Domestic violence in the UK

- 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence at some time in her life.
- 2 women every week are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales.
- 750,000 children witness domestic violence each year.
- On average, police receive an emergency call relating to domestic violence every 30 seconds.
- Everyone has the right to live in safety.
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THIS YEAR, Refuge will celebrate its 45th birthday. When we opened the doors to the world’s first refuge, our mission was to support as many women and children experiencing domestic violence as we could – and we remain committed to this mission today. Refuge is now the largest specialist provider of domestic and gender-based violence services in the country.

Every day, Refuge gives vital support to almost 3,700 women and children – an increase of 400 compared to last year. Given the challenging financial climate Refuge has found itself in, this 12% increase is a tremendous achievement. When I consider how far we have come over the last four decades, I feel incredibly proud.

That said, there are many things that have not changed. 45 years on, I am still horrified by the violence and abuse women and their children are forced to endure. Still, women are not believed when they report their experiences. Still, police tell women that violent incidents are “just a domestic”.

Still, women are killed by a current or former partner in circumstances where state agencies missed vital opportunities to protect them. And still, statutory funding to sustain domestic violence services is woefully inadequate.

Squeezed local authority budgets have resulted in further funding cuts to our services and our staff have worked incredibly hard to do more with less. We have had to counter this loss of state funding by increasing our fundraising targets, which carries its own set of challenges.

Across the country, specialist services like ours are struggling to survive. Poor commissioning practices have left some local authority areas with no refuge provision at all. In others, those who commission services are imposing restrictions on the length of time women are able to stay in a refuge, or awarding contracts to generic service providers.

Despite this, Refuge has continued to thrive. This financial year, Refuge has grown its independent advocacy posts

2015-2016 at a glance

- Refuge now supports 3,700 women, children and men on any given day – a 12% increase on last year.
- The National Domestic Violence Helpline, run in partnership with Women’s Aid, received 86,845 calls.
- Almost 1.7 million people accessed Refuge’s website; almost half a million people accessed the ‘Get Help Now’ area.
- Refuge provided life-saving and life-changing support to 8,161 women and children, and 104 men, escaping violence.
- 96% of clients asked said they felt safer at the point of leaving Refuge’s services.
- 92% said their quality of life had improved.
- 76% reported an end to all physical violence.
threefold. Independent advocates support women at the highest risk of homicide and serious injury, so their work is absolutely vital. We have also launched three new innovative services. This has enabled us to reach many more women facing all forms of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, female genital mutilation, trafficking, prostitution, so-called ‘honour’ based violence and forced marriage.

In 2015-16 we provided life-saving and life-changing support to 3,479 women, 4,682 children and 104 men. This is an increase of 9% on last year. Each client referred to our service is provided with high-quality support, tailored to meet their individual complex needs. I would like to pay tribute to the Refuge team and its unwavering dedication to the women and children they support.

In our efforts to address domestic and gender-based violence, Refuge remains committed to its ‘three P’ philosophy – providing specialist services, ensuring women and children have the protection they need, whilst campaigning and educating the public to prevent violence.

We do this by ensuring violence against women remains high on the public and political agenda. Through our award-winning campaigns and engagement with Government we aim to protect existing services and improve the support available for women experiencing domestic violence. Refuge wants to live in a world where violence against women and girls is unacceptable; we challenge social attitudes to women and champion gender equality in order to prevent violence in the future. Much of this activity is made possible by the generous support of pro-bono lawyers and creative agencies, for which we are truly grateful.

As we look ahead to 2017, we will continue to build on our expertise and passion to develop our services further. We want to ensure every woman and child escaping violence gets the protection they need and deserve. Domestic violence destroys lives: Refuge will continue to speak up for those affected by this hideous crime and strive towards a world where violence against women and girls is no longer tolerated or ignored.

Sandra Horley
Refuge is a dynamic, grassroots organisation. Over the last four decades we have pioneered countless innovative services – services which are informed by our clients and our expert practitioners. We ensure the needs of the women and children we support and the outcomes they request are at the heart of everything we do: in the services we run; the policies we challenge; and the issues we champion.

On any given day our services support 3,700 women, children and men. These services range from safe emergency accommodation to community-based outreach programmes; culturally-specific services to independent advocates for those experiencing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

We also deliver single point of access services which provide support for those experiencing gender-based violence including rape and sexual assault, stalking, prostitution, sexual exploitation, trafficking, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and so-called ‘honour’ based violence.

In the last year, these specialist services supported 3,479 women, 4,682 children and 104 men, as well as providing specialist support to the children of our residents.

What makes Refuge a specialist service provider?

Refuge has pioneered services to support women and children experiencing domestic violence for more than four decades.

Refuge understands the diverse and complex needs of women and their children – and we are experts in the dynamics of domestic violence.

Refuge will always go the extra mile for every single client. Our deep commitment to an individual’s needs is at the centre of our organisation – it is the starting point for every decision we make.

Refuge does not just follow best practice; it creates best practice. Refuge helped to design the first National Occupational Standards for domestic violence, which set out the specialised knowledge and skills needed to deliver the highest quality support. We then developed these Standards into Ofqual-accredited qualifications, demonstrating what best practice looks like on the ground. This knowledge is integrated into every operational role at Refuge.

Refuge’s wealth of experience – alongside the intelligence we have gathered from the 48,000 anonymised cases we hold on our unique database, IMPACT – means that everything we do is evidence-led. We are able to improve constantly and innovate our services based on what we know works, adapting to the dynamic needs of those we support. We are also able to demonstrate that our services offer excellent social return on investment.

The outcomes Refuge achieves for women, children and men speak for themselves. Through the support our workers offer Refuge empowers its clients and enables them to meet their personal goals. Last year, 96% of clients said they felt safer at the point of leaving Refuge’s services. 92% said their quality of life had improved. This is why the specialist emotional and practical support Refuge provides is so essential. Non-specialist providers might give a woman or child a roof over their heads in a moment of crisis – but Refuge does so much more. Refuge’s specialist services save lives and they transform lives, giving clients the building blocks they need to live free from fear.

Refuge provision

It is essential that women and children forced to flee violence have access to safe accommodation. No country, however enlightened, has ever phased out refuge provision. No matter how robust the state response to domestic violence, those in danger will always need a safe place to turn.

A refuge is much more than a roof over a woman or child’s head. Our specialist staff provide residents with the building blocks they need to begin a new life. They help women and children to overcome the physical and emotional impacts of what can be years of violence and abuse and offer a huge range of practical and emotional support. This might include advice on housing, education, accessing benefits, employment, or immigration, or it might mean helping a woman to achieve better health and wellbeing. Where we are fortunate enough to secure funding we also provide dedicated, specialist support to the children of our residents.

Our national network of refuges operates across more than 20 local areas, and provides safe accommodation for 259 women and children at any one time. During 2015-16, this accommodation allowed us to offer safety and support to 1,433 women and children.

Of the women who took part in our exit survey, 97% felt safer at the point of leaving our refuges and 94% said their quality of life had improved. 93% reported a complete cessation of any physical abuse. 76% reported a complete end to all forms of abuse including controlling behavior. There can be no doubt about it: refuges, and the expert staff within them, save and change lives.
Emotional and psychological support

The women who enter our refuges have been abused for an average of five years and four months. 41% have experienced threats to kill and more than 50% have been strangled or choked by their perpetrator. The psychological impact of violence and abuse over a prolonged period of time, often from the person a woman loves most, can be devastating. Indeed, 11% of women reported feeling suicidal at the point of entering our services.

Domestic abuse can chip away at a woman’s sense of self. Her perpetrator may disguise his jealousy and possessiveness as care and concern. He may convince her that his picking her up from work, or taking control of the finances, is for her own good. Gradually, she may begin to believe her abuser when he tells her that she is worthless, that no-one will believe her, and that no-one cares about her but him. Helping women to realise – often for the first time – that they are not alone and that nobody would be able to identify her if she died or had an accident. “No-one will know who I belong to”, she told me.

The expert practitioners working in our refuges offer an unique form of psychological support. Residents are also able to share their experiences with other women who understand what they have been through. Often women who experience domestic violence have been extremely isolated by their perpetrators, cut off from friends, family and other forms of support. Many tell us that before they came to a refuge they thought they were the only person experiencing domestic violence. Being in a refuge environment enables them to realise – often for the first time – that they are not alone and that they are not to blame for the abuse. Refugees facilitate this powerful recovery process.

