

Accommodation-based domestic abuse service funding consultation – Refuge response **August 2019**

Refuge welcomes the opportunity to respond to the hugely important consultation on the Future Delivery of Support to Victims and their Children in Accommodation-Based Domestic Abuse Services from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

About Refuge

Refuge is the largest specialist provider of gender-based violence services in the country supporting over 6,500 women and children on any given day. Refuge opened the world's first refuge in 1971 in Chiswick and 47 years later, provides: a national network of 46 refuges, community outreach programmes, child support services, and acts as independent advocates for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. We also run specialist services for survivors of modern slavery, 'honour'-based violence, and female genital mutilation. In partnership with Women's Aid, Refuge provides the National Domestic Violence Helpline which receives hundreds of calls a day.

Specialist refuge services

Specialist refuges are vital life-saving services for survivors of domestic abuse and their children. Yet they are currently in crisis, in large part due to a lack of funding and poor commissioning practices. The need for reforming the way in which refuges are funded is urgent, and we strongly support the Government's public consultation on this issue and commitment to act.

Refuges are so much more than a bed for a night. They are a highly specialised, national network of safety and support services for women and children who are victims of domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence.

There is a continuing and urgent need for refuges. 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime and, on average, two women a week are killed by their partners or former partners in England and Wales alone. Refuges are emergency, life-saving services for women and children. Data from Refuge's unique case management system, IMPACT, shows that last year over half of the women who came into our refuges had suffered a life-threatening injury and 44 per cent reported that the perpetrator had attacked them with weapons. At point of entry into a refuge, 64 per cent said the abuse was happening more frequently and getting worse. Further, women who use our refuges have higher levels of psychological distress and are more likely to express thoughts and plans about suicide than women who access our non-accommodation specialist services (<https://www.refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/domestic-abuse-suicide-refuge-warwick-july2018.pdf>). It cannot be overstated how critical refuge provision and the expert staff who operate within refuge settings are to ensuring the lives of women and children are both protected and rebuilt.

Behind the walls of our refuges, lives are transformed – specialist refuge workers support women and children who have experienced violence and trauma to keep safe, whilst rebuilding every aspect of their lives. This involves supporting them to access health services, secure legal and immigration advice, access safe and affordable housing, navigate the criminal justice system and help them get back into work and education when they are ready.

Refuges also provide vital peer support. Abused women and children are often extremely isolated by their perpetrators – cut off from friends and family and other forms of support. Women often tell us that before they came to a refuge they thought they were the only person experiencing domestic violence –

and that they believed the abuse was their fault. Being in a refuge environment and speaking to other survivors enables women to realise – often for the first time - that they are not alone, and that they are not to blame for the abuse.

Refuges are an essential element of the national response to violence against women and girls. It can be extremely difficult and dangerous to leave a violent and abusive perpetrator. Many of the women we work with attempt to leave several times before they are able to leave permanently. It is well established that women and their children are most at risk of homicide at the point of separation and in the period immediately after leaving an abuser. It is vital that women and their children are able to access a refuge space in a part of the country where they are safe as soon as they are able to leave the violent partner.

Summary and key recommendations on the proposed legal duty regarding accommodation-based domestic abuse services

Refuge welcomes the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) proposals to create a statutory duty to assess need for accommodation-based domestic abuse services and commission services on the basis of this need. We believe this model has the potential to be transformative, and *could* result in the desperately needed increase in refuge provision and a more sustainable funding model. However, we argue that the proposals will only be successful if a number of amendments are made. These include amending the definition of an accommodation-based service and the proposed model being accompanied by sufficient, sustained, ring-fenced funding. Our key concerns and recommendations are:

