

Tackling the Recruitment & Retention Crisis

**Recommendations from Violence Against Women and Girls
Organisations**

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1. Context

Organisations working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) and support survivors have long been facing a funding crisis. The impact of austerity and poor investment in tackling VAWG, the COVID 19 pandemic and the rising costs of living have all had acute impacts on our sector. This has resulted in undervalued and short-term contracts, underfunded and overstretched services which cannot meet demand and low pay for highly specialist staff.

Competitive tendering processes for specialist services cannot be managed by those who do not have a robust understanding of domestic abuse, sexual violence, so called 'honour based abuse', forced marriage, FGM and other forms of VAWG, but far too often this is the case. Tender processes sometimes prioritise cost over quality, and short-term contracts provide no sustainability for organisations to recruit and retain expert staff.

Contracts may also include requirements for organisations to employ certain roles but without sufficient funding to do so, alongside inadequate contributions to essential central costs and no annual inflationary increases within contracts or grants to meet the higher costs of service delivery. With local authorities across the country set to make significant budget reductions to avoid issuing a section 114 notice, these concerns are only set to grow.

These long-term trends have been compounded by the cost of living crisis and rapid inflation, which means salaries in the VAWG sector do not reflect the expertise required to undertake this complex, challenging work. As women make up the overwhelming majority of our workforce, our sector has been particularly exposed to the rising costs of living – with women working in VAWG services unable to manage on existing salaries but organisations unable to increase their wages.

Evidence suggests that VAWG sector professionals are paid around 20% less than those holding positions in comparable sectors – such as homelessness, substance use or criminal justice. Some roles are advertised at rates below the national living wage, with feedback suggesting this is particularly the case in rural areas and Wales.

These trends are being compounded by the increasing focus on statutory provision of VAWG support services, resulting in 'in-house' services within local authorities, policing, the NHS and other parts of the public sector who can offer more attractive pay and benefits packages including pensions. In the context of current economic challenges, talented staff often simply have no choice but to leave – often meaning that the training, investment and professional development they have received from specialist organisations is lost, at the very least to the sector, if not altogether.

There is a particular concern resulting from the critical funding delivered by government for the statutory duty on local authorities to deliver support in safe accommodation for domestic abuse survivors in England. In some areas, this funding has not been used to support life-saving specialist women's refuges, but to bolster domestic abuse roles within local authorities – despite the clear evidence that women trust and value the independence and expertise of specialist VAWG services. Frontline services report that such roles are paid at salaries much higher than the voluntary sector can pay, and they simply cannot compete.

2. The Impact

These issues are resulting in a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, and real risk and safety issues for survivors. A survey of Women's Aid Federation of England (Women's Aid) members in 2022 found that:

- 78% of responding organisations were struggling to recruit for vacant roles at the salaries they can pay – and this reached 92% of 'by and for' Black and minoritised women's services.¹
- Staff were using foodbanks in one in five responding organisations.
- 67% of responding organisations reported they have lost staff who have left either to work in a higher paid role elsewhere or because they can no longer afford to keep working (for example, due to childcare costs). Over half had lost staff to a local authority. Almost one-third (28.4%) were not able to provide any cost of living pay increases to staff – reaching 54% of 'by and for' Black and minoritised women's services.²

Welsh Women's Aid's Perfect Storm report in 2022 found that "*staff in specialist services are paid less for the same work as staff in the statutory sector.*" In particular, the report identified that:

*"a change in working practices because of the pandemic has also hampered recruitment efforts to plug these gaps. Potential recruits now have far more opportunity to apply for roles where they can work remotely or work from home, which can make frontline service roles seem like a less appealing prospect."*³

This issue has not dissipated post-pandemic, as many frontline services – particularly refuges – cannot be delivered remotely but applicants increasingly favour hybrid working.

In addition to unfilled vacancies, high staff turnover rates are currently a serious concern for services – leading to significant time and resource spent on recruitment, as well as challenges in training and supporting staff where there is constant turnover and difficulty in maintaining the consistency of service delivery. The instability of work within the VAWG sector results in women, who do not know whether they will be employed beyond the current financial year, struggling with renting, obtaining a mortgage or other lending, and planning financially.

The recruitment and retention crisis is also driving unmanageable workloads, stress and staff burnout. Women who have gone to work within other comparable sectors have fed back that their new organisation would employ two or three roles to do the same amount of work expected of just one professional in the VAWG sector. This has a direct impact on services' ability to support women and children experiencing violence and abuse - resulting in longer waiting times for services, lack of continuity or reduced levels of support, and the inability to access support at all. There are real and significant risks associated with not being able to sufficiently pay, train or support staff working directly with women and children experiencing violence and abuse.

