



Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Domestic Abuse Act 2021

Thursday 18 June 2026

11.40 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Barran (The Chair); Baroness Gerada; Baroness Gohir; Baroness Hussein-Ece; Baroness Hyde of Bemerton; Baroness Neate; Lord Polak; Baroness Porter of Fulwood; Baroness Rafferty; Lord Russell of Liverpool.

In the absence of Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, Baroness Barran was called to the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 18

Heard in Public

Questions 150 – 158

Witnesses

Ellie Butt, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Refuge; Veronica Oakeshott, Head of External Affairs, Women's Aid.

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Examination of witnesses

Ellie Butt and Veronica Oakeshott.

Q150 The Chair: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this second session today of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 post-legislative scrutiny panel. We are delighted that we have Ellie Butt from Refuge and Veronica Oakeshott from Women's Aid here to talk to us this morning. As you know, we have a series of questions to go through and we have an hour to do that. We look forward very much to hearing your answers.

Q151 Lord Russell of Liverpool: Good morning, and thank you very much for coming in. This is a very simple and straightforward question, but I suspect the answer to it may be less so. What is your headline assessment of the relationship between the Domestic Abuse Act and the Government's VAWG strategy?

Veronica Oakeshott: The strategy seeks to operationalise the intention of the Act. Obviously, it is not the first strategy since the Act came into force, but the strategy seeks to go further. Rightly so, because a response to a complex problem such as domestic abuse cannot be contained in a piece of law; it will always be something much more comprehensive than that. That is what the strategy seeks to do. It seeks to speak in areas where the Act is silent, for example, involvement of the health system.

Between the two of them, they fail to address some key areas, in particular provisions around migrant women. In so far as the strategy seeks to operationalise the Act and achieve this big government ambition of halving VAWG, I am afraid that, while making good progress, it falls significantly short of both those things. That is because of a mix of reasons. The strategy is inadequately resourced. There are good reasons for that; we know that many areas of political life need resourcing, but certainly more resources will be needed to meet the ambition of the Act, the strategy and the Government's manifesto commitment.

There are also commissioning decisions that need great improvement, which I am sure we will talk about today that mean that, even with existing resources, they are not having the impact that they could have. There is the age-old problem of cross-Whitehall working, which is improving but was highlighted by previous committees, such as the National Audit Office report. I would say in some areas, there is a paucity of ambition. The particular bit there is around children as victims in their own right. That quite ground-breaking element of the Domestic Abuse Act is so important. We know these things take real time. I was really involved in the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act and this is not something that happens overnight at all, but the things to follow to really support children as victims in their own right are not yet there. I hope we will have more of a chance to talk about that today.

Ellie Butt: I do not have a huge amount to add; I largely agree with Veronica. The violence against women and girls strategy can be seen as a logical next step from the Domestic Abuse Act. It is broader and more

ambitious. Really importantly, it is a violence against women and girls strategy and centres the gendered reality of violence against women and girls. As the Domestic Abuse Act went through, there was a big push for it to be a violence against women and girls Act. It was not, but it is right and good that we have a strategy that sees the continuum of violence and abuse that women and girls largely face in this country.

As Veronica said, children are the huge omission in the strategy. There was an expectation that the strategy would take forward the idea of children as victims in their own right, which, as the committee has heard time and time again, has not led to much more than words on paper so far. I would highlight the ambition around prevention in the strategy as a really crucial element. Again, there are some ambitious words and what sits behind that is still really in its infancy, but it is important that it is there. The Domestic Abuse Act was not hugely focused on prevention, much more on response.

Yes, it is a logical next step. It takes us further. Implementation will be key, as Veronica has already said. There is very little funding attached to the violence against women and girls strategy which, in our view, is a huge omission considering the level of ambition that this Government have around halving violence against women and girls. We were not expecting billions—we know the economic reality—but it is telling how little money the Government found to put alongside their violence against women and girls strategy.

