

Women's Aid Federation of England – Written Evidence (CPF0004)

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 House of Lords Committee on the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the United Kingdom. Home is not a safe place for those experiencing domestic abuse. The mass experience of isolation, and limited routes to support and safety, are set to have significant impacts on women and children. It is essential that the government takes coordinated, proactive action to prevent physical and emotional harm, and meet the increased and changing needs of survivors and their children, during this pandemic.

I. What estimates have been made about how the impact of the pandemic on parents and families will affect the need for services (local authority and third sector children and family services; domestic abuse services; child and adult mental health services) in both the coming months and the coming years?

COVID 19 did not cause domestic abuse – only abusers are responsible for their actions.

However the evidence of the past year is very clear – COVID 19 led to escalation of domestic abuse (in all forms – physical, emotional, sexual, and economic) and gave abusers the tools to increase coercive control:

- 67% said that their abuser used Covid-19 as a tool for abuse.
- 72% of survivors experiencing current abuse told us their abuser has more control over their life since COVID 19 – child contact a particular site of concern.
- Half (53.1%) of the survivors with children who were currently experiencing domestic abuse told us that their children have witnessed more abuse towards them, and over one third (37.5%, 12 out of 32) said their abuser had shown an increase in abusive behaviour directed towards their children.¹

Our findings from survivors also demonstrate that closure or restricted access to the public services shut down routes to safety and support:

¹ 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

- During the first national lockdown, over three quarters of survivors currently experiencing abuse (78%, 36 out of 46) stated COVID 19 has made it harder for them to leave.
- 23.7% told us that their children have reduced access to support services and 31.2% said their children have felt isolated.
- The financial impact of the crisis is fuelling economic abuse, which increases barriers to leaving.²

These trends have been born out in emerging academic research too. Katrin Hohl and Kelly Johnson's early research on police responses to domestic abuse show that:

- Lockdowns make reporting to the police harder, and that the pandemic context is keeping women in abusive relationships for longer;
- (Data from six forces) a rise in first-time domestic incidents that were reported to the police as lockdown eased in summer 2020.
- Those currently experiencing domestic abuse delayed fleeing until after lockdown – likely resulting in increased/escalating risk when COVID 19 restrictions end.³

We are expecting very long term impacts on the specialist domestic abuse sector:

- Our latest data from a sample of 9000 survivors in England shows that the average length of abuse experienced before accessing a domestic abuse support service was six years.⁴
- Critical to recognise that women experiencing abuse now might not reach out for help for years to come.
- There are severe and lasting mental health impacts on women and children – not only for those experiencing abuse now, but for survivors who have experienced abuse in the past. Over half of survivors we surveyed who had experienced domestic abuse in the past said that the pandemic had triggered memories of abuse, isolation, entrapment and affected their mental health.

II. To what extent will current services be able to meet this need?

Before the pandemic, funding was the number one concern for specialist domestic abuse services, who were unable to meet demand from the survivors who need them:

- In 2019-20, 57.2% of refuge referrals were declined, and 18% of all these turned down due to lack of capacity in the refuge.
- The number of spaces in refuge services in England still falls short of the number of spaces recommended by the Council of Europe by 1,694 spaces, which represents a 30% shortfall. (An additional increase of 361 to 4,251 spaces by 1 November 2020 due to temporary emergency COVID 19 funding came to an end in March.)⁵
- The impact of these shortfalls in provision result in women and children experiencing domestic abuse being turned away daily from the support they need – this was the case before COVID 19, has continued to be so during the pandemic, and is expected to increase for the months and years ahead.

² 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

³ <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/a-crisis-exposed-how-covid-19-is-impacting-domestic-abuse-reported-to-the-police/>

⁴ Women's Aid. (2021) The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid

⁵ Women's Aid. (2021) The Domestic Abuse Report 2021: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid

On basis of the experiences of services in 2020/21, and academic research which is predicting a surge in demand when lockdown measures lift, **we can anticipate the demand for specialist support will remain high and likely increase in the year ahead:**

- In May and June 2020 Women's Aid saw around a 50% reduction in the number of refuge vacancies in England available in comparison with 2019 – showing that easing of lockdown had clear impact on demand.
- Imkaan⁶ have highlighted that Black and minoritised women's services nationally have seen a 50% sustained increase in referrals into their services, with some workers seeing their caseloads increase threefold.