1. Funding

The success of this model hinges on how much central government funding is made available to underpin accommodation-based domestic abuse services. It is vital that services are fully funded, and that this funding is ring-fenced. The Government has not yet announced how much money will be attached to this proposal. However the Rt Hon James Brokenshire, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government at the time of the announcement of the funding proposals, suggested it would be somewhere in the region of £90 million. He did not, however, specify whether this would be per year or spread over several years. Refuge is concerned that even the higher amount of £90 million per year will not be sufficient to ensure adequate refuge provision, and we are working closely with MHCLG to help determine the true cost of provision of quality services that meets demand. We strongly urge the Government to fully fund this policy, drawing on the resources of the many Government departments which directly benefit financially from the improved outcomes for survivors of domestic abuse as a result of accessing and being supported by specialist domestic abuse services.

2. Definitions of accommodation and support

Refuge is concerned that the proposed definitions of accommodation-based service and support are too broad to guarantee the commissioning of a national network of specialist services, which can meet demand. The definitions underpinning the model could unintentionally incentivise the commissioning of non-specialist, generic domestic abuse services or services which are primarily accommodation, with very little specialist domestic-abuse focused support. Refuge recommends that the definition of refuge is amended to include dispersed accommodation, and that sanctuary schemes, other forms of temporary accommodation and move-on accommodation are removed from the definition. Crucially, the term 'specialist' should be explicitly and carefully defined.

3. Impact on other non-accommodation-based services

Whilst Refuge welcomes the creation of the legal duty for accommodation-based services, we are seriously concerned about the potential unintended consequences for domestic abuse services which are not accommodation based, particularly Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA) and outreach support. There is a real risk that local authorities will begin to fund only what is required under the legal duty and decommission essential non-accommodation-based services. Non-local authority funders (such as Police and Crime Commissioners and Clinical Commissioning Groups) may withdraw their involvement in domestic abuse services if they interpret this legal duty to mean that *only* local authorities are responsible for providing support to survivors, which would have disastrous consequences. Refuge has long advocated for refuges to be included as part of a broader VAWG strategy, which every local authority should be required to have. We therefore recommend that Local Partnership Boards have broader responsibilities for assessing need and developing strategies for *all* domestic abuse services, not just accommodation-based services. In addition, Refuge urges the Government to provide further detail and guarantees that non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services will not be adversely affected by the creation of a legal duty to fund accommodation-based services.

4. Refuges as a national network underpinned by a national needs assessment

It is essential that refuges are able to operate as a national network. Last year, over 75 per cent of the women and children who came into one of our refuges fled from a different local authority area. Whilst Refuge welcomes the consultation highlighting the need to meet the needs of survivors who require 'cross-border support', we are concerned that the proposal does not go far enough to ensure that refuges are commissioned and operate as a national network and not a local service. Refuge strongly recommends that the Government implements a statutory bar on applying local connection criteria to any domestic abuse services to reduce the risk of commissioning local, rather than national, services.

Further, a national needs assessment which assesses the national demand for services across the country is needed, instead of relying solely on local needs assessments. Without a clear understanding of national need and robust arrangements to ensure refuges operate as a national network, the proposed model is unlikely to lead to enough services to meet the needs of all survivors.

5. Quality standards and commissioning best practice

The legal duty provides a vital opportunity to ensure minimum quality standards are met across all accommodation-based domestic abuse services, and end the proliferation of generic services which do not meet the needs of survivors, nor offer value for public money. The statutory guidance should therefore include detailed quality standards which must be met in order for a service to be commissioned. This should include the requirement that all services are specialist, independent from the State, and provide a person-centred service in a trauma informed environment. The shared VAWG sector quality standards provide a framework for this.

Commissioning best practice should also be at the centre of the new model with clear rules and standards set out in the statutory guidance, and compliance monitored at a national level.