Q152 The Chair: We have the jigsaw of the Domestic Abuse Act, the VAWG strategy, the Online Safety Act and now, thankfully—in my opinion, anyway—some further restrictions on children’s access to social media. However, we have heard deeply troubling evidence about tech-enabled abuse. I wondered if you could say how effective you think that little jigsaw is in addressing tech-enabled abuse, where any gaps are and what else might be needed.

Ellie Butt: At Refuge, we are really fortunate to have a dedicated tech-facilitated abuse team. That team used to handle cases where there was a tech element; now that is true in basically every single case. It handles some really complex cases, and it enables the rest of the organisation to support survivors of tech-enabled abuse in day-to-day practice. I would agree with your analysis that we have a jigsaw. It is a jigsaw with some big pieces missing, and that is part of the problem. There is no co-ordination around tech-facilitated abuse, there is no clear leadership and there is no plan. We have had bits and pieces of a response.

At Refuge, we campaigned for the threatening to share intimate images offence to be in the Domestic Abuse Act. We worked with colleagues across the violence against women and girls sector on the Online Safety Act so that it had some measures around violence against women and girls. We have seen lots of reactive bits of legislation, which is really welcome. Recently there was the Grok scandal, and then the Government acted around image-based abuse and take-down. However, it has all

been very piecemeal, and that is what we are left with. We have bits and pieces with no clear co-ordination or ownership.

There are some real gaps. We have had some changes to the criminal law, although there is a question around the extent to which those offences are well understood and implemented, which I will not go into right now. We have had some online safety regulation, although I emphasise that the violence against women and girls guidance that is part of the Online Safety Act is guidance. We have mandatory codes around children and around terrorism, but we have a voluntary code on violence against women and girls, and there is a really clear argument that that needs to be upgraded and upgraded quickly.

We do not have the other element of tech-facilitated abuse, which is the devices and software: smart-enabled devices, doorbells, fridges, surveillance software, and the ease with which parental control-type software is used to just completely monitor and track everything a woman does. It is often quite clear in the design of that technology that that is what its purpose is for. We have silence on that. The VAWG strategy has some vague commitments around safety by design around some things, but we need to go much further in the regulation of everyday technology that can be used to monitor and surveil easily and for pennies. That is where we are really lacking. We also need some co-ordination because we really need to be proactive in this area. It is all too little, too late at the moment.

Veronica Oakeshott: I would like to add perhaps two bits. First, there is the pressure that this is putting on services. Ellie just mentioned how almost all cases are coming with some element of tech-related abuse. Obviously, that has great impact on young people; children as victims in their own right are also affected. There is also just that pressure to keep up with whatever the newest crazy iteration of misogyny is in the online space.

In our annual audit of our members, we ask about emerging trends and threats. In our most recent audit we found that slightly over 15% of our services—we have just under 200 member organisations throughout England—reported that survivors in their service had disclosed being coerced into participating in OnlyFans. No doubt you have heard about OnlyFans through this committee, but in essence, their partners are monetising their abuse. The potential for the monetisation of misogyny is just horrendous.

Without wanting to be too doomsday, we have not seen anything yet. When we look at the resourcing of the strategy and the likely surge linked with this technical revolution that we are all going through, the two do not match, sadly. It is probably time for us to start considering how we actually get more resources. These huge tech companies are making money. Even with the OnlyFans example, depressingly enough, the people posting those pictures make money but so do the platforms. Through Ofcom fines and other ways, how can we levy fines in that hugely commercialised environment where people are breaking the law?

How can we pour some of that money back to support these front-line services, such as us, our colleagues at Refuge, and the whole domestic abuse sector that are picking up the pieces of this misogynistic use of technology day in, day out?

Q153 **Baroness Neate:** Slightly cheekily, I also have a bit of a follow-up question to what was just being said about misogyny. I just wanted to test your view on whether there is something that could specifically be done around misogyny within the criminal justice system itself, as an aggravator or something. There has been progress on that but, given its relationship with the tech arena in violence against women and girls, I just wanted to ask about that—briefly, because I know it is a bit cheeky.

