a range of different sources to meet the needs of women and children.²⁰

Indicators to evidence:

- i. The organisation has established referral pathways with local statutory agencies and community groups.
- ii. The organisation secures income from non-statutory sources.

Criteria 8:

Specialist organisations operate within an established framework of sector best practice and accredited quality standards led by second tier organisations, which provide benchmarks for training, quality and safeguarding.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. The organisation may hold Women's Aid's National Quality Standards or Imkaan's Accredited Quality Standards (IAQS) or are working towards this accreditation.

²⁰ This is currently a distinction between generic and specialist services because sufficient funding is not available, and commissioned contracts to do not cover work within local communities.

B. Definition of a specialist 'by and for' service

1. Specialist 'by and for' services are run *by and for* the communities they serve, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so they offer a uniquely empowering experience to the communities they support, as the client group is reflected in staffing, management, and governance structures of these organisations.
2. Specialist 'by and for' services have emerged as distinct from wider specialist services, in that they are led by, and seek to support, further minoritised and marginalised groups. They respond to parallel state-imposed barriers due to the marginalisation of the communities they support, who face additional forms of structural inequality (racism, homophobia, classism, Islamophobia etc), alongside misogyny, sexism and violence. While wider specialist services may also support these groups, 'by and for' organisations run independent, specialist and dedicated services specifically for the minoritised community they seek to serve.
3. Equality is an active practice within specialist 'by and for' services; it is central to the values and working practice of the service. The organisation takes an intersectional approach to practising equalities and observing the rights of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.
4. Specialist 'by and for' services are designed to tackle the barriers facing the marginalised communities they support and have specific expertise in meeting their needs. They provide highly tailored, wrap-around holistic recovery and support that addresses a victims and survivor's full range of needs - which often means their work covers all forms of VAWG, as well as wider issues. Specialist by and for services are rooted in the marginalised communities they support, which means they can engage with survivors who may be reluctant to make contact with statutory agencies or generic organisations.
5. Despite the clear evidence that specialist 'by and for' services deliver improved outcomes for minoritised survivors²¹, they often operate in a hostile environment — their expertise and holistic work to support survivors is often devalued and exploited by commissioners and generic or larger services.

How is this evidenced?

Unless specified otherwise, 'by and for' specialist services are required to meet all the indicators below to be defined as such.

The below information will be split into two headings, "Criteria" and "Indicators to evidence" per criteria point.

²¹ Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 'A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales', 2022. [Available online](#).

Criteria 1:

Specialist 'by and for' services are run by and for the communities they serve, such as for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors. In doing so they offer a uniquely empowering experience to the communities they support, as the client group is reflected in staffing, management and governance structures of these organisations.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. Specialist 'by and for' services are led by the community they are designed to support - the chair and vice chair of the board, the chief executive, senior managers, and a majority of the trustees are from this community.²²
- ii. Where a specialist 'by and for' service is part of a larger organisation, this is governed by a board or steering group of individuals from that community.

Criteria 2:

Specialist 'by and for' services have emerged as distinct from wider specialist services, in that they are led by, and seek to support, further minoritised and marginalised groups. Specialist 'by and for' organisations run independent, specialist and dedicated services specifically for the minoritised community they seek to serve.

Indicators to evidence:

- i. Founding documents of the organisation specify that it has been established/ specifically designed, to support a further minoritised or marginalised community - for example on the grounds of race, ethnicity, faith/religion, sexuality, disability, and other protected characteristics.
- ii. The organisational governance structure is independent from any statutory body.

²² This is not a requirement for 100% of the organisation to be from the specific community - but ensures that all of the leadership positions and majority of the trustees are. For example, this would prevent a white-led organisation, without the inherent expertise or knowledge, to hold 'by and for' status because they run a specific refuge dedicated to Black and minoritised women.

Criteria 3:

Equality is an active practice; it is central to the values and working practice of the service. The organisation takes an intersectional approach to practising equalities and observing the rights of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

Indicators to evidence:

- i.** Equalities data is monitored across the organisation; or staff, volunteers, trustees and service users.
- ii.** Codes of conduct, ground rules, shared agreements across the organisation consider equalities.
- iii.** Intersectionality is understood across the organisation- equalities are explicitly in organisational values, policies, processes and recruitment.

Criteria 4:

Specialist 'by and for' services are designed to tackle the barriers facing the marginalised communities they support. They provide highly tailored, wrap- around holistic recovery and support that addresses a victims and survivors full range of needs.

Indicators to evidence:

- i.** Service user support plans and activity reports demonstrate needs-led, holistic interventions, which tackles the additional barriers facing marginalised communities.

Criteria 5:

Specialist 'by and for' services are rooted in the marginalised communities they support.

Indicators to evidence:

- i.** Members of the community supported by the service are involved in the planning and evaluation of services.

The Domestic Abuse Report 2024: The Annual Audit

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