

Women's Aid Federation of England

Women's Aid Federation of England (Women's Aid) is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of nearly 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. Over the past 47 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.

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 Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry on government's support for charities during COVID 19. Sustainable long-term funding is the number one concern in the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector and the sector was already suffering from a crisis in funding and demand before the pandemic - 54.5% of domestic abuse services that responded to our Women's Aid's Annual Survey in 2020 were running an area of work with no dedicated funding at all¹. The government needs to implement a long-term sustainable funding plan to ensure women and girls experiencing violence and abuse have continued support post-COVID 19.

How well has the funding been distributed?

Increase in levels of domestic abuse

It is widely evidenced that during public health crises women and girls are at increased risk of various forms of violence, yet as demand for domestic abuse support increases, the availability of these services remain limited². Increased domestic abuse was quickly experienced in the UK and it is recognised we are currently dealing with 'dual pandemics'³ - violence against women and girls and COVID 19. Our survivor survey during the first lockdown found abuse had escalated with 67% of survivors currently experiencing abuse told us that it had got worse since COVID 19⁴. Black and minoritised women are not only experiencing escalating domestic abuse, but also intersecting impacts of the pandemic exacerbating existing structural inequalities and racialised discrimination⁵. COVID 19 is also having severe impacts on Deaf and disabled women, who already face higher risks of gender-based violence and health inequalities – increasing reliance on abusers for care and access to basic essentials, creating further barriers in accessing help and support and threatening their independent living, health and wellbeing⁷.

The behaviour of perpetrators quickly evolved to use the pandemic as a tool for enacting coercive and controlling behaviour, through manipulating lockdown restrictions and the virus itself as an integral part of the abuse. Our recent report *A Perfect Storm* identified abusers preventing survivors from leaving the house, disregarding survivors concerns about the virus and deliberately ignoring

¹ Women's Aid. (2021) The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid.

² Fraser, E. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls. VAWG Helpdesk Report 284. DFID

³ Imkaan (2020). The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls. Available [online](#)

⁴ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

⁵ Imkaan (2020). The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls. Available [online](#)

restrictions to increase fear and anxiety - in one case making specific threats the woman would die from the virus and in another spitting in the woman's face⁶.

Whilst COVID 19 of course does not cause domestic abuse, it does intensify existing abuse and reduces options for escape. Over 70% of survivors told us their abuser has more control over their lives during the pandemic and over three quarter of survivors said COVID 19 has made it harder for them to escape⁷. This is also having an impact on children, with over one third of survivors telling us their abuser had shown an increase in abusive behaviour directed towards their children⁸. Survivors have now had to be in lockdown with their abuser three times which has been incredibly traumatic and difficult for them, as well as the frontline staff and services supporting them. This has been compounded by the limits to survivors' access to key areas of support from wider family, friends, community members and workplaces or school, being potential routes to safety.

The funding process

The increased political attention on domestic abuse, such as awareness raising campaigns and the £750 million emergency package of support for charities⁹, has been welcomed during the pandemic. However, we remain concerned that the response to VAWG has been piecemeal, fragmented and unequal. Domestic and sexual violence services received £37 million of the emergency package, however the VAWG sector estimated that at least £65 million was required to ensure specialist VAWG services could cope during the pandemic¹⁰.

We also called for a single streamlined process that would be simple and quick for services to access during a time of crisis. This would make it fair for both smaller and larger services and would avoid services having to spend time and resources on making multiple complex bids, at a time when demand was severe and services were adapting to the pandemic. It was therefore disappointing that the funding was administered through a bureaucratic process, split over three government departments - the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. As a result local services had to deal with a range of application processes that were stressful, complex and time-insensitive, which had detrimental impact on services in a time of crisis. Numerous services have no reserves to rely on after facing year-on-year cuts, and our recent report *Fragile Funding Landscape* found 59% of local authorities implemented a real-time cut to their domestic abuse funding in 2019/20¹¹, meaning the level of funding is often already insufficient to cover the full costs of services. Combined with working in a time of crisis with loss of fundraising income, the additional costs of remote working, increasing complexity of caseloads, and staff shortages, was crucial for funding to reach the frontline urgently.

