



All-Party Parliamentary Group on  
Domestic and Sexual Violence

## **The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence Inquiry: The Changing Landscape of Domestic and Sexual Violence Services.**

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence has launched an Inquiry entitled: The Changing Landscape of Domestic and Sexual Violence Services.

The aim of the Inquiry is to investigate the impact of funding changes and localised commissioning processes on domestic and sexual violence services and the survivors that they support. The Inquiry will also investigate what the future might hold for these specialist services and how the Government can support these services to survive.

The Inquiry is being led by Women's Aid, Rape Crisis England and Wales and Bridget Phillipson MP.

This particular survey is aimed at professionals, organisations, academics and anyone with a professional interest in this subject area. We are running a tandem survey for survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence. Please contact [appg@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:appg@womensaid.org.uk) for a link to the survivor's survey.

This survey is split into two sections.

**Section A** focuses on domestic violence services

**Section B** focuses on sexual violence services

Please respond to the part of the questionnaire that relates to your area of expertise, or both if applicable.

The closing date for this survey is Friday 24 October. Oral evidence sessions will take place in Parliament in November.

Any questions or queries about the Inquiry please contact [appg@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:appg@womensaid.org.uk). Please distribute this link to your contacts.

\*\*\* please note: quotations from submissions may be used publicly and attributed to you/your organisations unless you specify in Q7 that you do not consent for the publication of your quotes. \*\*\*

**Please submit your response to [appg@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:appg@womensaid.org.uk) by Friday 25 October.**



### Personal Information

1. Your name – **Elaine Hake, Senior Communications and Policy Manager**
2. Are you responding on behalf of an organisation, if so which one? **Refuge**
3. Name of organisation (if applicable) **Refuge**
4. Nature of organisations (if applicable) for example, charity, public sector, front-line service. **National domestic violence charity**
5. Email address – [elaine\\_hake@refuge.org.uk](mailto:elaine_hake@refuge.org.uk)
6. Phone number – **020 7395 7727**
7. **Do you consent for quotes from your submission to be used publicly? Yes – as long as they are credited appropriately**

### PART A – DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

8. **Have changes to funding affected the deliver-ability of your domestic violence service, or any services that you are familiar with, over the last five years?**

Yes.

9. **If you answered YES to Q8 what was the percentage of the funding reductions or increases experienced?**

This answer is hard to quantify. Approximately 80% of our contracts have had their funding cut. The percentage to which the funding has been cut varies considerably – for example the largest cut to funding we have seen to refuge provision has been 50%.

10. **If you answered YES to Q8 which services were affected and how?**

Refuge has experienced reductions in funding from local authorities in all of our service contracts across the country (refuge provision, Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA), community outreach etc.).

11. **If you answered YES to Q8 what impact has this had on service users?**

Yes there has been disruption to our service model. We have had to revise our management structures and reduce staffing levels, particularly in our refuge services.

Current refuge service specifications reflect the desire by local authorities to commission services more cheaply and in so doing 'meet' their statutory homelessness duties.

Issues we have seen include:

- Refuges having to enforce a three month limit on stay. This timeframe is very tight, women are not always ready to move on



- There has been a reduction in the number of support hours per woman which has impacted on staffing levels
- Local services are required to prioritise support for local women – to the extent where a prescribed % of local women are required to live in the refuges, this can affect safety
- Support within refuges to be provided on an outreach basis

**12. If you answered NO to Q8, what has the stability of funding meant for the organisation and the survivors of domestic violence accessing your service?**

N/A.

**13. How have commissioning practices affected your domestic violence service or any services that you are familiar with, over the last 5 years?**

**Please cover:**

**Which services delivered by the organisation(s) were affected and how?**

Commissioning practices have affected all of the specialist services Refuge runs across the country (refuge provision, Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA), community outreach etc.).

**What impact this had upon service users?**

Many local authorities are commissioning shorter and shorter contracts as a result of uncertainty about ongoing budgets. The provision of one or two year contracts, particularly where this is a new specification or requires a restructuring of how services are delivered, means that implementation occupies a large part or the majority of the life of the contract. There is also, inevitably, disruption to victims when services are continually being re-commissioned.