Services aren't able to meet need – without significant investment in a sustainable long-term funding plan for specialist domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) services they will not be able to do so. It is also important to note that funding crisis has other severe impacts on services (for example: running support without funding; using reserves; staff loss and burnout).

It is important to recognise that significant proportion of domestic abuse services delivering life-saving support are not currently commissioned or funded by their local authority, PCC or through other government funding streams:

- More than one in five refuge services in England received no local authority commissioned funding in 2019/20 (60 out of 269 refuge services).
- 57.5% (146 out of 254), of spaces in these services were provided by non-commissioned refuge services, compared to the overall 18.5%.
- The current commissioned refuge sector is currently supported by a significant number of non-commissioned spaces. Without these, the shortfall in spaces would increase from 24.5% to 42.5%.⁷

We also expect that that there will continue to be more complexity to the issues survivors seek support for over the next year, and in the medium term:

- There will be severe and lasting effects of the escalation of abuse, and increased barriers to help, that women and children have faced during this time.
- For example, the Live Fear Free Helpline delivered by Welsh Women's Aid has shown an increase in complexity & severity of cases which increased the average call duration between 23-37% in first two quarters of 2020.
- Increased complexity of need will particularly impact women who experience structural inequality – on basis of race, ethnicity, disability and other factors – as they face greater barriers to accessing support. Yet specialist led 'by and for' services continue to face most severe funding challenges.

III. Are you aware of any attempts by Government to calculate the likely gap between need and current provision?

During 2020-21 the government has delivered:

- £37 million in emergency funding for domestic and sexual violence services in England and Wales in May 2020⁸.

⁶ Imkaan are the only UK-based, umbrella women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and Minoritised women and girls.

⁷ 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

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/emergency-funding-to-support-most-vulnerable-in-society->

- An additional £11 million in funding for domestic and sexual violence services in England and Wales in November 2020⁹.
- £7 million for responses to perpetrators in England and Wales in November 2020¹⁰.

This amounts to £48 million for services supporting victims of domestic and sexual violence in England during 2020-21. However:

- Funding was piecemeal, fragmented and unequal. It took months and numerous different complex funding streams to deliver, and was severely challenging for life-saving frontline services to access at a time of crisis.
- There was no ring-fence on funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, and LGBT+ survivors, who face the most severe funding challenges and often required major adaptations in order to work remotely.
- The Treasury deadline of spending emergency funding by the end of March 2021 has been wholly ineffective. Delays in delivering the funding meant that additional staff have only recently been recruited, but in some cases are now facing notice of redundancy.

Furthermore, there hasn't been consistent national data collected on the level of funding which have been awarded to specialist domestic and sexual violence services (as opposed to victims' charities and other generic organisations), or to specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, disabled women or LGBT+ survivors. We therefore don't know what impact it has made to meeting current demand. There are no consistent national data collected on funding from local authorities, police and crime commissioners or health bodies for domestic abuse or other VAWG services so it is not possible to know how much they spent during 2020-21.

IV. What action is needed from Government (or others) to address gaps between likely future need and current provision?

In 2019 Women's Aid Federation of England estimated that £393 million would be required annually to securely fund specialist women's domestic abuse services in England:

- £173.8 million for the national network of refuge services and £219.5 million for community based services – including advocacy, outreach, floating support, support for children and young people, therapeutic support, and community work.
- We also call for ring-fenced funding for specialist services led by and for Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors.¹¹

The government's committed funding in 2021-22 for domestic abuse services comprises of £125 million through local authorities for support in safe accommodation, and £40 million through Police and Crime Commissioners for specialist domestic and sexual violence services in the community.

We know that women and children experiencing abuse now might not reach out for help for years to come, and this must be factored into the funding delivered for the

during-pandemic

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-boost-for-rape-and-domestic-abuse-support>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-boost-for-rape-and-domestic-abuse-support>

¹¹ Women's Aid (2019) Funding Specialist Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors Bristol: Women's Aid.

domestic abuse sector over the next five years. We need the spending review this year to finally deliver certainty beyond the next financial year – which will enable services to plan ahead and meet demand.

We continue to call for a secure, national multi-year funding settlement for the specialist violence against women and girls sector which:

- Ensures all forms of specialist service provision for survivors, children and young people and perpetrators are resilient for the future;
- Provides equity of provision for survivors across the UK nations;
- Delivers ring-fenced funding for specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ survivors.

5 May 2021