We also called for ring-fenced funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, migrant women, Deaf women and disabled women, and LGBT+ survivors. These specialist services are essential for fulfilling the government's duties under the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty as well as supporting women's specific needs. COVID 19 has exacerbated structural and racial inequalities for Black and minoritised women and girls¹², as well as structural inequalities for Deaf and disabled women¹³. Furthermore, it is well evidenced¹⁴ that these survivors have the greatest barriers to protection, safety, support and justice and experience disproportional impacts of COVID 19.

'By and for' led specialised services meet women's specific support needs, and the work of Imkaan¹⁵ highlights that many Black and minoritised women prefer to be supported by specialist 'by and for'

⁶ Women's Aid (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them*. Available [online](#)

⁷ Women's Aid (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them*. Available [online](#)

⁸ Women's Aid (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them*. Available [online](#)

⁹ GOV.UK. 2020. Chancellor sets out extra £750 million coronavirus funding for frontline charities. Available [online](#)

¹⁰ Joint VAWG sector emergency COVID 19 funding statement. Available [online](#)

¹¹ Women's Aid. (2021) *Fragile funding landscape: the extent of local authority commissioning in the domestic abuse refuge sector in England 2020*. Bristol: Women's Aid.

¹² Imkaan (2020). *The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls*. Available [online](#)

¹³ Sisters of Frida (2020) *The Impact of COVID 19 on Disabled Women from Sisters of Frida* Voices of Disabled women in the pandemic. Available [online](#)

¹⁴ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid

¹⁵ Imkaan (2020). *The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls*. Available [online](#)

services that understand the intersection between gender and racial equality and which provide peer support from other Black and minoritised women. However, these specialist services are continuously excluded, undervalued and marginalised in current funding structures. They have experienced disproportional budget cuts over the past decade and competitive tendering practices which do not value their unique expertise.

We were therefore disappointed that the emergency funding did not ring-fence funding for these specialist services. The recent extra £40million¹⁶ funding for domestic abuse services during COVID, does include £2 million specifically for smaller specialist organisations helping ‘BAME, LGBTQ+ or disabled victims’, however this is clearly a very small proportion of the total sum and there remains no clarity about how it will reach frontline by and for services.

It is also important to note that there has also not been equal funding across the four nations. The Scottish Government swiftly allocated emergency funding for Scottish Women’s Aid and local services, funds have been made available for domestic abuse services in England and Wales. However, Northern Ireland has not received comparable levels of funding for domestic abuse services, despite seeing similar increases in need from survivors.

Has the funding achieved its objectives?

Our member services have highlighted the significant impact the pandemic has had on frontline staff and many services are reporting seeing increases in staff burnout due to the complexities of working during a pandemic - one service described it *“Like standing on the shore watching a tsunami approaching, we knew it was coming but we had no idea how devastating this pandemic would be”*¹⁷.

Women’s Aid member services have had to quickly adapt to the increase workload, as well as changing government guidance, adapting to new service formats and new technologies and adapting the type of support needed during the pandemic. As well as increased levels of domestic abuse, many survivors are living with their abusers during lockdown and support staff are having to work in the evenings, weekends and throughout the night to be able to safely contact survivors. Survivors are increasingly using email and messaging services as they are often not able to safely call for support whilst their abuser is at home, extending hours of work for many staff members.

Impact on frontline staff

The increase in workload is also due to the direct impact of the pandemic: 49% of services had been affected by staff sickness, and 64% were affected by staff being unable to come into work due to staff isolation¹⁸. Services also reported a 49% reduction in the number or availability of volunteers. Our member services have also highlighted the increase in complexity of cases and in demand for wide-ranging support over a longer period of time due to an increase in the severity of abuse: for example services noted a 50% increase in survivors experiencing mental ill health, drugs and alcohol¹⁹.