**Whether you experienced positive or negative commissioning practices**

Please see our response to questions 14 and 15.

**14. Do you have any examples of poor commissioning practices for domestic violence services? If yes, please explain and provide further details.**

In general there is no consistent approach to commissioning for specialist domestic violence services. Quite the contrary.

Overall, Refuge is concerned that many local commissioners have a very poor understanding of what is required to provide high quality specialist support to victims of domestic violence. This is evident in a number of worrying trends in commissioning practice, which Refuge has noticed in 2013-2014, outlined below:



### Contracts that are not financially viable or that present financial risk

- Many service contracts are simply not financially viable: Refuge has decided not to tender for several contracts in the last year because we felt that the service could not be safely delivered within the budget set by the commissioner/s
- In October 2013 a council commissioned a domestic violence service - the TUPE list detailed approximately 50 members of staff that might be eligible to transfer, however the published contract was for a much smaller service, making redundancies inevitable. The financial risk of making even a portion of those employees redundant was disproportionate in a one year contract where redundancy costs could not be absorbed in following years

### Contract where the refuge stay is very short

- Feb 2014: a tender was released specifying a maximum stay of **6 weeks**. We know, from running first class refuge services up and down the country for decades that women need an average of 5-6 months support before they are ready to move on. Many of our clients are suicidal on arrival. Providing services is not just a case of providing a safe roof over a head for a couple of weeks – it is a question of providing intensive support across a wide range of complex needs to empower women and children to turn their lives around following horrific experiences of abuse
- Jan 2014: another tender specified maximum **14 week** stay in refuge with additional 12 weeks resettlement support; 70% of residents in any one year had to be **local residents**
- June 2013: another council commissioned a two-stage model of refuge provision and move-on accommodation: maximum **28 days** stay in refuge; dispersed accommodation available for 6-months

### Mixed male and female accommodation

- We have seen tenders including specifications for safe houses providing bedroom spaces for both female and male victims
- There is tendency for contracts to require accommodation for both female and male clients, usually with a provision that the latter be provided for in dispersed accommodation. This indicates a lack of understanding of the needs of abused women and men and how they may differ. It implies a misunderstanding of statutory obligations to commission services in accordance with equality legislation. It is not only a waste of money but potentially extremely dangerous.

### Local services for local women

- Many commissioners have specified that we must prioritise local women in our refuge services. Refuges are, by their very nature, places where people can escape to. Many of our clients move abroad to escape their ex-partner. We must encourage commissioners to prioritise safety and make it as easy, not as difficult, as possible for women to start a new life.

### Erosion of refuge provision

- In the drive for 'innovation', some councils are moving away from commissioning refuges. Some contracts do not include any refuge provision at all, whilst others are replacing refuges with dispersed accommodation. This means that abused women and children are housed in isolated units, with little support to help them recover from the trauma of experiencing horrific, and often prolonged abuse. One recent tender



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specified refuge provision but without any refuge workers – instead, support was to be provided by outreach workers.

- Refuges are so much more than just a roof over a head. Our specialist refuge workers support women and children to rebuild every aspect of their lives, from helping them to stay safe, access health services, legal advocacy and immigration advice, and get back into work or education. Refuges also provide vital peer support. Abused women and children are often isolated by their perpetrators – cut off from friends and family and other forms of support. When women come to a refuge they are able to share their experiences with other women who understand what they have been through. They realise – often for the first time - that they are not alone, and that they are not to blame for the abuse. Refuges facilitate this powerful recovery process.