Empowering women to articulate their needs and fears is an important part of rebuilding their confidence. Refuge works with each individual to ensure their specific needs and goals are met. At the Gaia Centre – Refuge’s single point of access in Lambeth, London – staff held a focus group with women about the support they would like to receive. Now, as well as a support group which explores the dynamics of domestic abuse, the women can participate in a new group, Moving Forward, which focuses on how they are rebuilding their lives following violence. One member said: “As a victim I felt powerless, but now I am getting my power back. Now I can get involved in activities, I can show myself to people after all.”

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Women who access our culturally-specific services often have particularly complex needs. One Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) from our Vietnamese outreach service describes the trauma of a woman she recently supported and how, through specialist, one-to-one support, she helped her to rebuild her confidence:

“One of my clients had been trafficked into forced labour ten years ago. The traffickers regularly subjected my client to physical, financial and psychological abuse. She had insecure immigration status and her traffickers ensured she would not seek help by regularly threatening deportation.

“My client was deeply traumatised – she was very fearful and suffered nightmares every night. She told me she found it difficult to look in the mirror because all she could see was a very old and grey person looking back in the reflection. She worried constantly about her health deteriorating and feared that nobody would be able to identify her if she died or had an accident. “No-one will know who I belong to”, she told me.

“At regular key work sessions, communicating in Vietnamese and at her own pace, I helped her explore the abuse she experienced and accept that it was not her fault. Slowly, she became more confident, and felt able to share more about her experiences and how they were affecting her on a daily basis. I was able to refer her to specialist counselling and organised several emergency appointments with an immigration lawyer. We also obtained temporary accommodation for her and helped her to access a weekly personal allowance. Now, my client tells me she feels there is hope for the future. She can smile again.”

Sophia, who endured over a decade of physical and psychological abuse from her ex-partner, benefited from a support group run by one of Refuge’s services. She now helps to run a coffee morning there, in which women support each other to move on from abuse. Here, Sophia explains what the experience has meant to her.

“After I left my abusive partner, I used to beat myself up with guilt. I needed to let go. Coming to the support group every week and listening to all the other women made me realise I’m not the only one. One woman started talking about what had happened to her kids, and that was the breakthrough for me. This woman was still standing strong – ‘that’s what I can do’, I thought. She was an inspiration.

“In the support group we talk about our pain. But at the coffee morning we talk about our week, our kids, our new relationships or jobs. It’s all about the positive things and moving forward. When you leave an abusive relationship, you feel lost – you don’t know which way to turn. The coffee mornings give you a direction.

“There is so much laughter – we all bring cake and support each other. We’re all here for each other. On Valentine’s Day, so we wouldn’t be alone, one lady from the coffee morning planned a dinner. Everyone went to her house. We all brought our children, she cooked for everyone and we gave each other gifts.”

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“Socialising with women who have been through what you’ve been through gives you hope that you can move forward and start making something of your life. Some of the women stopped hobbies that they loved because of the awful things happening to them. Now, one has taken up sewing, another is going to the gym again. It is about saying, “Who am I? What do I like to do?” When you’re with an abusive partner, you forget who you are.

“When I first started going, I didn’t say much. I just listened. Gradually I started speaking more and opening up to the other women, who gave me confidence. The Refuge team said I had a good understanding of the different forms of abuse. They told me I was bubbly and friendly and that they thought I would be good at leading the coffee morning.

“I enjoy helping people. I know where they’re coming from because I have been there. I can see myself in the other women. At first they’re fearful and sad, like I was, but then they slowly start to blossom. You really see the transition. It’s nice to see the women come out of themselves. It’s also given me much self-confidence.”

Practical support

When a woman arrives at a refuge, often she has nothing but the clothes on her back. In order to escape abuse, she and any children she has with her may have left behind friends, family, jobs and schools. They have to rebuild their lives from scratch.

Many women will have experienced years of financial abuse, where perpetrators have prevented them from earning or accessing money or benefits, spent their money without consent or even built up debts in a woman’s name. Women arriving at a refuge might be unsure of the benefits they are entitled to or how to eliminate the debt they find themselves in. Some women also arrive with problems relating to their immigration status.

Refuge staff are expert in untangling complex financial and housing issues, amongst many others. Whatever a woman needs – whether it is assistance with a housing application, accessing benefits, registering her child at a new school or accessing a local GP – our staff are on hand to support her.

This letter, written to staff at one of our refuges earlier this year, demonstrates the impact of this support:

“I have been moved to the point of tears on several occasions by the kindness and compassion shown to me by the staff members, and would like this to be documented.

“Your refuge worker is diligent, caring, flexible, considerate, empathetic, and discreet, and has a wonderful sense of fun. The latter, in my opinion, is not to be trivialised in an environment such as this. She has a calming manner and there seems to be nothing she is unwilling to help with, including advocating, researching and generally being helpful in any way that she can. She offers sound counsel regarding procedure and if asked a question that she is unsure of, she explains this and endeavours to secure the correct information. She is very interested in the social betterment of residents also, and is always finding interesting and constructive things for us to do. I cannot speak highly enough of her and her work ethic is to be aspired to. I admire her greatly.”

“My keyworker has also been wonderful. For both of them, nothing asked is ignored even though it is more than apparent that both members working day is filled completely. These women simply do not stop working and yet always make time and prioritise for the smallest concerns of the residents.”

Refuge workers make great efforts to build links within their communities so they can ensure residents get the broader support they need from other local services. They also gather gifts-in-kind from local businesses and charities so women have the practical items they need when they arrive at the refuge, such as food, clothes, toys and toiletries.

In Shropshire, our refuge staff work closely with the local food bank, which donates any surplus food to the women and children. Shropshire staff have also reached out to the local Morrison’s supermarket, which now allows staff to pick up any damaged tinned and fresh food and distribute it to their residents. Similarly, our Derby refuges receive weekly grocery donations from the British Red Cross. With funding constantly stretched, partnership working and creative problem solving of this kind is essential.
Financial support

Empowering women economically is a vital part of the work undertaken by refuge staff. Refuge works in partnership with local organisations including banks and job centres to enable women to regain their financial independence and security, often after years of financial abuse. Staff help women to set up new bank accounts, claim benefits and to return to work or training. One refuge worker describes this process:

“A woman arrived at our refuge with £13,000 worth of debts accrued in her name by her ex-partner. The perpetrator had falsified her payslips in order to take out a loan in her name. The physical violence he subjected her to meant she was unable to go to work due to her facial injuries, and eventually she was forced to give up her job. We worked tirelessly to reduce these debts and after many months, the debt was finally wiped out. Now the woman lives in a new home, which we helped to secure, and is volunteering whilst looking to find a part-time job.”

In our Southwark and Lambeth refuges, staff received workshop training from BNP Paribas Investment Partners on CV writing and interview skills. Similarly, in Richmond and Hounslow refuge staff ran financial empowerment workshops for women, both in groups and on a one-to-one basis. Staff helped residents apply for jobs and prepare for interviews. In 2015, staff in Richmond supported 21 women into education, training, voluntary work and/or paid employment.

Recent research from Refuge, working in partnership with The Co-operative Bank, found that 18% of all adults in the UK have been a victim of financial abuse, and that 60% of all cases are reported by women. In order to support women who have experienced this form of abuse, Refuge produced a practical guide. This has been distributed across all of our services.

Housing and resettlement support

When a woman is ready to move on from a refuge, helping her to find a new, safe home for herself and her children is vital. Refuge workers advocate on their clients’ behalf to the local housing service and help women to secure new accommodation.

Setting up home in a new and unfamiliar community can be very difficult for a woman. However, Refuge staff work hard to continue to provide emotional and practical assistance to women throughout this transition.

Simple things, such as having their own items of furniture, can make an enormous difference to families. With community care grants abolished, Refuge staff have established partnerships with local businesses and charities to ensure women get the basics they need. In Cambridgeshire, staff have an agreement with the furniture project Emmaus whereby they furnish a woman’s new home with second-hand furniture for just £50.