It is really well known that the violence against women and girls strategy's aim is to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade. We have already heard about some of your reservations about what needs to happen in order to make that remotely likely. To what extent does the Domestic Abuse Act support that aim to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade? How could it be improved to do so? My question about misogyny relates to that as well, in a way.

Ellie Butt: I will start with the misogyny question and then move on to the next one. At Refuge, we worked with others a while ago on making misogyny a hate crime. There was a real gap in hate legislation; criminal activity motivated by hatred of women and girls was not really there. I know there have been some recent changes around aggravating factors, which we welcome. I do not have a comprehensive knowledge of where the existing gaps are.

The criminal law has a role to play there, but perhaps the greatest benefits are going back to that tech element and the way in which algorithms really put misogynistic content on steroids. We did some research recently with the End Violence Against Women Coalition, which has not yet been published, that asked how many people were receiving unprompted misogynistic content. It is pretty high. That is where we really need to look at the regulation of these online spaces and really push tech companies on their algorithms because, as Veronica says, they are not neutral actors; they are profiting and adding fuel to the fire. It needs to be a combination. Yes, the criminal law has an important role to play, but it is tech where we could stand the chance to gain the most.

In terms of whether the Domestic Abuse Act supports the mission of halving violence against women and girls, my answer is yes, a little. There is a lot in the Domestic Abuse Act that is to be welcomed. For example, there is the duty around safe accommodation and the additional funding that came from that. That is really significant. There are problems with it, which I am sure we will go into, but it has increased the sustainability of safe accommodation that is absolutely vital if we are to halve violence against women and girls. Women need a place to go.

Where it really needs to go further is in looking at community-based services. We need a similar framework where we can learn from the

issues we have had with accommodation to really shore up community-based services and to end this patchwork of services—in terms of geographical areas and how a service will be commissioned for 18 months, then they will change it a bit. That is the next step from the Domestic Abuse Act around that.

I want to talk about DAPOs a little. You have heard lots about the new orders that are still being piloted and soon to be implemented. In and of themselves DAPOs will not enormously contribute to halving violence against women and girls, but there is some potential if the implementation of those orders is really used to drive up police practice. That really involves resourcing. We have heard from the Louise Casey review and others that public protection that responds to domestic abuse call-outs every 20 seconds—or however often it is now—is often really poorly resourced with the least experienced officers rotating around very quickly.

I would love to see us using the rollout of DAPOs to really try to fix some core problems that lead to really patchy and sometimes quite poor police responses. Training is vital, but it is not enough alone; it is about the resourcing, the leadership and the focus. There are elements where we could really use the limited impact the Domestic Abuse Act has had to push forward. On its own it is helpful, but it is not going to be a game-changer in halving violence against women and girls.

Veronica Oakeshott: For your additional question, I am afraid I am going to rely on Ellie's excellent response. On the wider question, the Act is a necessary but insufficient part of the halving VAWG ambition. The strategy really makes some good progress. It is the most cross-government strategy that has been published yet. The involvement of the NHS—although it is still not quite clear what the funding attached to that is, and certainly the named funding in the strategy is tiny for the NHS—is very significant and important, as are the new commitments on education and prevention. These help build a far more comprehensive approach than we have had yet. However, there are some key elements I would like to highlight that will be really important in getting us closer towards that halving VAWG ambition.

The first is on the improved recognition of Black, minoritised and migrant survivors. All our data shows that these groups have a much harder time accessing services, that the services that are appropriate for them really struggle to get commissioned and that the children of migrant survivors have a particularly difficult time getting the absolute basics, such as safe accommodation when they need it. In the online world, the experiences of Black and minoritised women are systematically worse than they are for white women. These factors are inadequately addressed in the strategy. While the Act itself certainly talks about the sharing of information, for example, there is a lot more to do on protecting migrant women in particular in terms of the sharing of information.

Over the course of your evidence, I am sure you will have heard people talk about the firewall that is needed between police and migrant

survivors to give them the confidence to report to the police without fearing that their immigration status is going to be damaged in some way. I know work is happening on that but there is a lot more to do. That Black, minoritised and migrant survivor element is one that needs uplifting.