This increased workload and reduction in staff availability has been combined with the challenge of working from home. The nature of the work, dealing with women and children experiencing domestic abuse, means there has been an increase in vicarious trauma impacting on staff wellbeing and their ability to separate the home/work balance. Domestic abuse staff are predominately women, and working from home also brings additional challenges for workers with children – meaning staff have been juggling home schooling and childcare, whilst dealing with trauma-informed work.

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice (2021) Extra £40m to help victims during pandemic and beyond. Available [online](#)

¹⁷ Women’s Aid (2020) The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women’s Aid. Available [online](#)

¹⁸ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-impact-of-Covid-19-on-domestic-abuse-support-services-1.pdf>

¹⁹ Women’s Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women’s Aid

For those working in refuges, services have shared experiences of an increase in anxiety due to risk of infection, fears around keeping the women in the refuge safe, delays in vaccines despite being key workers and juggling with their own wellbeing during the pandemic. Government guidance makes clear that refuges should remain open during the pandemic and refuge services have worked non-stop to ensure this happens, but navigating the pressures on their services alongside infection control procedures was extremely challenging.

Despite most of our June survey respondents having received the emergency funding, less than half said they had experienced an increase in funding or income during the pandemic²⁰. Therefore many services did not have the resources to hire more staff and reduce the workload for current staff. As already highlighted many services were already running on reduced income due to loss of funding, costs of adapting to online services and years of budget cuts. Women's Aid is clear that secure long-term funding is needed, in recognition of the long-term impacts the pandemic will have on staff.

Refuge services

Even before COVID 19, the national networks of refuges faced a funding crisis; 57% of referrals to refuges were declined in 2019-20 and one in five of referrals were refused because the refuge had a lack of space or capacity to support the survivor²¹. This increases significantly for Black and minoritised survivors as nearly 4 in 5 are turned away from refuges, an inequality that increases in regions of the country where there are no remaining specialist black-led VAWG organisations²². The number of refuge spaces in England is now also 30% below the number recommended by the Council of Europe²³.

The emergency funding did create a net increase in the number of beds available during the pandemic from 1st May to 1st November 2020 by 316 refuge spaces²⁴. However, during the pandemic there was a 41% decrease in refuge vacancies in comparison to the same period in 2019²⁵. We found that the amount of vacancies available at a given time in 2020 was consistently around half that available in the same week in 2019²⁶. It is also important to note however that even in 2019, the shortfall of refuge spaces meant demand for refuge exceeds the numbers of spaces available²⁷.

The £37 million emergency funding, including £10 million specifically from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for safe accommodation, did not take into account the gaps in refuge provision pre-pandemic and the significant impact COVID would have on the ability of refuges spaces. Whilst government guidance²⁸ makes it clear that refuges with shared facilities should remain open during the pandemic with infection control procedures in place, it was unclear how refuges are meant to safely manage self-isolation within communal accommodation. Member services reported that they had to section off parts of a refuge for new arrivals could quarantine for the first 14 days, as well as experiencing difficulty accessing PPE and seeing significant variation in how access to testing to enable refuges to safely accept new women and children. This has created 'voids' in refuges, and many services are reporting a loss in rental income, which is a serious concern and will create further barriers to survivors who need to escape to safety.

Refuges are also reporting difficulties finding move-on accommodation for women during the pandemic to support long-term recovery and independence. Over half of the refuge providers who responded to our June survey reported a lack of available properties for women to move in to and the most common reason for this was the lack of suitable secure housing²⁹. Inconsistencies and a lack of

²⁰ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid

²¹ Women's Aid (2020) *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*, Bristol: Women's Aid. Available [online](#)

²² Imkaan (2020). *The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls*. Available [online](#)

²³ Women's Aid. (2021) *The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit*, Bristol: Women's Aid.