In Southwark, London, residents benefited from furniture donations from the high-end French company Roche Bobois. Women were given sofas, arm chairs, coffee tables, rugs and cabinets. This meant an enormous amount to the residents moving on, with one remarking that her furniture was the nicest thing she had ever owned.

In Derby, Refuge’s resettlement worker has begun a support group for women who have moved on from refuges. The women are able to share in each other’s achievements and continue to receive vital peer support. The group organises group activities, building the women’s confidence and reducing isolation. Staff also work in partnership with other organisations to ensure all of a woman’s needs are met once they leave the refuge. For example, staff help women access sanctuary scheme arrangements to ensure they have appropriate security at their new homes, and schemes like Women’s Work Derby, which supports disadvantaged women in the community by running life skills and confidence enhancing groups.

Health and wellbeing

When a woman first enters a refuge, there are often immediate health concerns. Last year, 35% of women arrived with an injury from a recent incident, and more than 200 required urgent medical assistance. Many women also have complex or chronic health needs, for which they may have been prevented from seeking help.

As well as experiencing serious physical injuries, many women also experience chronic psychological injuries. On arrival, 22% of women who responded to a mental health screening measure had made plans to end their own lives. At the point of leaving our refuges, this figure had more than halved.

When a woman arrives, staff will listen to her individual needs and support her to access any health services she may request. Our refuge workers are highly skilled at working with a variety of different agencies and services, enabling women to access a huge range of services including: support with drug and alcohol misuse; counselling; mental health services; health visitors; and midwives. Last year, women in our refuges were supported to achieve 95% of the health outcomes they identified when they arrived.

In Cambridgeshire, Refuge has worked in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council so that women in our refuges can benefit from the support of a local mental health nurse. The nurse ensures that she sees every woman Refuge refers to her within a week – rather than the months she would have to wait if referred by a GP – and provides both direct support and signposting to other mental health services. This makes an enormous difference to the women we work with, who are often in acute need. One client told us:

“I cannot believe how quickly I was seen. Before coming to Refuge I had been waiting months for an appointment with the mental health team.”

Refuge’s Athena service, which provides support to those experiencing gender-based violence in Lewisham, London, is currently taking part in a training support and referral programme, aimed at GPs. Refuge has presented to several GP practices and three are now signed up for training, with many more to be approached. As well as imparting essential information about the health needs of women experiencing domestic violence, this kind of partnership working strengthens relationships between Refuge and local statutory services; in turn helping Refuge to meet its clients’ health needs quickly and effectively.

Reducing social isolation and encouraging women to pursue interests and hobbies is vital to improving wellbeing. In Hackney this year, our refuges have run a series of women-led workshops, with activities including jewellery-making, gardening and baking. Similarly, women at the Gaia Centre in Lambeth have held sessions on aromatherapy, with one woman even planning to pursue her new hobby as a business. Staff at Gaia have also been working with a local theatre group, which will be delivering a series of creative workshops including poetry, drama, writing and music for the Gaia clients.
Children

In the UK, around 20% of children have been exposed to domestic abuse, according to the NSPCC. It is estimated that 39,000 babies under one-year-old are living with domestic violence. This experience can have a profound and lasting impact. Many will have seen their mothers violently attacked, verbally abused, sexually assaulted, or even have been abused themselves. Some children may become withdrawn and find it difficult to communicate as a result. Others may blame themselves for the abuse.

When fleeing violence, children must leave family, friends, schools, pets and possessions behind. Being away from home and their usual routine can be frightening and disorientating, and is the culmination of what may have been months or even years of terror.

With support, children can begin to cope with and make sense of what has happened in their families. They can start to overcome the trauma of witnessing or experiencing violence and have a better chance of living safe, happy lives.

Refuge’s staff work tirelessly to make refuges welcoming spaces where children can really feel at home. This year, our refuge in Stratford has undergone a total refurbishment, thanks to the generosity of The Rigby Foundation.

Furniture that had been there for eleven years has been replaced and all of the flats have been beautifully redecorated. Stratford refuge staff have also partnered with the Bright Horizons Foundation, which has donated games, toys, learning activities and a playground for the garden, complete with pretend kitchen equipment. “It has turned the garden into somewhere the children can just be children – they can interact with each other and have their own space. It means that they can be supported while their mums are talking about their experiences”, explained one refuge worker.

Refuge staff also organise activities and trips for the children and their mothers and often secure free entry to cinemas, zoos and museums. Christmas was particularly busy for the children in our refuges. In Warwickshire, staff organised a breakfast with Santa and his reindeers. In Hounslow staff partnered with a local business to put on a Christmas party for the children, complete with presents, face painting and an entertainer. Thanks to the generosity of our individual donors and corporate partners, we were able to give each child in our refuges Christmas presents and an advent calendar.

As well as providing emotional support for children, refuge staff advocate on their behalf and help mothers access the practical support they need to ensure their children’s safety and wellbeing. In addition, enabling women to parent effectively is vital to empowering families to move on from abuse.

During 2015-16, 92% of women who requested support to protect their children around issues of child contact and residence achieved their goals. 97% were supported to access information about local schools and nurseries.

Refuge has now secured funding for six specialist child support workers and one outreach worker. These workers support children to process their thoughts and feelings and support mothers to communicate effectively with their children and re-establish their bond following abuse. Children’s workers also provide one-to-one childcare so that mothers can speak freely about their experiences of abuse without their children being present. They provide stimulating play opportunities to encourage children from all backgrounds to develop and express themselves, as well as supporting children with homework and literacy. They also refer children to wider support services, including counsellors and children’s centres.

One child support worker describes the difference this specialist support can make:

“Janice and her three-year-old daughter Charlotte arrived at the refuge after Janice’s partner had abused her and attempted to abduct Charlotte. They were both painfully shy and very introverted. Charlotte would hide behind her mother’s clothes, not speaking or making eye contact with anyone. She had also reverted to having a comfort blanket with her at all times, and using a baby bottle at night.

“I worked with Janice to help lessen Charlotte’s separation anxiety, advising her to take small steps towards increasing Charlotte’s independence. For example, Janice would leave Charlotte with me at the table whilst she went to sit on the sofa or into the garden – still staying within sight. Reward charts were encouraged to recognise small steps forward and we devised a game called ‘Can Mummy be back before we count to 3, 4, 5…’

“Gradually Charlotte began to trust me. She started to join in activities with the other children. A breakthrough came five months after they had moved in, when Charlotte asked if she could stay with me to make a mother’s day card whilst her mother went to sit on the sofa or into the garden – still staying within sight. Reward charts were encouraged to recognise small steps forward and we devised a game called ‘Can Mummy be back before we count to 3, 4, 5…’

“I am glad I have a youth advocate helping me through my problems. I feel like I can talk to her and she will listen to me without judging me. She helps me understand my feelings and is really helping me with all my court stuff and how it all works. Having a youth advocate has helped me feel calmer and able to cope with my situation.”

Refuge’s young person advocates also ensure they connect and share important information with local schools, colleges and child protection officers. The advocates help professionals to understand risk factors around the forms of violence that often affect young people, including child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour’ based violence.

Our staff do not wait for clients to find them. Instead, they are highly skilled at grassroots outreach; they find creative ways to reach those who need Refuge’s services through statutory agencies and community networks. This year in Warrington, Refuge’s young person advocate saw a 50% increase in the number of 12 – 17 year-olds with whom she was working, from September to December. This is thanks to the strong links she has developed with local agencies. The advocate now receives referrals from schools, colleges and social workers.

Young people and early intervention

Over the last year Refuge has worked hard to increase the number of staff who specialise in supporting young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage or so-called ‘honour’ based violence. In 2015-16, Refuge has supported 317 women under the age of 20, and 12 men.

This early intervention work is crucial; as well as supporting young people at the point of crisis, our young person advocates and support workers aim to increase long-term safety and reduce risk for the future. On leaving Refuge’s service, 80% of these young clients felt safer and 83% said their quality of life had improved.

When supporting young people, Refuge staff take an approach that suits their needs. Specialist workers will nearly always meet young people face-to-face in a place familiar to them. Often, it takes several sessions to gain a young person’s trust and enable them to open up about their experiences. Then they can begin to gradually overcome them.