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

By & for Black and minoritised women's service

¹ Women's Aid members' experiences of the cost of living crisis – November 2022 survey findings: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/For-WAFE-publication-members-experiences-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

² Women's Aid members' experiences of the cost of living crisis – November 2022 survey findings: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/For-WAFE-publication-members-experiences-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

³ Welsh Women's Aid, A Perfect Storm: The Funding Crisis Pushing the Welsh VAWDSV Sector to the Brink, October 2022

The domestic abuse perpetrator response sector is also under pressure and services are at best scaling back, and at worst are at risk of closure. The approach of commissioning short term contracts of one or two years and spot purchasing is impacting on staff retention. Working with perpetrators at all levels, from early intervention to high harm, high risk, is challenging work that requires significant levels of skill and tenacity, and the work needs to be delivered through high quality programmes that recognises these skills and rewards the expertise of the workforce. If we lose talented people, growing the capacity to provide high quality perpetrator responses will continue to face difficulty.

We are sounding a clear warning that the future of this sector is at risk. If the network of specialist services collapses due to loss and lack of staff, the government and statutory services will no longer be able to rely on the sector to deliver expert, life-saving support across the country and achieve national ambitions to tackle violence against women and girls.

3. Current responses

VAWG organisations in England and Wales have been [calling for urgent action](#) from national government and public sector commissioners to tackle the impact of the cost of living increases on the sector – including for grants to be paid in advance, guaranteed three to five year contracts with inflationary uplifts, and mid-term contracts to be uplifted to reflect higher operational costs.

In August 2023, the government launched a £76 million Community Organisations Cost of Living Fund, which has been accessed by charities struggling with higher operating costs but which needs to be spent by the end of March 2024. Local and regional commissioners have also made emergency funding available. However, short-term funding pots do not resolve the long, term systemic challenges with funding and commissioning – which have a direct impact on the recruitment and retention of expert staff to support survivors and effectiveness of service delivery.

In addition, we are concerned that individual funder or commissioner responses and solutions to the recruitment and retention crisis may have unintended consequences. For example, a funder of a specific service or project within an organisation may agree to fund higher salaries or cost of living uplifts, but this may not apply to other services or colleagues in another part of the organisation. This puts organisations in the challenging position of being able to pay some staff, who may be doing the same or similar work as others, higher salaries – which is not fair and potentially could have legal consequences.

We are also seeing other concerning practices emerge during this crisis - such as requirements on individual workers to pay the costs of qualifications (such as the ISVA/IDVA accreditation) and imposing other conditions to access qualifications and training.

4. Recommendations

Sustainable investment in specialist VAWG services is urgently needed to save lives and ensure that specialist women's organisations can continue to operate in a severely challenging economic landscape. It is also essential for reducing the impact of VAWG on public spending long term; research by ResPublica for Women's Aid found that for every £1 invested into specialist women's domestic abuse services, there is a £9 benefit to the public purse.⁴

We also recognise that it is not only increased funding which is urgently needed, but also reform of funding and commissioning practices, and action to tackle current recruitment and retention pressures. This is vital to ensure the sustainability of specialist VAWG organisations.

⁴ Women's Aid. (2023) Investing to save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support. Bristol: Women's Aid.

We are therefore recommending that an independent task force is established, which closely involves the specialist VAWG sector, to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis.

We propose that the taskforce would:

- Be chaired by an independent VAWG expert, such as an academic, who has a proven track record of expertise and who takes a feminist approach.
- Meaningfully involve the specialist VAWG sector in England and Wales, including through:
 - Establishing an advisory group which involves a representative group of VAWG sector organisations, including services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors;
 - Gathering evidence – including through written and oral submissions from a comprehensive range of organisations, including 'by & for services';
 - Conduct in-depth site visits to frontline services for a meaningful period of time to understand how recruitment and retention issues are impacting survivors;
 - Interviews with current and departed staff, including those who have left the specialist VAWG sector to work in the public sector.
- Meaningfully involve survivors using specialist VAWG services, to understand the impact of current recruitment and retention practices on their journey and the support they receive.
- Include evidence from national and local government, Police and Crime Commissioners, Integrated Care Boards, other public sector commissioners and funders.
- Publish a report on findings, including an analysis of the issues with recruitment and retention and their impact on survivors, current and projected staffing levels, and recommendations to national governments, public sector commissioners and specialist VAWG organisations for reform.

Such a taskforce would seek to work alongside the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Victims' Commissioner and the National VAWDASV Advisers for Wales and Welsh Government VAWDASV team, whose remit relates to the sustainability of specialist support services.

The taskforce would require appropriate resourcing to ensure its work was comprehensive and meaningful. We recommend that relevant national government departments – the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – provide the funding for the taskforce.