The second, as we have already talked about, is children as victims in their own right. We come to that later on in this evidence session and we can talk about it in more detail. In essence, the strategy focuses on prevention, which is very important for children, but less on provision of services for children as victims in their own right.

There is amazing experience in the House on this. There are people who will talk about their experiences of having grown up in families where there has been domestic abuse. Societally, we are only just starting to understand quite how important that is and the services that are needed in response.

There is then the implementation of Part 4. I am sorry; I know I am going on at length. But that implementation of Part 4, the safe accommodation duty is such an important—

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt you, but that is literally going to be our next area of focus. Can I pause you there? That would be very kind.

Veronica Oakeshott: I will hold it, but I would like to just mention before—because we might not pick it up in the next bit—that there is no duty to commission community-based services. If you do not want or need safe accommodation but you desperately need other forms of help, there is no duty to provide that. We know that our services and other key services are really struggling without those commissioning duties.

Q154 **Baroness Gohir:** This is your opportunity to talk about the safe accommodation duty and how you think the violence against women and girls strategy can help implement that.

Ellie Butt: The safe accommodation duty is such an important element of the Domestic Abuse Act. As I said before, it has had a noticeable impact, not necessarily on the number of refuge spaces but on the sustainability of a lot of those spaces. We welcome it. In terms of the violence against women and girls strategy, a really important element is that it puts some additional money towards it: £19 million over three years. There is still a shortfall. Women's Aid calculations estimate that there is still around a £55 million gap between what is needed to make that duty work and what we have. Still, it was important that there was some funding there.

A challenge with the violence against women and girls strategy is that it assumes that the Part 4 duty is being implemented perfectly, and that we can take it as read that that is fine and that we will do other things, which unfortunately is not the case. There are a few key issues with the implementation of the Part 4 duty. The fundamental one is that refuges need to be a national system. Survivors move to be safe; refuges are often not for local women, but it is reciprocal. People are moving around

the country to be safe. However, this system is being implemented locally with very limited national oversight. There is really not a clear understanding still of how many refuge spaces there are, where they are, and where the gaps are. That is a real challenge.

At Refuge we provide refuge services directly; we have around 70 at the moment. For the last few years, we are having to really make the case quite fully to lots of local authorities again that, "You need to invest in these services. Okay, they might not be for women from your area but the women from your area are going over there, and you need to have some. That's how it works". That feels like we are going backwards again. We used to make that argument all the time. I would say it got a little better after the passing of the Domestic Abuse Act, but it is a real struggle again. It is clear why. Local authorities are under a lot of strain, and they are looking for where they can cut.

In the slightly more complicated local arrangements where there is a tier 1 authority and a tier 2 authority, and the tier 1 authority holds the duty but historically the tier 2s have usually commissioned these services, we are starting to see the money that was in the system fall away. Now it is only the central government domestic abuse safe accommodation funding that is being spent, if that makes sense. While the duty was designed to be additional, there are no real levers to make that happen in practice.

There are a few exceptions of authorities that say, "I know we don't have to spend this money on this but we really want to, and we value it". However, we are seeing some services, for example in London, that are at risk because the boroughs are saying, "We don't have to fund these anymore and we're being told by our leaders that this isn't what we're spending money on. Go to the GLA and if not, then it'll have to close". There is a lack of grip over the implementation, and a real gap where we need some national oversight that can pull together the differences across local authorities and step in when needed.

Veronica Oakeshott: Maybe just to illustrate the scale of the remaining challenge, I would like to draw attention to the data in our annual audit just past, where nearly two-thirds of referrals to refuge are rejected. That is primarily due to a lack of bed space. There was an uplift of about 6 million per year in the most recent funding package. That is absolutely welcome, but that two-thirds rejection works out as about 30,000 individuals or families. If you do the rough maths—6 million divided by the 30,000—that is about £200 per individual or family. To accommodate somebody safely while you help them find their feet until they know what the next steps are, that barely gets a late-notice night in a Travelodge, let alone something safe and stable for families who have been through something awful and need a little time to think about next steps.