Here, one 15-year-old describes what support from Refuge has meant. Her advocate arranged a pre-trial visit to court so she could get used to the surroundings, advocated on her behalf for special measures, and attended court with her. She says:

“...I feel like I can talk to her and she will listen to me without judging me. She helps me understand my feelings and is really helping me with all my court stuff and how it all works. Having a youth advocate has helped me feel calmer and able to cope with my situation.”

Refuge’s young person advocates also ensure they connect and share important information with local schools, colleges and child protection officers. The advocates help professionals to understand risk factors around the forms of violence that often affect young people, including child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour’ based violence.

Our staff do not wait for clients to find them. Instead, they are highly skilled at grassroots outreach; they find creative ways to reach those who need Refuge’s services through statutory agencies and community networks. This year in Warrington, Refuge’s young person advocate saw a 50% increase in the number of 12 – 17 year-olds with whom she was working, from September to December. This is thanks to the strong links she has developed with local agencies. The advocate now receives referrals from schools, colleges and social workers.
Leaving an abusive partner is a process. Refuge’s outreach work is vital in supporting women who continue to live with their perpetrators. Often women keep the violence they are experiencing secret from family and friends and feel extremely isolated. By operating discreet services in the community Refuge is able to make contact with women in need of domestic violence services and address any risks she and any children she has may be facing. Our outreach workers support women to keep themselves and their children safe and work with them to make short-term and long-term decisions about their situation. Refuge outreach workers also support women who have already left abusive partners to rebuild their lives.

Community outreach

There has never been enough refuge provision in this country. Despite years of campaigning for more safe accommodation, there are still not enough beds for the women and children who need them. However, some women may not need to or may not want to access refuge accommodation. These women may benefit instead from practical and psychological outreach support while they make decisions about their future.

In the last year, our outreach workers supported 566 women and 706 children, as well as providing short-term support to more than 100 people. We also supported 11 men. Of those clients who answered our exit survey, 83% reported a complete end to all physical abuse. 95% said they felt safer as a result of using our outreach services.

Refuge outreach staff work very hard to ensure women who may need their help know they can access this vital support. When a woman is being abused it can feel like there is nowhere to turn. In these circumstances, hearing about a local service at the school gates, or in the local shop, or from a GP, can make all the difference – it is vital that our staff make themselves known in the community so that women can be signposted to support.

In Derby, Refuge’s outreach worker provides weekly drop-in sessions at the local children’s centre – this provides an opportunity for women to access support around housing, debt and safety planning in a safe environment that will not arouse the suspicion of the perpetrator. It also offers an opportunity for Refuge to connect with the children’s centre staff, so they know where to signpost women they think may be experiencing abuse and can identify when they think a child might be at risk. Similarly, Refuge’s Cambridgeshire outreach worker attends the local food bank every week, where she is able to provide invaluable one-to-one support to women who need it whilst raising awareness of Refuge’s services.

Culturally-specific services

Refuge recognises that some women from particular backgrounds may have specific support needs – and we continue to adapt our services to best support the diverse range of women referred to our services. Cultural pressures may make it more difficult for some women to leave an abusive partner. It can also be difficult for women to access mainstream services if language is a barrier. Some women may prefer to be with women from the same ethnic background, believing they better understand their specific needs and experiences.

For these reasons we operate a number of culturally-specific services. These include refuges for African, African Caribbean and South Asian women and children, outreach services for Vietnamese women and an independent advocacy service for Eastern European women. Many of the women accessing our culturally-specific services have experienced other forms of gender violence, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and so-called ‘honour’ based violence. Our expert staff are trained to support the specific needs of clients who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing these forms of violence, and work hard to raise awareness of these forms in their local communities.

Actively engaging with the local community is vital in reaching women from culturally-specific groups. In Warrington, Refuge’s independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs) increased their visibility in the community by setting up a stall at a multi-cultural festival run by a local faith group. As well as distributing information about the service, staff asked attendees to comment on what domestic violence meant to them – this provoked deeper discussions with women, several of whom shared their own experiences and were directed to immediate support. Making these connections means that more women know where to turn and, crucially, that others in the community will have a better sense of how to support those they think may be experiencing abuse.

In Brent, Refuge’s Eastern European Advocacy service carried out an innovative programme of training for 29 domestic violence ‘champions’ – volunteers from the Polish, Lithuanian and Romanian communities keen to support women experiencing domestic violence. The champions were trained by Refuge staff on domestic violence and how to support friends, family and people in the community to access support. 93% of champions who completed the training reported increased confidence in giving practical assistance to those experiencing domestic violence. The service has now begun to receive referrals who have been supported by a champion. This programme was funded by the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime, via the Brent Safer Neighbourhoods Board and we are very grateful to both.

Refuge works hard to sustain its Eastern European Advocacy service, and the funding for this project currently remains uncertain. The work it does is absolutely vital: despite the increasing numbers of Eastern European women and children in this country, our specialist advocacy project is the only one of its kind. Given the gap in services for this group, Refuge receives a very high number of referrals from other agencies, which value our specialism. This is particularly important because many professionals lack knowledge about Eastern European women, hold negative views about them and respond to their needs inadequately.

The women who turn to this service often have a variety of complex needs. Conditions around the women’s immigration status and their ability to access benefits is a major concern – and used by many perpetrators to control and abuse their partners. Women who use the service often have little or no information about their options in the UK. Many tell Refuge they feel pressurised by families to make their relationships work, especially where children are involved. Accessing support from a Refuge IDVA who understands an individual’s culture and speaks their language is invaluable.
One woman who accessed the service explains how it helped her:

“It was very good for me to receive this support. This project helped me so much. If it wasn't for this project I would have gone back to him and I would have been killed. I want this service to continue – there are plenty of other women in my situation.

“I was lost, to be honest, when this happened. I didn’t know my own name. She [the IDVA] offered me support and advice. My son needed support, he was very scared. I had support, he had support – I felt released.

“If this service didn’t exist I would still be with my husband. I wouldn’t have shared my pain, my hurt. But now I have a better future; my kids can have safe lives. I know I will manage every kind of situation. I know I’m independent. I can sleep calmly, knowing that when I wake I will still be alive.”

A recent evaluation of this service summed up the impact it has had:

The Eastern European service has played an important role in ensuring a joined up approach to women, in giving women information about the criminal justice system and in supporting women to report initial and repeated domestic violence to the police and to support prosecution. The support provided makes women demonstrably safer, enhances their confidence and sense of well-being, and results in women being better informed about their options and existing support services. The evaluation shows that considerable achievements have been made by the Eastern European Advocacy service, not least because it has placed the needs of Eastern European women on agency maps.

Refuge also runs an outreach service for Vietnamese women escaping domestic violence. This is the only specialist service of its kind in the UK and operates across three London boroughs in its efforts to reach and support as many women as possible. Many women accessing this service have experienced or are at risk of experiencing multiple types of gender-based violence, including trafficking and modern slavery. A large number also have insecure immigration status or have no recourse to public funds. They are therefore prevented from claiming welfare benefits or seeking employment.

Refuge’s specialist Vietnamese outreach workers help women to access immigration solicitors and apply for immigration status in the UK, as well as supporting them with safety planning, criminal and civil remedies, health services and employment. Staff have recently secured free ESOL (English as a second language) classes for the women.

As with all outreach work, links with the community are essential. Refuge staff have recently attended a local midwives’ meeting to increase awareness of the service and the additional barriers facing Vietnamese women. However, much of this outreach work is more subtle, particularly when working with marginalised communities. A woman recently referred herself to the Vietnamese service having heard about it in her local Vietnamese shop – this demonstrates how important building grassroots awareness is, and is testament to the workers’ ability to build relationships which help them access even the most hard-to-reach women.

One woman who used the service explains what that first contact meant to her:

“I called Refuge from a phone box one day when he was at work. I just wanted to talk. They gave me advice on how to stay safe at home... They told me about all kinds of legal options available to me. I had no idea about any of those things. I started to feel that I could do something – that I didn’t have to be stuck with him.”

Independent domestic, sexual and gender-based violence advocates

Refuge’s independent advocates support survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, including those at the highest risk of serious harm or homicide. Independent advocates give a voice to those who feel voiceless, enabling victims of violence to pursue justice and put the building blocks in place to start a new life, free from fear.

