

Price of Safety:

The cost of leaving an abuser and rebuilding a safe, independent life

Key findings

It could cost a survivor **almost £50,000** to leave an abuser, based on the direct costs of fleeing and rebuilding a new life. In the best-case scenario, a survivor would still face a **£10,000 deficit** after receiving her full entitlement of support from the state.

For survivors who have no recourse to public funds, the deficit would be much larger

Around £20,000

- The biggest single cost is likely to be **legal fees for the family court**, where survivors have to fight to ensure their children are safe. Access to legal aid can decrease the cost of hiring a lawyer **by 90%**.
- The second biggest cost is **housing**. Only **two thirds** of these costs are met through benefits.
- This **£10,000 deficit is not inevitable**. It could be significantly reduced through targeted policy changes (see our recommendations).

These estimates are based on Women's Aid's fictional case study, 'Anna'. Her journey illustrates typical circumstances and costs in the first year after fleeing.



One child (pre-school age)



Few financial resources due to economic abuse



Living in West Midlands



Female survivor



Not employed



Has recourse to public funds

» Context

Domestic abuse is a **high-risk, high-harm crime**. It is the most common form of violence against women and girls (VAWG). For the Labour Government to meet its mission of halving VAWG over the next decade, they must enable survivors of domestic abuse to **flee to safety and 'stay fled'**.

Currently, due to the significant barriers to leaving, many adult and child survivors are trapped with the perpetrator for years. Over this time, the perpetrator often **increases the abuse** and inflicts severe physical, psychological, sexual and economic harm.

» Why do survivors need to flee?

When a survivor ends her relationship with the abuser, **the abuse does not end**. In fact, it often escalates. Many women have to leave their home and flee to **keep themselves and their children safe**. They cannot rely on the perpetrators receiving a prison sentence or on protection orders, which are often not effectively enforced.¹

» What does it cost to flee and what support is available?

Women's Aid has calculated the costs for the first year after fleeing, as leaving is a process.² At any time, a survivor could be forced to return to the perpetrator if she faces an unaffordable cost or is faced with homelessness. **Much state support is paid in arrears, which compounds this issue.**

Immediate costs

Costs

£1,000³

Support

£500

To keep safe, Anna and her child may have had to flee secretly and quickly, without taking much. After paying for transport to flee, she may have to replace compromised technology and essential possessions. **The Home Office Flexible Fund**, which Women's Aid disseminates, provides Flee Fund grants of up to £500 to help with the costs of fleeing.

Legal

Costs

£25,500

Support

£22,500

Many perpetrators apply to the family court for child contact in order to cause the survivor expense and stress.⁴ Navigating the family court without a lawyer is very difficult – but legal fees are expensive. Many survivors go into debt to pay for a lawyer and have the best chance of keeping their children safe.⁵ We have assumed that Anna has access to legal aid. But legal aid has been severely restricted since 2013 and **many survivors are not eligible for this.**

¹ Centre for Women's Justice. (2019) Centre for Women's Justice Super-complaint: Police failure to use protective measures in cases involving violence against women and girls. London: CWJ. Available [online](#).

² Only costs directly related to fleeing and rebuilding a safe life are included. Costs that would have been incurred had the survivor not fled (e.g. groceries and bills) and support related to these day-to-day expenses (e.g. standard allowance of Universal Credit) are excluded.

³ We have rounded these figures for ease. Please see the report for more exact costs.

⁴ Ministry of Justice. (2020) Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases. London: MoJ. Available [online](#).

Housing

Costs

£13,500

Support

£8,900

There is a **severe lack of social housing**, so we have assumed Anna spends six months in council temporary accommodation and then moves to the private rented sector. A Future Fund grant from the Flexible Fund could cover Anna's rental deposit (£1,000). There is **Housing Benefit** available for temporary accommodation and the **Universal Credit** housing element for renting, but neither reflect the true costs, leading to a £4,600 deficit.

Childcare

Costs

£5,700

Support

£5,300

Building a new independent life is a complicated process. Survivors face **a lot of administrative tasks and appointments** with a variety of agencies – which are difficult to manage when caring for a young child. We have assumed Anna's child has a part-time nursery place. This is mostly funded through the 15 free hours which all three and four year olds receive and through Universal Credit childcare support, which covers up to **85% of childcare costs**.

Health

Costs

£2,400

Support

None

Specialist mental health support is often needed to deal with the trauma of domestic abuse. But NHS counsellors may have a limited understanding of abuse and specialist domestic abuse services are not sufficiently funded to provide therapy.⁶ We have assumed Anna accesses counselling privately. This support may be essential to her ability to cope and recover. Attending these multiple, necessary appointments would likely require more travel, so we have included the cost of a bus pass for Anna.

Travel

Costs

£1,000

Support

None

In addition to state support, Anna would be owed child maintenance by her ex-partner. Many perpetrators **refuse to pay this** and the **Child Maintenance Service enforcement is often ineffective**,⁷ so we have estimated that Anna only receives half her entitlement: £1,800.

In total, the costs of fleeing are **almost £50,000** – but the available support is **only about £40,000**. This represents a **deficit of £10,000** (or 20%) which might force a survivor and her children into debt, poverty or homelessness. It could also mean she has no choice but to return to the abuser.

⁵ Surviving Economic Abuse. (2021) Denied justice: How the legal aid means test prevents victims of domestic abuse from accessing justice and rebuilding their lives. London: SEA. Available [online](#).

⁶ Women's Aid. (2022) Are You Listening? 7 Pillars for a survivor-led approach to mental health support. Bristol: Women's Aid. Available [online](#).

⁷ Work and Pensions Committee. (2023) Children in poverty: Child Maintenance Service. London: House of Commons. Available [online](#).

⁸ Women's Aid. (2024) Funding safer futures: A government pathway for the quantity and quality of funding required to help women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Bristol: Women's Aid. Available [online](#).

What barriers do survivors face to fleeing?

Many survivors have **little to no financial resources when they flee**, due to years of economic abuse. This is why the safety net of state support is so important.

For some survivors, the costs of fleeing are far higher. For example:

- Disabled survivors and those in rural areas may need taxis or a car.
- Survivors in London and the southeast face higher housing costs.
- Legal fees can soar in complicated family court cases.

For others, the support available is much lower:

- Survivors with no recourse to public funds would face a £20,000 deficit – twice as large as Anna's.
- Survivors who do not qualify for legal aid would face a £33,000 deficit – or advocate for their children on their own.
- Survivors subject to the two-child limit or benefit cap would have their benefits reduced further.

What needs to change?

To ensure survivors can access safety, there needs to be a cross-government approach to strengthening essential support. **Changes that could be made in the next year include the following:**



The Department for Work and Pensions to **assess all new policies** for the impact on survivors' ability to flee abuse.



The Home Office, along with HM Treasury, to **guarantee ongoing funding** for the Flexible Fund in the upcoming Spending Review.

Some changes would require more time and funding to implement, but they are just as important. These include:



Increasing funding for **specialist domestic abuse services**, which currently face a £238 million shortfall a year.⁸



The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to **build more social homes** to meet demand.



The Ministry of Justice to **exempt survivors** from the civil legal aid means test.



The Home Office to **exempt survivors** from the no recourse to public funds condition.

» Please see the **full report** for further recommendations.

For further information about this report or to arrange a meeting, please contact policy@womensaid.org.uk

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of just under 180 organisations which provide over 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across England. For 50 years we have campaigned on behalf of our members and survivors to shape policy and practice, and to raise awareness of domestic abuse.