### Short contracts

- Many local authorities are commissioning shorter and shorter contracts as a result of uncertainty about ongoing budgets
- The provision of **one or two year contracts**, particularly where this is a new specification or requires a restructuring of how services are delivered, means that implementation occupies a large part or the majority of the life of the contract
- There is also, inevitably, **disruption to victims** when services are continually being re-commissioned
- It is hugely difficult to retain the highest quality staff when job security remains fragile

### Data ownership

- Some contracts specify that ownership of service user data must rest with councils/commissioners. This means that service providers are obliged to tell women entering the service that the data they collect about them will belong to the local council. This can obviously impact on women's willingness to disclose full details of their experiences, and thus hinder the quality of support we are able to offer in return. Service providers may also have to spend additional resources and energy securing legal advice in order to negotiate issues around data control.

### Local helplines

- There is an increasing move towards commissioning local helplines in order to facilitate direct, 24/7 access to local services. Refuge believes this is unnecessary, given that the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership between Refuge and Women's Aid) is a 24/7 service that exists to link women to specialist services across the country. Commissioning additional local helplines – which are often required to operate lengthy opening hours – is an unnecessary duplication of resources.

### **15. Do you have any examples of good commissioning practices for domestic violence services? If yes, please explain and provide further details.**

Refuge runs the Gaia Centre in the London borough of **Lambeth** – an innovative 'one stop shop' service for victims of all forms of gender-based violence, which was commissioned and funded by Lambeth Council. Refuge felt that there were several positive aspects to the commissioning of this service:



- The council consulted service users on what they wanted and developed their VAWG strategy from there (see summary of consultation process below)
- The process was not overly onerous: they didn't want reams of unnecessary information, and were mostly focused on how we would deliver the service. All of the elements of support were sensible, unlike some tenders we see

**16. Do you have examples of where domestic violence services have adapted to meet funding changes and difficult commissioning decisions in order to continue to provide a quality service? If yes please explain and provide further details**

Refuge has had to adapt some elements of its service provision in order to meet funding changes and commissioning demands. We have, for example, had to extend support to male victims across a number of our services. We have also had to restructure some elements of our staffing structure, undertake salary reviews and design new posts to accommodate service specifications and reduced budgets.

However, whilst there has been intense pressure to reduce and adapt our provision, Refuge has worked hard to continue to offer the same levels of high quality specialist support to women and children. We have over forty years' experience of supporting survivors of domestic violence and we know that our services produce powerful outcomes. We are determined not to reduce the quality of support we offer in the face of ongoing austerity measures. Instead, we have sought to subsidise statutory funding shortages with voluntary income raised through a number of channels (corporate, individuals, major donors etc.).

**17. What do you think is the future for specialist domestic violence services considering changes to funding and commissioning that you have experienced?**

Refuge provision is under serious threat as a result of ongoing cuts to local funding and poor commissioning practices. In the current climate, commissioning has become less about protecting the needs of victims and more about cutting costs. We are in real danger of returning to the days of *Cathy Come Home*. Without adequate refuge provision, women experiencing domestic violence will be 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.

It is astounding that we are still having to argue the need for refuges four decades after opening the world's first refuge in Chiswick, in 1971. In 1975, the Select Committee on Violence in Marriage identified that there should be at least one refuge space per 10,000 people. A second Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry in 1992 reinforced this, stating: *"We recommend that the first priority for the Government action on domestic violence should be the establishment of a central, co-ordinated policy for refuge provision throughout the country. We believe this could well be the greatest cost-saving measure that could be taken."* And again, in 2008, another Home Affairs Select Committee expressed concern over the lack of funding for refuges, describing this as a "critical need" for victims of domestic



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violence. Four decades of rigorous political scrutiny has highlighted the need to protect and strengthen the provision of refuges for victims of domestic violence. And yet these vital services are now in danger of slipping away.

Domestic violence is a serious crime – a crime that kills two women every week. No country, however enlightened, has ever phased out refuge provision. There will always be some women and children who need to escape from their violent partner and seek the safety of a refuge. After all, only a minority of victims of domestic violence report to the police, so we cannot rely on the criminal justice system to provide protection. The key to addressing domestic violence is providing a range of solutions and services. Ensuring the provision of refuges should not be at the discretion of local authorities. Funding for specialist services should be placed on a statutory footing. Domestic violence is a national problem: it needs a national response.

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