Refuge now runs independent advocacy services in Warrington, Coventry, Thames Valley and across seven London boroughs. This year, Refuge has grown its number of advocacy posts almost threefold, to 32, in order to reach more women who need our support. We have also diversified these roles, ensuring we meet the varied and often complex needs of our clients. For example, we now have 27 accredited independent sexual violence advocates (ISVAs) to support victims of rape and sexual violence.
Independent domestic, sexual and gender-based violence advocates (continued)

Thirty five per cent of the clients our advocates serve are from black and ethnic minority communities. 50% have mental health issues at the point of referral, and almost 20% have issues around alcohol and drug misuse. Our advocates provide a tailored service to meet each individual’s needs. This might mean coordinating the action of up to 20 agencies at a time to ensure a client’s urgent mental health, physical health, accommodation, legal and other needs are met. Refuge advocates are mostly situated in police stations, courts, hospitals, children’s centres and other community locations in order to provide immediate assistance to women who need it.

In 2015-16, our independent advocates have supported 2,242 women, 93 men and 3,207 children. They also gave short term support to a further 527 people. 46% of clients reported a complete end to all abuse and controlling behaviour at the point of leaving the advocacy service. 95% reported feeling safer and 89% who wanted to make a statement to the police were supported to do so.

Refuge independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs) also offer group support sessions. In Warrington, staff deliver a ‘WINGS’ support group, which examines the dynamics of domestic violence and discusses the impact abuse has had on individuals in the group. One IDVA describes how the group works:

“We direct discussion initially towards an individual that we call ‘Twiggy’ – a stick figure drawn on a flip-chart – rather than asking individuals what they experienced. The impacts of abuse are drawn on the flipchart around ‘Twiggy’ to give a visual representation to the participants of how domestic violence affects clients’ lives. We focus particularly on where the blame for the abuse lies – with the perpetrator. For many participants, it has been the first time they have actually appreciated how they have been affected by their experience, and from this we have been able to show them how strong and courageous they are to have come this far.”

Supporting clients through the justice system

A large part of an advocate’s work is to support women going through the criminal and civil justice system.

It takes a huge amount of courage to bring a case against a violent partner or ex-partner, and the legal system can be confusing, frightening and isolating for victims of domestic violence. Women who have reported incidents to the police may feel intimidated into withdrawing their support for the case; the idea of facing a perpetrator in court can be too much to bear, and often victims are not aware of their rights.

Independent support from a Refuge advocate can make all the difference.

An independent advocate will help to demystify the process and ensure the woman knows what is happening at every stage of the trial. If a woman is attending court to give evidence, an IDVA will arrange a pre-trial visit so that she can familiarise herself with the environment. IDVAs will also request special measures such as a screen so that a woman does not have to see her perpetrator.

During 2015-16, when Refuge advocates were able to support a client right through to the conclusion of their court case, the successful conviction rate was 75%.

One service manager describes a recent case:

“One of our IDVAs supported a woman through a very difficult court case. She had experienced abuse for almost 30 years and had not reported any incidents before making a self-referral to our service. She shared her experiences of verbal aggression, threatening behaviour and physical violence.

She described how she lived her life in constant fear, never knowing what was coming next. Our IDVA supported her through a series of complex issues in court - there were several moments when the client wanted to give up. Now, her courage and persistence has resulted in the perpetrator being given a six year sentence.”

Support for women experiencing other forms of gender-based violence

At Refuge we recognise that every woman we support has individual needs – no one person’s experience is the same as another’s. We recognise that domestic violence often overlaps with other forms of violence against women and girls, including rape and sexual assault, stalking, trafficking, prostitution, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and so-called ‘honour’ based violence. Our expert staff are trained to support all clients, whatever form of violence they have experienced.

Refuge also runs a range of specialist support services that specifically reach out to survivors of modern slavery. This year, we opened a service in the London Borough of Redbridge which supports women experiencing all forms of gender-based violence, including young women at risk of exploitation.

Alongside the services we run, Refuge has produced fold-out leaflets on so-called ‘honour’ based violence, forced marriage and FGM, as part of a wider initiative funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government designed to prevent these forms of abuse.

The leaflets give clear, bullet-pointed information on what ‘honour’ based violence, forced marriage and FGM are, how to spot whether you or someone you know might be at risk, and how to access support. They are wallet sized and disguised with a plain cover, so clients can refer to them discreetly. These leaflets have now been distributed in Refuge’s services and across relevant local agencies, so that professionals can share them with women.

Refuge also produced a more extensive resource for women who have experienced FGM. The content was created using both the experience of Refuge staff and one-to-one consultations with women who have experienced this form of abuse. The booklet, which was funded by Rosa, acts as a learning aid to help women make sense of what has happened to them, provides practical information about dealing with the physical and psychological impacts, and gives information about how Refuge can support women affected by this crime.

The booklet helps to facilitate what can be very personal discussions. As one woman said: “I was given practical support in terms of information for support agencies and I was given space to talk about my experience.”

Refuge staff also work across services and in their local communities to shine a light on all forms of gender violence. In Hounslow, staff participated in two events: a ‘Not For Sale’ event about safely exiting prostitution; and the White Ribbon Day event. At both staff distributed FGM literature and cards, and spoke to the community and agencies about the different types of FGM, the impact it has on women and the specialist clinics available locally. In Derby, staff ran a ‘16 Days of Activism’ campaign to raise awareness of forced marriage, so-called ‘honour’ based violence and FGM. They delivered presentations to local professionals highlighting the support available for women experiencing these forms of abuse, which received very positive feedback.
This year, Refuge has supported 104 men. On exiting Refuge’s services 90% of the men asked said they felt safer and 84% said their quality of life had improved. 87% of the men’s desired health outcomes had been achieved, as well as 83% of their safety outcomes and 71% of their social wellbeing outcomes.

Here, one of our independent sexual violence advocates explains the ways in which Refuge can support male victims:

“Chris had been raped by a stranger. He was homeless when he was referred. Chris’s immediate need was to find him somewhere safe to live.

“I was unable to make an application for housing in the local area as the perpetrator knew Chris had lived there and he was petrified of being found. Instead, I supported him to find secure housing elsewhere. I have also supported Chris to manage his debt and kept him updated on the police investigation into his rape. I also secured a shopping voucher for him, to see him through until he got paid.

“Chris did not tell anybody about the rape, including his partner. I have provided emotional support to him during our work together and supported him to access a counsellor, who will help him cope with the psychological impact of the rape. I continued to keep in phone contact with Chris. He is now in a much better place and has left the service.”

Support for men experiencing abuse

Refuge recognises that men can also experience domestic violence, rape and sexual assault and other forms of abuse and exploitation. We believe that everyone has the right to live in safety, free from fear – regardless of their gender or sexuality.

Refuge runs a number of services for male victims of violence across the country. These are primarily independent advocacy and outreach services, which provide practical and emotional support for men who are experiencing abuse.

Many men may feel ashamed about what has happened to them. They may be worried that people will think they are less of a man for ‘allowing’ themselves to be abused. Refuge staff will ensure their male clients know the abuse is not their fault, and provide them with the support they need to overcome their experiences.

Single point of access services

Refuge offers a number of single point of access services, which act as the first point of contact for any victim of gender-based violence in a specific area. These services operate across entire local authorities and support those who have experienced domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, prostitution, stalking, trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and so-called ‘honour’ based violence. This means that clients are able to come to one place to access a range of specialist support.

Thames Valley independent sexual violence advisory service

In July 2015 Refuge launched an independent sexual violence advocacy (ISVA) service for anyone in the Thames Valley area who has experienced rape or sexual assault, recent or historical. This specialist service acts as a single point of access coordinating all referrals from the police in the region and provides survivors with the psychological support and practical information they need to overcome their experiences.

The service covers 15 local authorities across a vast region of urban and remote rural areas, and includes a bespoke service for young people aged 16-21. So far, the service has supported 256 women, 203 children and 24 men, and it is now set to support at least 525 Thames Valley victims every year.

Experiencing rape or sexual assault is incredibly traumatic, and some people may find it difficult to disclose what has happened to them. Some report feeling embarrassed or ashamed, and may feel anxious when discussing their experiences. Many of the women the Thames Valley team support have complex needs: 25% have needs around drug misuse, 53% have mental health needs.

In 2015-16, the Thames Valley service supported its clients to achieve 99% of their desired outcomes, across safety, health, economic outcomes and social wellbeing outcomes.