6. National oversight arrangements

Refuge welcomes the inclusion of national oversight arrangements and the commitment to create a National Steering Group. However we are concerned that this will not be robust enough to ensure local authorities are meeting their duty, that services meet national need, and that the Group can act when service provision is insufficient to meet the needs of all survivors that require specialist support. Instead, we argue that a body with more robust powers (referred to as a National Oversight Mechanism in this response) be established. The Mechanism should have the responsibility and power to: compile

an assessment of national need; develop strategies for specialist provision for minority groups including BAME and LGBT survivors; work with Local Partnership Boards to ensure the needs assessments and strategies of all the Boards together provide sufficient national provision; scrutinise local needs assessments, strategies and commissioning practice; and take action where local areas fall short of the minimum standards and provision required.

7. Meeting the needs of all survivors, including those with no recourse to public funds

Refuge supports and shares the MHCLG's aim to ensure women with no recourse to public funds can be supported by accommodation-based domestic abuse services. However, we are concerned that these proposals will not achieve this ambition unless further policy reform is undertaken. Without changing immigration rules so that women with no recourse to public funds are able to access State support when fleeing domestic abuse, it is difficult to see how the current situation will change. Refuge is therefore urging the Government to extend the Domestic Violence Rule and Destitute Domestic Violence Concession to provide greater protection to survivors with no recourse to public funds and enable them to access domestic abuse services, particularly refuge.

8. Interim period before the legal duty is implemented

The legal duty proposed in this consultation will not be in operation until April 2020 at the very earliest, and is dependent on passing primary legislation to be enacted. However, refuge funding is in crisis at this moment. Refuge has experienced significant cuts to its refuge services since 2011 and several of our services are likely to be cut further in the coming months, risking closure. We therefore strongly recommend that the Government provide interim funding whilst the proposed legal duty is consulted on and implemented to ensure current service levels are maintained.

9. Housing and support elements as a single service

Whilst we broadly welcome the proposed policy, we do have concerns around the separation of support-related costs of a refuge service, from the housing-related costs of a refuge service. There should be recognition that housing management services and housing related support are inextricably linked when supporting women fleeing domestic abuse. MHCLG should therefore develop these proposals with regard to and in conjunction with proposed arrangements for housing costs. The importance of ensuring refuge accommodation is appropriate and fit for purpose is crucial and there is an urgent need for capital funding for refuges. Refuge also has concerns about the increasing difficulties service providers face in sourcing appropriate, good-quality properties for refuge accommodation and the highly onerous terms often applied by housing associations when leasing their properties to refuge providers. We would welcome MHCLG looking into this issue in further detail as it develops its proposals.

Response to consultation questions

Accommodation-based services

Q1. Do you agree with our definition of 'accommodation-based services' for victims and their children?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither Agree or Disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

Comments

Refuge strongly welcomes the intention to stabilise funding for accommodation-based domestic abuse services and put these vital services on a more sustainable footing. However, Refuge is concerned that the proposed definition of accommodation-based services is too broad, with some proposed components too vague, to achieve this aim.

As currently drafted, the definition of accommodation-based services could incentivise the commissioning of non-specialist, generic services, which are primarily accommodation services, rather than specialist domestic abuse support services. Generic services do not offer the high quality, survivor-centred support which is embedded in a deep understanding of the causes and impacts of gendered-based violence, which are critical for supporting survivors effectively. Refuge strongly urges the MHCLG ensures that this new funding model is developed in way that supports the increase of new specialist services and the maintenance of current specialist provision.

In order for the proposed model to deliver specialist domestic abuse accommodation-based services rather than generic services, we believe that the definition of refuge should be more clearly defined and other forms of emergency accommodation, sanctuary schemes and move on accommodation be removed from the definition.

Definition of refuge

We welcome the focus on specialist provision in the proposed definition. However, we disagree with the distinction made between refuges and dispersed accommodation. Refuges can be delivered within a shared house, self-contained units in a single building, or dispersed properties across an area alongside communal refuges, as part of a broader offer. What makes an accommodation-based domestic abuse service a refuge is that they are run by specialist staff who have a gendered understanding of violence against women and girls and offer extensive support for women and children which take a person-centred approach in order to support survivors with their needs. It is this which makes refuges a specialist domestic abuse service, and not simply a form of accommodation.