Baroness Gohir: What happens to the two-thirds? Where do they end up going then?

Veronica Oakeshott: I would like to refer to my team for a more detailed answer to you on that, if that is okay. People with no recourse to

public funds have particular challenges. I want to highlight that, where families have no recourse to public funds, we found that children's services have refused to provide safe accommodation in 85% of cases, which really brings home just how desperate some families are.

The other thing to add is around ring-fencing. There is a ring-fence for the safe accommodation duty money that sits inside a wider homelessness ring-fence. Sorry, I should get my technical terms right: the wider grant is ring-fenced, which is Part 4 and homelessness together. That means that there could be fluidity between the two, so you could see domestic abuse-related money seeping into addressing other homelessness needs. Obviously, there are great crossovers between the two, but it is just something to be aware of and a potential risk.

The other ring-fencing point is just that there is not a ring-fence for "by and for" services. That would be really welcome. By that, I mean services that are run by and for specific populations. We know that for Black and minoritised women, deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors, those kinds of services run by and for those groups really make a difference. For example, 67% of Black and minoritised survivors wanted a specialist service run by their own community. I know we are going to talk about commissioning shortly but, without a ring-fence, those services really struggle to get commissioned just because of the barriers and the way the commissioning system is set up.

Q155 Baroness Porter of Fulwood: That segues perfectly to the funding question, on which you have both given us some really specific and very helpful points. This is something that has come through really clearly as an issue across all the sessions we have had. In addition to the points you have already made, are there others that you want to drill down into very specifically? I have a couple of points that I would find it helpful if you could address. Veronica, regarding the point you ended on there around specialist services, if you could say a little about what you think the answer is there, that would be helpful.

In addition to that, if you have examples of cross-Whitehall commissioning where you think it is actually working and best practice that we can look at, that would be really helpful. This links a bit to that point of yours, Veronica, but in the first session today we heard evidence that discussed a hierarchy, where the funding went first to Government and local government services, and then the specialist services community and voluntary sector services received just whatever was left over. Do you have any comments on that hierarchy? What can be done to actually structure the system so that you have more nuance around looking at the appropriate places to channel funding for different things rather than that hierarchy, if you think that that exists here?

The Chair: I am going to do my boring clock monitor warning. If you can keep your responses reasonably focused, that would be great, to make sure we get through everything.

Veronica Oakeshott: On commissioning, there needs to be a statutory duty on funding community-based services if halving VAWG is going to be achieved, because an accommodation-only approach is not going to have that impact. It is important—required, but not sufficient.

On the wider questions around commissioning, including solutions and what can be done, there is a need for more robust oversight. There is actually some really good commissioning guidance already out there, and the Government are doing a review of commissioning at the moment, as you know. We hope that that guidance will be even further improved.

The important thing, though, is that things such as the national statement of expectations, although good, have not really had any teeth. How can you actually back them up and really hold commissioners to account for delivering on those standards that are envisaged centrally? More work needs to be done on that, and it could be to do with statutory duties. This is perhaps a thing for legislators more than us, in figuring out what tools would work, but perhaps there could be a statutory duty to have regard for the guidance.

At base, there is a real challenge with the overuse of competitive market commissioning-based decision-making—competitive procurement. You have commissioners behaving as though they are trying to commission the next iteration of Trident, when they are actually spending £30,000 on a local service. There is no competitive market in domestic abuse services. There is no sufficient provision for there to be any choice for survivors, as they cannot vote with their feet like you would in a market. Let us not pretend that there is a market; let us not waste public money on expensive, lengthy commissioning procedures, which in effect exclude small organisations from participating because they involve so much upfront time, and instead make much better use of grant-making.

Grant-making is entirely legal as long as the contracts are under £700,000 including VAT, which I am sad to say is virtually all domestic abuse-related contracts. Grant-making should be much more used by commissioners. We very much hope that the Government in this next round of commissioning reviews will be reminding commissioners that they should be proportionate in the systems they are using and that they can make grants. That would be particularly helpful for “by and for”, which would also benefit from a “by and for” ring-fence.