Refuge’s highly-skilled ISVAs work to empower, support and inform clients. They are given the opportunity to discuss the impacts of sexual violence and the space to consider their options. If victims want to report incidents to the police, Refuge can support them to do so – and give in depth guidance on how the criminal justice system works.

As well as its strong relationship with the police, staff have worked in close partnership with community agencies including the local sexual health clinics and mental health services, and have met with university staff in the area to ensure they know how to support students who have experienced sexual violence.

Refuge is grateful to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley, which funds this service.

The Gaia Centre

The pioneering Gaia Centre, funded by the London Borough of Lambeth, was the first of its kind in the UK to offer a single point of access for women, girls and men experiencing violence and abuse. This year, the Centre has supported 539 women, 780 children and 17 men, providing one to one casework, group work, outreach, independent advocacy and peer support. The Centre’s dedicated ISVA has also supported an additional 41 women and 37 children.

Connecting with local agencies and promoting a greater understanding of the services Gaia provides helps to ensure that, when clients first seek medical or police assistance, they are referred to our specialist support quickly. A Gaia Centre Independent Gender Violence Advocate (IGVA) works within the community safety unit of the local police station, so she is on

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hand to support victims as soon as they arrive and share best practice with police colleagues. Gaia’s young person advocate has built relationships with social services and local schools – this is vital, as young people are much less likely to self-refer.

The Gaia Centre also runs regular surgeries for clients, where staff from partner agencies come to the Centre and offer advice on immigration, child contact and housing issues, as well as on clearing debt and claiming benefits. The Centre also has volunteer peer mentors, survivors of gender-based violence who support clients to rebuild their lives following abuse, including assisting them with applying for jobs, making phone calls and filling in forms.

The Gaia Centre also benefits from a large playroom and a dedicated child support worker, who runs homework clubs and play sessions for the children of clients. The child support worker is a post which Refuge fundraises to provide, and it means that women can discuss their experiences privately in the knowledge their children are both stimulated and

The Athena service

The Athena service opened its doors in April 2015, in Lewisham, London. The service supports women and girls aged 13 and over who are experiencing all forms of gender-based violence. Athena also supports men aged 16 or over and those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. It does this through outreach programmes, independent advocacy, group support, refuge accommodation and a specialist service for young women.

Athena staff have worked incredibly hard to raise the profile of the service across the borough. Senior managers have delivered domestic violence awareness training to over 50 staff in adult social care and 100 housing professionals, promoting the Athena service and raising awareness of support options and safeguarding methods for high-risk victims.

Athena’s team of independent advocates work from various community locations to ensure those in need can access their support quickly. For example, an Athena IGVA is currently located at the maternity unit of Lewisham Hospital and staff regularly attend maternity safeguarding meetings. This has increased the number of direct referrals to the service from midwives. In 30% of cases domestic violence begins during pregnancy, so this work is vital.

Coventry community based support service

This single point of access service acts as a gateway to community based support, refuge provision and children’s services which run across Coventry. It includes a helpline open seven days a week, independent domestic violence advocates, women’s safety workers, a sanctuary scheme and aftercare support.

The service was initially commissioned to support a minimum of 300 clients per year, but Refuge has far exceeded this. In 2015-16, the service supported 524 women, 940 children and 18 men.

The Coventry service works in partnership with the police, social services, children’s centres, courts and the health service to ensure professionals know what support Refuge can offer. Our independent domestic violence advocates work from the local public protection unit twice a week and attend the specialist domestic violence court once a week. This means they can offer immediate support to victims, as well as raise awareness of domestic violence among staff. Refuge advocates also attend MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences) where they represent the needs of high-risk clients to many other agencies to ensure a client is receiving all the support they need.

In Coventry, Refuge supports many clients with complex immigration status. To best support these clients our staff speak a combined total of 27 different languages. In order to make their clients’ lives easier, staff have developed a close working relationship with the local asylum office; this means that clients no longer have to attend an initial asylum appointment in London and can instead attend locally, which saves clients’ time and money.

London Borough of Redbridge violence against women and girls service

This new integrated support service opened in November 2015 to support clients experiencing all forms of abuse including domestic violence, sexual violence and sexual exploitation including trafficking and prostitution, stalking and harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and so-called ‘honour’ based violence.

Funded by the London Borough of Redbridge, the service provides confidential, non-judgmental, independent support on a one-to-one or group basis. Staff work with clients to create a tailor-made safety and support plan, which might include goals around personal safety, safe housing options or contacting the police. The service also runs group sessions and a peer support scheme to help reduce isolation, build social networks and support clients to regain control of their lives.

The team includes specialist independent gender-based violence advocates who support women and men at risk of serious harm, a young person’s advocate supporting girls aged 14-17 and a children’s outreach worker. So far, the service has supported 126 women, 203 children and one man. In addition, the youth advocate at the service has supported seven young people, and the children’s outreach worker has supported 17 women and 31 children.
Freephone 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline

Refuge runs the National Domestic Violence Helpline in partnership with Women’s Aid. This service offers free, confidential support and information for anyone experiencing domestic violence. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

For many women, phoning the Helpline is the first step towards safety. One caller says:

“If you’re feeling unsafe, I’d urge you to call a national domestic violence helpline. 24-hour, seven days a week, and they’ll be able to help you find refuge accommodation and support. No one should be alone in this. I rang your Helpline and felt relieved that someone at last was listening to me. The person who dealt with me was sensitive and very professional and understood what I was up against, which has been a major barrier for me in getting help.”

A Helpline adviser will never tell a woman what to do. Instead, she will let her know what support is available and talk her through her options. The Helpline also acts as a gateway to a national network of refuge accommodation and outreach services.

More women are calling our Helpline than ever before. In 2015–16, the Helpline received 86,845 calls. This is an annual increase of almost 10% and amounts to an average of 238 calls per day.

At Refuge the Helpline is staffed by 10 permanent members of staff, 17 sessional workers and 60 volunteers. Without these volunteers we would not be able to answer so many calls from women who need us. This year, our volunteers contributed 7,204 hours of their time. This is an increase of 16% from last year – an amazing achievement. This year the team has also benefitted from a new, bespoke Helpline database, making it much easier to offer relevant support quickly.

One volunteer said:

“The best thing about working on the Helpline is being able to support people. It really is as simple as that. To be there for people who may have never spoken to anyone about what is happening to them before is humbling. They have chosen to call the Helpline and speak to me. It is so satisfying being able to make a difference. I always look forward to my shifts.”

Another said:

“I remember one particular caller. She was suffering very severe domestic violence and was agoraphobic. As a result, she didn’t want to go into a refuge. We worked really hard with other Refuge colleagues in our services to make sure this woman could be supported on her journey from home to the refuge, as she was so anxious about making the move.”

Online support

Picking up the phone and telling somebody about the abuse you are experiencing is a huge step, and one not all women are ready to undertake. However, women may want to find out more about domestic violence and what support is available for them. This is why online support is so important.

Refuge’s website, www.refuge.org.uk, provides simple, clear information on identifying the signs of abuse — and also on what to do if you think you may be experiencing domestic violence. This information is a vital first line of support. We work hard to ensure key messages are shared throughout our website so women know that they are not alone and that they are not to blame for the abuse. Crucially, we ensure that women know Refuge is there to support them.

Last year, almost 1.7 million people visited our website, with almost half a million people accessing the ‘Get Help Now’ area, an increase of 23%. This means more people than ever are learning about domestic violence and taking the first steps towards safety.

Our Facebook and Twitter reach has also increased hugely over the year. Refugee’s Twitter account gained more than 7,000 new followers and our Facebook account gained almost 8,000 new likes, almost doubling our total number. Our social media presence is a valuable tool for sharing vital information about our services, whilst breaking down myths around domestic violence, and for reaching out to women and girls who may need our support.
Our ‘3P’ approach

Refuge wants to live in a world where domestic violence no longer exists. In order to achieve this aim, society must adopt a ‘3P’ approach:

Protection
Prevention
Provision

This means protecting women through a strong criminal justice system response that holds perpetrators to account; preventing future violence through education, training and awareness raising; and providing specialist services for women and children forced to flee violence.