We recognise the need for flexibility wherever possible in providing appropriate support to meet a wider range of survivor needs. For example, a refuge place in dispersed accommodation might be more appropriate for survivors with older teenage children, or survivors with alcohol or drug dependencies. On the other hand, Refuge's research with the University of Warwick on survivors of domestic abuse and suicide suggests that placing a suicidal woman in a dispersed unit without staff on site, or the vital peer support refuges in shared houses provide is likely to be unsafe (<https://www.refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/domestic-abuse-suicide-refuge-warwick-july2018.pdf>). Standalone dispersed accommodation should always be delivered as part of a broader specialist service which includes communal refuges, otherwise it is unlikely to keep all survivors safe or meet their needs. For this reason, we argue that the definition should be amended remove dispersed accommodation as a form of service separate to a refuge. Instead it should state that specialist refuges can be provided via different forms of accommodation, which can include dispersed accommodation.

Refuge is also concerned that the need for single-sex provision is currently absent from the definition of a refuge. In our view it is essential that women's refuges remain a women-only space to protect women's safety and meet their needs following male violence and abuse. Men's refuges should also be delivered on a single-sex basis. In our experience, commissioners are increasingly misunderstanding the requirements of the Equality Act, leading to the requirement of providers to deliver accommodation for both men and women. It is therefore crucial that the definition of refuge is amended to categorically

require that all refuges are single-sex spaces. This should also be clearly stated in the accompanying statutory guidance.

Properties with Sanctuary Schemes or other enhanced security measures

Refuge strongly argues that Sanctuary Schemes are not an accommodation-based service, but rather an infrastructure measure that should only be delivered as *part of* a specialist outreach service with appropriate risk assessment and support. Refuge is concerned that including Sanctuary Schemes in the definition of domestic-abuse accommodation-based services and not, as is more appropriate, as a specialist domestic abuse outreach service, could encourage the commissioning of stand-alone Sanctuary Schemes. In Refuge's experience offering such schemes as a stand-alone service will very rarely, if ever, provide enough protection and support to survivors of domestic abuse and their children to keep them safe. We are also concerned that offering stand-alone Sanctuary Schemes without specialist, comprehensive outreach support could unintentionally encourage women to stay in homes which are not safe for them or their children. We therefore recommend Sanctuary Schemes are removed from this model.

Other forms of emergency accommodation – e.g. respite accommodation or temporary accommodation

Refuge does not support the inclusion of 'other types of emergency accommodation' within the definition of accommodation-based *domestic abuse* services. Temporary accommodation, typically a mixed-sex homelessness hostel or a B&B is not a domestic abuse service; it is a homelessness service.

Refuge and our frontline staff acknowledge the important role of temporary accommodation for survivors, including when survivors fleeing abuse are unable to find a refuge space or a permanent home following a stay in a refuge, or when fleeing a property previously shared with an abusive partner. We support survivor choice in accommodation as articulated in the Whole Housing approach for survivors, pioneered by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA). However, it is crucial that *this* funding model funds only those services which are specialist domestic abuse accommodation services with the primary purpose of supporting survivors of domestic abuse, such as refuges. While temporary accommodation will retain an important role, survivors fleeing abuse should be able to access refuge and the accompanying specialist support more readily, which is why it is essential that funding is funnelled towards more refuges, rather than more generic homelessness accommodation (although we acknowledge that it is important these services are funded, albeit through different funding streams).

Additionally, Refuge believes 'respite accommodation' is not clearly defined and should be removed from the definition. From Refuge's understanding, 'respite accommodation' refers to an accommodation service where survivors experiencing abuse can stay for short periods of time while they consider their options. Refuge places can provide this option for survivors, as well as the added benefit of specialist support, therefore we do not support the inclusion of respite accommodation in this definition.