Ellie Butt: I have just a couple of things to add there. I completely support and echo the fact that we really need something substantial around community-based services. That is a missing piece of the puzzle. Commissioning can be far too complicated and resource-intensive, and disproportionately so. Competitive tendering is probably appropriate in some cases but, as Veronica says, it does not need to be the default, and it is.

There are also some real basics that we are still failing to get right. For example, we still see really short-term contracts for really complicated services: “Provide a domestic abuse service for accommodation and

community-based services, for all forms of VAWG, for all different groups, for quite a small amount of money, for 12 months". These things just are not realistic, and we are still seeing that. I would say it has become marginally better in recent years. We see a few more of the three-to-five-year contracts, which we would say should be a minimum. As you articulated it, Baroness Porter, we still have not moved away from the approach of just using whatever is left: "We have a little left; let's see if a local charity will do something for a year". That is not a way to commission life-saving, crucial services for survivors of violence against women and girls.

Because of this complex procurement process, at Refuge we often might be trying to bid for a service; sometimes it is a service we already run and we are bidding to run it again, but now we have to demonstrate our social value. We are having to do things such as ask our staff to volunteer in the community, even though they are—sadly—relatively poorly paid on the front line. There is not much money in this work. They are working extremely hard and handling huge levels of risk. It feels performative and just silly in terms of applying what is there for these big public sector, private company, billion-pound contracts.

These things should be easy to fix. I know that the Home Office and others are working on new commissioning guidance. If that is developed with a bit of ambition and oversight, we should be able to make the system work a bit better, but not without some major changes around community-based services and the level of funding in the system. When you compare the scale of the problem, the cost to society is still relatively small. None of us are expecting that to change overnight, but we need to keep in our sight that improving the system can do only so much when it is chronically underfunded.

Yes, there is that element. Let us make the system we have better, but we also need to be ambitious. We really want to get to a state—at Refuge we really want to—where a survivor can access the service she needs at the point she needs it. That is still far too hard for lots of women across the country.

Baroness Gerada: What about joint commissioning? I take the point about competitive tendering but sometimes things are done the same all the time, and a competitive tender can bring in innovation and different partners. We have heard examples of local authorities with pooled budgets, but do you have experience of joint commissioning, so we actually have an end-to-end? Every bit of the system has a transactional cost, no matter how small, which is a wasted cost in a sense. Do you have experience of that?

Ellie Butt: We have some examples. It is not quite pooled, but London works to pool resources from the boroughs and commission across the city, and there are some really great examples of good practice there. For example, at Refuge, we are the lead partner at the moment in the Ascent Pan London Floating Support Service. That involves about 10 different partners, and we are lots of small "by and for" organisations that could

not go for that contract on their own but together we could. That commissioning process was designed to facilitate small organisations to get together. That is a good example.

With the Part 4 duty coming in, we also saw in Warwickshire that local authority saying, "How can we use this to really increase provision and increase diversity in the people who can access that?" It works with us to source lots of individual properties and have what we call dispersed refuges, which are not the classic one big house model. That has been really brilliant in supporting survivors with larger families, trans survivors or survivors who might have substance misuse issues, which could make communal refuges challenging. It was quite creative in thinking about how it could use this to pull some budgets together. There are pockets of good practice, but they are the exception rather than the norm.

Q156 Lord Polak: Before I go into children, I was listening to Ellie just now, and there were a number of us who put down amendments in relation to community-based services during the passage of the Bill on the basis that only very few people—you will know the percentage—who need it get to a refuge. The vast majority of people are just not receiving enough support. We tried to get that, and we will continue to try.

Of course, the other thing that I particularly was involved in was getting children into the Bill. I hear what you have said, and we could talk about this for a long time. If you can, just focus on the VAWG strategy; will putting children in the Bill help with the strategy of reducing numbers and so on? If we can focus there now, I would be grateful.