The ‘3P’ approach underpins Refuge’s work. We have campaigned for decades to keep domestic violence high on the political agenda, expressing the needs of our clients at the highest level and advocating for improvements to domestic violence policy and practice. We work in partnership with other organisations to raise awareness of domestic violence, its causes and solutions. We improve and diversify constantly our specialist services for survivors of violence and abuse, so that as many women as possible can benefit from our support.

Seeking justice

Two women a week are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales. One in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. During this year period, a United Nations report has been released criticising the UK Government response to tackling violence against women. In the UK, 750,000 children witness domestic violence each year, an experience that can have a profound and lasting impact. Yet domestic violence is still not taken as seriously as other forms of violent crime.

Domestic violence will not be reduced until the police, prosecutors and courts show perpetrators that their actions have serious consequences. Perpetrators must be brought to justice. Refuge advocates both for legislative change and for a shift in attitude, so that violence against women is given the attention and resources it deserves.

Improving women’s experience of the criminal justice system

When a woman finds the courage to speak out against her abuser, she should be protected by the full force of the law.

“There is still a long way to go until every woman, no matter where she lives, gets the police protection she needs and deserves. Too often the response a woman receives from the police is subject to a ‘postcode lottery’. And too often women tell us that they feel let down by the police and criminal justice system.” Sandra Horley

This year, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) published a progress report on the police response to domestic violence. 21 months after its 2014 investigation found “alarming and unacceptable weaknesses”. The new report found that although there had been improvement in some areas, much more still needs to be done – the response of nine forces were assessed as a cause for concern, and a further fifteen had areas identified for improvement.

Refuge has made clear that this is not good enough. We continue to participate in the national oversight committee, convened by the Home Secretary, which seeks to ensure progress is made by all police forces against the HMIC recommendations. On the committee, Refuge ensures the voices of women who continue to experience poor police practice are heard.
Supporting bereaved families

Refuge also seeks justice for the families of women killed by their partners or ex-partners. We support them to access high quality legal representation, accompany them to meetings with the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) and offer ongoing emotional and practical support. Many of these families work with Refuge because they want to save other families from the heartbreak of losing a loved one in circumstances where more could have been done to protect them. Refuge is hugely grateful for their on-going support and courage in speaking out against domestic violence and in working with us to affect change.

Domestic homicide reviews

In England and Wales two women are killed by a current or former partner each week, a statistic which has not changed in more than a decade, and around 500 more abused women take their own lives annually. Refuge continues to contribute to the Home Office Quality Assurance Panel for domestic violence homicides. In the last year we have provided feedback on around 100 domestic homicide reviews, ensuring that the voice of the deceased may at least be heard in death. The purpose of the panel is to ensure these reviews meet a high standard, that any state failings are identified and that lessons are learned to prevent future deaths.

Protecting services

Since 2011, Refuge has experienced cuts to 80% of its services, with some being cut by up to 50%.

In September, Refuge chief executive Sandra Horley and the senior management team met with local government and communities minister, Baroness Williams to impress upon her the value of specialist domestic violence provision. Refuge staff also spoke passionately on this subject at the Department for Communities and Local Government’s Domestic Abuse Summit in September. The summit followed the Government’s announcement in the summer budget of an additional £3.2 million for victims of domestic abuse. Refuge welcomed the news, but warned that this small amount of money is only a stop-gap. Sandra Horley said:

“Funding cuts are having a profound effect. I worry that the country may be returning to days of Cathy Come Home, where women experiencing domestic violence are faced with a stark choice: flee to live rough on the streets with their children, or remain with their abuser and risk further violence – or worse.”
Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

On International Women’s Day, 8 March 2016, the Government launched its updated Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, announcing £80 million of funding to address domestic violence over four years until 2020. This may sound like a lot of money, pointed out Sandra Horley – but when you take into account the gaping hole left by year-on-year reductions in funding from local authorities, it is clear that this figure will not bridge the gap. Refuge welcomed the strategy’s emphasis on improving poor commissioning practices – something Refuge has been advocating for many years.

Refuge continues to sit on the Home Office’s national oversight group on domestic abuse and plays a leading role in advocating for the protection of specialist services.

Welfare changes

Housing benefit is the life-blood of refuges – but it is now at risk under the Government’s welfare changes. In February, Refuge wrote to the welfare minister Lord Freud to raise its grave concerns about the Government’s plan to extend Local Housing Allowance to social housing – effectively a cut in housing benefit for those renting from social landlords, of which Refuge is one.

If supported accommodation like ours is not exempted, it could mean the end of the refuge sector. Local Housing Allowance is set in line with the lowest 30% of market rents in a given area. These rates would not even meet refuge rent charges, let alone the additional funds needed to maintain specialist emergency accommodation like ours. In this scenario we would be forced to shut down our life-saving refuges and turn women and children away. Sandra Horley wrote a passionate piece for The Guardian on the subject.

Following this correspondence, Refuge provided evidence for a review into supported housing conducted by the Department of Work and Pensions and the Department of Communities and Local Government. Refuge will continue to lobby the Government to ensure that welfare changes do not impact on women’s ability to flee violent partners.
Domestic violence is still a taboo subject in this country. As a result, women experiencing abuse can feel that they are totally alone. It is vital for Refuge to raise awareness of the issue amongst the public; loudly and persistently. Providing information about how to spot the signs of abuse and how to access support means we can reach more women – and save more lives.

Refuge believes that violence against women and girls will not end until society sees men and women as equal. While there is gender inequality at the levels we see in the UK today, there will be men who view their wives and girlfriends as subordinates and treat them with contempt and cruelty. Refuge is committed to changing social attitudes so that violence against women and girls becomes unacceptable to everybody. This is reflected in our campaigning work.

Campaigning for change

My money, my life.

In December Refuge launched a new campaign, in partnership with The Co-operative Bank, to shine a light on an often-ignored form of domestic abuse – financial abuse. As part of this campaign, we commissioned the UK’s largest study to date to uncover the true extent of financial abuse within intimate partner relationships. The research found that 18% of all adults in the UK have been a victim of financial abuse. For women, financial abuse rarely happens in isolation – 86% also experience other forms of abuse.

As part of the campaign, Refuge published a practical financial guide to help women understand the nature of financial abuse, and need banking services. The campaign was recently championed in the Government’s Violence Against Women and Girls strategy as a way of making domestic violence ‘everyone’s business’.

#GiveThemRefuge
Refuge is incredibly lucky to have the pro-bono support of prestigious creative agency BBH. On Christmas eve, Refuge and BBH launched the #GiveThemRefuge social media campaign to raise awareness of the huge numbers of children exposed to domestic violence in this country.

The campaign was supported by Facebook, which donated media space allowing Refuge to target a carefully selected audience of 2.1 million parents with children under the age of 12. The response to the campaign was phenomenal: traffic to Refuge’s website increased by over 1000% over the campaign period, and we experienced an 89% increase in charitable donations.

Training and education
Refuge staff train professionals up and down the country on spotting the signs of domestic violence and work incredibly hard to ensure effective referral pathways are in place so that women can access our services.

Educating staff working in statutory services to understand the dynamics of domestic violence allows them to assess risk and safeguard more effectively. This in turn can save lives.

In 2014-2015, Refuge was given a £13,000 grant from the Department of Communities and Local Government to deliver two community engagement projects addressing female genital mutilation (FGM) and ‘honour’ based violence. This year, Refuge delivered training on FGM to four groups in Lewisham, consisting of 123 health professionals, children’s centre staff and faith and community groups. 90% of participants rated our trainers as very good or excellent.

Feedback showed that hearing about a woman’s first hand experiences helped attendees to contextualise FGM, leading to improved understanding of how they can best support women who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing the practice.

Refuge also delivered training on forced marriage and ‘honour’ based violence. The training explored definitions, motives and excuses, law, impacts, safeguarding and how Refuge provides support. This training was delivered to six groups in Hackney and six groups in Derby and Stoke-on-Trent, including health visitors, police officers, school nurses, housing officers and a local Muslim faith school.

One trainer explains why the programmes were so effective:
“The most positive part of the programme for me was the fact that we were able to invite women in Refuge’s services to participate in the design and delivery of it. We have been able to work with women who have experienced FGM and together change other people’s practice and challenge perceptions. As such the women who took part have been able to turn their own negative and often traumatic experiences of FGM into a positive vehicle for change, helping to lay new foundations of best practice in their communities.”