²⁴ Women's Aid. (2021) *The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit*, Bristol: Women's Aid.

²⁵ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid

²⁶ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid

²⁷ Women's Aid. (2021) *The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit*, Bristol: Women's Aid.

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-domestic-abuse-safe-accommodation-provision>

²⁹ Women's Aid. (2020) *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women's Aid

move-on pathways from refuge into secure housing means that women are blocking spaces for survivors who need to escape and compounding the overall availability of beds.

The Domestic Abuse Bill includes a statutory duty on local authorities to fund accommodation-based services, which is set to be in force and underpinned by £125million funding in April 2021. We continue to have significant concerns that without further reform the duty will not fix the crisis facing refuge services. Furthermore, whilst there has been an increase in number of refuge spaces due to emergency funding, these spaces are unlikely to exist once the funding comes to an end, with some services likely to lose staff. We estimate that £173million is required annually to sustainably fund the national network of refuge services.

Future demand and long-term sustainable funding

Once COVID 19 restrictions are fully lifted, domestic abuse service providers predict a future spike in demand which will have long-lasting impacts beyond the pandemic. This increase will occur for a number of reasons: the ability of women to seek help post lockdown; the increase in awareness of domestic abuse during the pandemic; and perpetrators reacting to lockdown being lifted. It's also crucial that the long-term impact on survivors' and frontline staff's mental health and wellbeing is recognised through the improved access to counselling and mental health support - one Imkaan member service stated during lockdown they had 52 women on the waiting list for counselling, reflecting the demand and capacity issues facing 'by and for' led services³⁰.

The continuation of short-term funding pots and lack of certainty and sustainability has resulted in Women's Aid member services reporting difficulties around staff retention, with some losing staff to local authorities and housing associations who are able to offer higher wage security. Services are reporting this is creating difficulties retaining skills within the organisation and building on them, having long-term impacts on their services. Many services are also reporting having to use their own resources to ensure women and children can access food and basic essentials due to capacity at foodbanks being restricted.

Many services are facing a funding cliff-edge as emergency COVID 19 funds must be spent by March 2021. Organisations that have increased provision to deal with additional demand as the funding aimed to deliver, will be put in the same position once again if the deadline for spending the funding is not extended beyond March 2021. This Treasury deadline fails to recognise that delays to frontline services receiving COVID 19 funds means that recruitment and spend was delayed – and services may have underspend with these funds which they still need to sustain their services. This is a wasteful approach, as it will mean the possible loss of newly recruited and trained staff, a significant impact on workforce morale already stretched by increased complexity and severity of caseloads, and potential gaps in provision.

Although emergency funding during the pandemic has been welcome, the biggest concern in the VAWG sector continues to be insecure funding and poor commissioning practices. The recent announcement of a £40million funding boost for domestic abuse and sexual violence services, alongside the £125million for the statutory duty is welcome. However these are another example of short-term funding and does not meet the urgent need for sustainable long-term funding. Women's Aid estimates that £393 million annually is required to ensure specialist women's domestic abuse services are sustainable in England³¹, and Imkaan state that a ring-fenced £57 million annually is needed to ensure that the existing highly specialist network of services for Black and minoritised women are sustainable³². The recent spending budget announcement has a shortfall of over £200 million despite the well-known concerns that women and children will be turned away from the lifesaving support they need. We continue to urge the government to deliver long-term sustainable

³⁰ Imkaan (2020). The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls. Available [online](#)

³¹ Women's Aid (2019) Funding Specialist Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors Bristol: Women's Aid

³² End Violence Against Women (2019) The Comprehensive Spending Review and funding towards ending and preventing Violence Against Women and Girls

funding to secure the national network of specialist women's domestic abuse services to protect and support all survivors of domestic abuse.

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