Ellie Butt: While it has not had the impact that we all might have hoped for, it is still significant that children are victims in their own right. We have seen a little practice change in some parts of the system. In terms of the VAWG strategy, it is quite a big omission. There is not much in terms of the change we want to see in response to child survivors of domestic abuse. There is the work around prevention: yes, it is thinking about children and schools, but really that does not cover it. We are talking about different children, in a sense. This is too late by the time that they have been subject to domestic abuse.

What is interesting in the VAWG strategy—the children as victims in their own right led to this—is this review of the age limit for domestic abuse. At the moment it is 16, and the Home Office is currently looking into whether that should be reduced further. There are real arguments in favour of doing so. We know that children are being subject to domestic abuse at quite high rates in their earliest intimate relationships. It is important that we look at that.

In terms of what Refuge thinks about that, we are a little nervous that reducing the statutory age at which you are considered a survivor of domestic abuse could do what children as victims in their own right did and change it on paper but not really in practice. Children will need different responses depending on their age, the abuse they are being subjected to and who they are being abused by.

The strategy has a few areas where we will work to really push the Government in understanding the needs of different children, including children who are being abused in their early intimate relationships. However, we really need a response to sit around that from social services, support services and other parts of the statutory sector.

We see some elements of good practice. I am thinking of a children's IDVA service that we run, but the age group that that quite small service works with is supposed to be five to 21. The needs of those—they are not even all children—people are so different. We need a whole different model of risk assessment. We will need lots of co-ordinated working between different agencies. My hope is that we can use that review to think about the age at which we should consider and respond to children as survivors of domestic abuse. However, it is going to need to go a lot further than changing the number from 16 to 13.

Veronica Oakeshott: It is good to see the stuff around prevention in the strategy. There is a bit of money in there for training delivered by external providers: £5 million and £3 million for teacher training. These are important, but quite small really for a nationwide response. It is an encouraging start but much more will be needed.

In terms of the services, I agree with Ellie that, for those already experiencing domestic abuse, that feels like a big gap. We did a statistically rigorous survey in 2023, which found that 70% of children and young people said that they would seek support if affected by domestic abuse, but 61% said that they did not know where they would go.

On the provision of services, only about half of community-based services in our annual audit had a dedicated children and young people service. As I have said, the provision for migrant children is particularly dire. Children's services fail to provide adequate support for children. In our *Nowhere to Turn 2025* report, we found inadequate support in 61% of cases.

The other thing I just wanted to draw attention to about children, which is linked but completely separate, is around the family courts. The recognition of children in their own right has stimulated some change. Certainly, we are really glad that the Government are working on removing the presumption of parental involvement. That presumption has been incredibly frightening and sadly linked to the deaths of some children who have had court-encouraged contact with dangerous perpetrators. That presumption is part of the Courts and Tribunals Bill, which we very much hope will make its way through so that that can be finalised.

However, that change does not fix the problem. There is still very much a pro-contact culture in courts, and in family courts much more training is needed and funding for that. I know that there is always an issue with the separation of powers—this place cannot tell the judiciary what it should and should not be doing—but certainly funding helps. It is one less

barrier, one less reason for it not to do training. We would love to see that.

- Q157 **Baroness Hussein-Ece:** My question is about how the strategy does not go far enough to acknowledge the experiences of Black and minoritised women, particularly including migrant survivors. We have heard quite a lot about that. During the passage of the Bill, there were amendments to try to include protection for migrant women as well, and that is ongoing work. We are running out of time really, but could you address the extent to which this is being omitted in the violence against women strategy specifically? You have already said quite a bit previously so you do not have to repeat that, but is there anything specific that we should take note of where it is not being picked up in the strategy?

Veronica Oakeshott: It is all linked into this “by and for” provision, because particularly people with insecure immigration status are going to feel so much more confident to get the help they need—potentially life-saving help—from a “by and for” provider, more so than from the police, frankly. Although efforts are being made to create this firewall, my understanding is, at the moment, there will be a situation where survivors can give their consent for police information to be shared. Just regarding the ability for freely given consent in that scenario, there are some quite big questions about how free and informed such consent could be in this firewall of information between police responding to a DA thing and immigration. That would be my main point around the firewall, the importance of the “by and for” services and how current commissioning decisions or systems make that very difficult. That is what the strategy perhaps could have done more on.