Move-on and second stage accommodation

Women and children who have experienced domestic violence have been forced to live from one day to the next, in fear, often for many years. Those who enter refuge gain physical safety and the 'building blocks' (both practical and emotional) they need to begin new, independent lives. When they are ready to leave refuge, women aspire to settle long-term. Instead, under a second stage model, families will move into new properties, likely in new areas away from any connections they made whilst in refuge, in the knowledge that they will have to move on again, for at least the third time in as many years.

This knowledge could, in fact, compound risks and reduce life chances. Women are likely to feel a sense of 'returning to square one'. And they will lack the intensive, one-to-one support available in a refuge, in which staff navigate their housing options and advocate on their behalf to the local authority.

We have found that many non-specialist refuge providers employ staff who lack the knowledge and understanding of women's housing rights. In our experience, staff who run non-specialist refuges often do not begin supporting women to secure a permanent home at the earliest stage possible. Instead they rely on women moving to second stage accommodation after staying in refuge, delaying and denying the woman the prospect of finding a new stable home.

Refuge therefore does not support the inclusion of move-on and second stage accommodation in the definition of accommodation-based domestic abuse services. Second stage or move on accommodation removes choice from women fleeing abuse who should be entitled to, and receive, a stable, safe, permanent home. Survivors should not be repeatedly moved between different temporary accommodation, inhibiting their ability to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children. However, this is a common situation survivors find themselves in, particularly women without children, who do not automatically qualify as being in priority need for housing. This effectively eliminates any real chance of securing a permanent, stable home for many survivors.

Women and children staying in emergency refuge accommodation, who no longer need the support of the refuge, should be enabled to secure a permanent home, with every effort made by local authorities to help them to do so. Including move-on and second stage accommodation within this funding model could instead incentivise further development of this form of accommodation, rather than investing in the long-term supply of permanent homes for survivors and ensuring clear pathways to secure, permanent accommodation exist. Instead, the funding of emergency refuge spaces must be a priority under this model. In addition to implementing the legal duty for domestic abuse accommodation based services, Refuge is urging the Government to extend entitlement to priority need for housing to all survivors through the Domestic Abuse Bill. This would increase housing rights for survivors and reduce the need for women to spend years in refuge and different forms of second-stage and move-on accommodation.

Definition of specialist

Refuge strongly welcomes the inclusion of the word 'specialist' the proposed definition of refuge, but argues that this must be appropriately defined within the definition of an accommodation-based domestic abuse service. Only then can the commissioning of specialist, quality domestic abuse services become the norm under this model. Without a definition of specialist, we are unlikely to reverse the trend of increasing generic service provision, which does not offer the safety and support survivors both need and deserve, or offer value for money. Whilst the definition of specialist is not straightforward, Refuge agrees with Women's Aid that the definition of specialist set out in the commissioning guidance for the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (Wales) 2015, provides a solid framework from which to work (<http://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/sub-ld12217/sub-ld12217-e.pdf>). Refuge would welcome the opportunity to work with MHCLG on the precise definition of specialist.

Q2. Are there any other services, other than those listed, that you would define as an accommodation-based service?

a. Yes, this accommodation-based service is...

b. No

c. Don't Know / No Opinion

Rather than expanding the definition, Refuge strongly argues that the definition should be narrowed and clarified as set out in the response to question one. Refuge provision should be defined as including dispersed accommodation and being a single-sex service. Other forms of emergency accommodation (including temporary and respite accommodation), Sanctuary Schemes and move on accommodation should be removed from the definition. In addition, the definition should be underpinned with a clear definition of 'specialist'.

Support

Q3. Do you agree with our definition of 'support'?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree**
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge suggests a series of changes to the definition of support in order to ensure appropriate specialist support is commissioned under the model. We are concerned that if support is poorly defined, as with the definition of accommodation-based service, this could lead to the commissioning of generic, non-specialist services, rather than the quality, specialist domestic abuse services we know work for survivors and their children.