Educating young men

In July, Refuge teamed up with the National Football League to raise awareness amongst young men of sexual violence and domestic abuse in relationships. Over one weekend, Refuge ran an awareness-raising programme for a group of 80 young men aged 16 to 19-years-old, training them on the part men can play in ending gender violence. One of the participants said: “The domestic violence session was very enlightening and it was good to speak about it in such an open environment. Normally it is seen as a taboo subject, which can lead to ignorance and misinformation. It was great to have the opportunity for everyone to discuss it.”

As part of this work, Refuge created a new website about sexual violence, targeted at young men. This will act as a valuable educational and awareness-raising tool for many years to come.
Raising funds

As local authority budgets are squeezed further, Refuge is constantly asked to do more with less. Raising funds is essential if we are to keep the doors to our specialist services open. Our small but dedicated fundraising team works incredibly hard to secure funds and gifts-in-kind from individuals as well as trusts, foundations and corporate partners.

This year, the Refuge team has raised more than £2 million in voluntary funds. We have seen a 20% increase in the number of individual donors giving to Refuge; almost 6,000 ordinary people have given money in support of the women and children we serve, and we are enormously grateful to them and all of our other supporters.

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Whilst Refuge has not been involved in The Archers’ script, we have worked closely with the BBC and The Archers’ team to ensure messages about domestic violence and where women can receive support are promoted alongside the storyline. Thanks to ‘real time’ social media channels Refuge has been able to draw attention to Rob’s tactics of abuse as they play out, and in parallel provide information about spotting the signs of controlling behaviour. This information has been shared by many, helping us to connect with more women who may need our help.

Walk4

This year, we staged our first Refuge-owned event, Walk4. On the 27 September, hundreds of women, men and children came together to walk four of London’s most iconic bridges, to highlight the fact that one in four women in this country will experience domestic violence. The event was a huge success and raised more than £85,000 for Refuge. Refuge staff were joined on the walk by supporters and survivors of domestic violence, and by the families of women killed by their perpetrators. Melony Slack’s sister-in-law Rachael Slack was stabbed in 2010 by her ex-partner Andrew Cairns. She was pregnant at the time. Rachael’s 23-month-old son, Auden, was also killed. Melony shares what the walk meant to her:

“Rachael was unaware of Refuge’s services and all the different ways the charity supports women and children. Had Rachael been able to access such support, she could have taken steps to protect her life, the life of her unborn baby and her toddler son, Auden. We were delighted to take part in Walk4 to raise awareness of Refuge’s work and support other women, just like Rachael, to keep safe and rebuild their lives free from the threat of violence and fear.”

Bold is Beautiful

In May 2015, Refuge’s long-term corporate supporter Benefit Cosmetics launched its first ever international philanthropy project, Bold is Beautiful. Throughout the month, Benefit pledged to donate 100% of the profits from its UK brow wax services to Refuge and one other charity, Look Good Feel Better. As a result, more than 45,000 women had their brows trimmed and tamed for a good cause.
Benefit also organised the Bold is Beautiful march on behalf of the charities, which saw more than 500 women walk 3.7 miles past some of London’s most iconic sights. As well as taking in Marble Arch, Wellington Arch and Piccadilly Circus, participants were given Benefit make-up throughout the route, which culminated in a celebration in Cavendish Square.

Bold is Beautiful was the biggest corporate fundraising event Refuge has ever taken part in, and it raised more than £145,000. We would like to say a huge thank you to Benefit for its fantastic support.

Fundraising events

To mark International Women’s Day in March, our long-standing pro-bono partner BBH brought together 11 graphic artists in an exhibition of unique pieces named ‘She Lights Up The Night’. The one-off works were auctioned at Christies and raised more than £30,000 for Refuge. Michelle, who escaped domestic violence with the support of Refuge, spoke courageously to the auction audience about her experiences.

In September, Benefit Cosmetics staged the annual Funny Women Comedy Awards, which showcases the best up-and-coming female comedy performers. As well as raising laughs, the event secured almost £5,000 for Refuge.

Refuge was also delighted to be the charity partner of The City of London’s International Women’s Day Breakfast for the tenth year in a row. Chaired by journalist and presenter Susanna Reid, the event enabled us to raise awareness of domestic violence and over £40,000 for Refuge.

In July, we were thrilled to hold a fundraising dinner at the prestigious Spencer House. The event was very generously sponsored by our supporter, Peter Virdee, which meant that all funds raised on the night went directly towards our work. We were delighted that, once again, our patron Sir Patrick Stewart attended – and that award winning actress Olivia Colman was able to give a heartfelt speech on the evening. The event was attended by many key supporters as well as some new ones.

Refuge has also benefitted from the support of more than 300 runners and cyclists this year. This included 35 brave Virgin London Marathon runners, who were cheered on by staff and volunteers and raised an amazing £87,583 between them. Other events included the Prudential RideLondon Surrey 100, which involves a 100 mile cycle past the iconic sites of the capital and then on to the beautiful Surrey countryside, and the Royal Parks Half Marathon. We would like to thank all of our runners and cyclists for their much valued support.

Commitment to quality

At Refuge we pride ourselves on our high quality, specialist services tailored to the individual needs of each woman and child we support. We continue to innovate and improve our services, and to train our volunteers and staff to a high standard. This ensures that we provide the best support possible to women and children experiencing domestic violence.
ISO 9001 standard – a mark of excellence

In 2010 Refuge became the first domestic violence organisation in the country to be awarded the internationally recognised ISO 9001 certificate by the British Standards Institute. The British Standards Institute judged that Refuge operates a quality management system for its network of services which complies with the high standards of the ISO 9001 qualification. The ISO 9001 demonstrates that the processes and procedures Refuge uses to deliver its specialist services are robust, consistent and systematic, and that Refuge constantly strives for continuous improvement.

In February, Refuge underwent its three-year strategic review by the British Standards Institute. For the second consecutive year, the independent auditors were unable to identify a single area requiring management action.

Staff development and training

Our staff are our most valuable resource.

We have continued to ensure that all frontline workers including volunteers receive a comprehensive package of specialist training on a wide range of issues, from the law and immigration, to support around substance misuse, to risk assessment and safety planning.

In July Refuge launched a management training and development programme to ensure the continued success of its services. The programme includes specialist management training and the opportunity to achieve an Institute of Leadership and Management Award qualification which thirty managers are currently working towards.

Refuge is very proud of the 27 staff members who completed and passed the accredited rape and sexual violence advocacy training in December. This means Refuge is now even better equipped to work with clients requiring specialist sexual violence and advocacy services.

This year, we delivered over 68 training sessions to approximately 140 members of staff, who attended an average of four courses each.

IMPACT

IMPACT is Refuge’s bespoke casework management system and embedded specialist outcomes framework, designed by our specialist practitioners to monitor our work with women and children. It enables us to document the full story of the abuse a woman has experienced, record the type of support she is given and – crucially – the outcomes she has been supported to achieve. Through IMPACT, we are able to demonstrate that our specialist services do not just save lives, they change lives.

IMPACT is a dynamic system – it can be constantly tailored to support the needs of individual services. It automatically flags any ‘gaps’ in casework, ensuring that women in our care stay safe and it greatly reduces paperwork and bureaucracy for the staff. This means they can spend more time with the women and children they support.

At a Department for Communities and Local Government conference in September, local government and communities minister Baroness Williams paid tribute to IMPACT, stating that clear understanding of data and people’s needs can save lives.

New improvements made to IMPACT mean it is now web-based, making it accessible from multiple locations. Refuge is now making this state-of-the-art system available to other organisations and will launch a new website to showcase what makes IMPACT so unique.

Thank you

We would like to thank all of our supporters during 2015-16, including those who have chosen to remain anonymous.

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As ever, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the staff, volunteers, patrons, trustees and the individuals who support us and whose hard work and dedication result in the delivery of life-saving and life-changing services to thousands of women and children each year. Without the ongoing support of our patrons and the continuing generosity of many donors, this vital work would not be possible.
Refuge

For women and children. Against domestic violence.

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www.refuge.org.uk

24 Hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline
run in partnership between Women’s Aid and Refuge:
0808 2000 247

Thanks to Nick Darke for design and Julian Nieman for photography.
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