Ellie Butt: I would echo those points and flag that, as long as we still have the ability for someone to have no recourse to public funds, migrant survivors with no recourse to public funds are going to be hugely vulnerable. We know that, and the VAWG strategy does not do enough to change that. At the very least, we really need for everyone on all visa types to be eligible for some of the safety nets, such as the migrant victims of domestic abuse concession. We really need that as a minimum, otherwise we know that survivors with no recourse to public funds are going to face enormous hurdles getting the help they need. That is really crucial.

We also need to take a look at the other reforms that are going on around this. From the same department, we have had the violence against women and girls strategy, but also the proposals around earned settlement, with very long periods of time before people can apply for indefinite leave to remain, and any reliance on the state or use of public funds could limit future chances of settlement. That is going to really impact migrant survivors and make them highly vulnerable.

We also need to link this work. There is the hugely welcome ambition to halve VAWG. We have talked about the downsides, but there is important work in here. At the same time, we have to have that broader view as, yes, we desperately need the services, but if women are not going to

come forward in any way because any interaction with the state means that they are going to have increased vulnerability in their status, they are not going to receive the help that they need.

Baroness Gohir: I have a super-quick question. Is there anything that could be helpful for victims of transnational marriage abandonment?

Ellie Butt: That is not my area of expertise, I am afraid. There are people at Refuge who are experts, and I could write in. Apologies.

The Chair: Maybe we can take that in the written evidence.

Q158 **Baroness Rafferty:** Thank you so much for your excellent contributions so far, Ellie and Veronica. My question really is the sweep-up one: is there anything that you have not mentioned thus far that you would like to draw to the attention of the committee?

Ellie Butt: There was something I wanted to say, back on tech. Something I missed out is on AI chatbots, but also AI more broadly as another missing piece of the jigsaw. There was a gap in the most recent King's Speech; we were hoping for an AI regulation Bill that the Government suggested they were going to bring forward but has not materialised. That is something we really need to think about in terms of chatbots, particularly for younger survivors and with the promotion of misogyny. There are also things that our tech team at Refuge has not seen yet but thinks it is going to see around AI, such as audio or visual material being used by perpetrators to use the system against them, which we know perpetrators, sadly, are often very good at doing. That bit on AI needs to be thought about.

Veronica has just touched on this, but there is the issue of family courts. When visiting services at Refuge, it is often the number one thing mentioned. Survivors talk about what an awful time they are having in the family courts and how it feels like an extension of the abuse, and that they are petrified about the unsafe conditions that their children are being put into.

We have had some really important progress in the Domestic Abuse Act around stopping cross-examination. The presumption is also really important, but we really need to take a broader look at that system. There are challenges, of course, but, at a very basic level, we need increased transparency to understand what is going on in the family courts, because survivors are telling us every day that their experiences are being belittled and minimised and that it is not a safe or efficient system.

Veronica Oakeshott: My final thing would just be to encourage the committee to be aware of what an incredible period of change this is, not just on the technical IT front, but particularly on the commissioning front. You have the local government reorganisation, the abolishment of police and crime commissioners, and movements in health with ICBs. These are the places where services such as our members, that are often operating on a shoestring—really on a cliff edge—get their money from.

Everything is changing at once. There is not much money in the system already and there is a huge vulnerability to dropping through gaps. We will be calling on the Government to make sure that those transitional arrangements are as robust as possible while doing that bigger piece on what the perfect system would look like. We need both that bigger piece and that transitional reassurance.

The Chair: Thank you very much. If I can use Chair's prerogative, I was struck that neither of you referred to services to change the behaviour of perpetrators, either in relation to prevention, protection of children or halving violence against women and girls. I know you are both stretched but, if you have thoughts that you think are relevant for the committee, we would be very interested to hear them. With that, I thank you both hugely for your input, which was really insightful and helpful. Thank you. With that, this session is now concluded.