Housing-related outreach

We are not clear on the intention behind the inclusion of 'outreach workers providing housing-related support in safe accommodation'. Outreach is a crucial domestic abuse service, but it is community-based, not an accommodation-based service. Further, specialist domestic abuse outreach workers rarely provide solely housing-related support, but rather holistic support to meet a whole range of needs. Refuge would welcome clarity on whether it is the Government's intention to fund outreach services through the model proposed in this consultation. If it is intended that this model funds accommodation-based services only, then outreach should be removed from the definition of support for the purposes of this funding model. Instead outreach services should be fully and sustainably funded in parallel to this model (see response to question 5 for further detail).

If by including housing-related outreach support MHCLG is referring to the ongoing support from a refuge worker following a survivor moving out of refuge into new accommodation, ensuring this support is included in this model would be better achieved by including this service in the definition of refuge.

Further, leaving this form of support within the definition could encourage the commissioning of accommodation-based services, with no staff on site, but instead with some outreach support. We strongly argue that this should not qualify as a domestic abuse accommodation-based service as it does not provide the specialist, intensive support that survivors who require a refuge place need.

Advice

We are not clear on the type of support envisaged under the term advice, and would welcome further detail from MHCLG on this point. This could potentially be immigration, legal or debt advice, but this should be clearly set out along with requirement that those giving advice have the appropriate

qualifications and training. Refuge staff support, explain options and advocate on behalf of survivors, but they do not give advice. This separation should be clearly stated in the definition.

Child support workers

It is widely accepted that adverse childhood events, such as exposure to and direct experience of, domestic abuse have long lasting psychological and physical impacts on children, particularly the very young. Refuge therefore strongly welcomes the inclusion of child support workers in the definition. At any one time, at least half of the residents in one of our refuges are children. These children need dedicated support in order to help them recover from the abuse they have suffered, which should include, but not be limited to, a dedicated child support worker in every refuge in which children can live. However, in almost all of our contracts for refuges there is no statutory funding whatsoever for specific support for children in refuges. Instead, we fundraise to ensure children get the support they need. Given these funds are voluntary, they are inherently unstable and therefore unsustainable.

Child support workers are essential, and should be appropriately qualified and receive specialist training in supporting children who have experienced domestic abuse. Only then can some of the most vulnerable children in the country begin to receive some of the support they need. We would therefore welcome a requirement in either the definition of support itself, or the statutory guidance accompanying the legal duty, that every accommodation-based support service that accommodates children includes a qualified and trained child support worker.

Counsellors and therapists

Refuge welcomes the inclusion of counsellors and therapists in the definition of accommodation-based support. The value of having a specialist psychologist or therapist in situ to respond to clients in crisis cannot be overstated. Currently, the majority of our clients who need these type of support must often wait for at least six months to see a counsellor, who is often not a specialist in domestic abuse. In our experience, having specialist counsellors and therapists within domestic abuse services can serve to mitigate the likelihood of future psychological distress. However, our frontline staff have highlighted that they are concerned that this model would be very expensive, and potentially very difficult to recruit for, particularly as there is also a shortage of qualified therapists who understand the dynamics of domestic abuse. Therefore significant additional funding would be required to deliver this form of support.

Q4. Do you define an accommodation-based service not listed here as support?

a. Yes, This Support Service is...

b. No

c. Don't Know / No Opinion

Statutory Duty

Q5. Do you agree with our approach of introducing a statutory duty underpinned by statutory guidance?

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither Agree or Disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

Comments

Refuge agrees broadly with approach of introducing a statutory duty for accommodation-based domestic abuse services, underpinned by a statutory duty. We believe this model *could* be transformative – leading to increased refuge provision and making refuge funding more sustainable. However, we think the approach is likely to be successful only if implemented with the definitions of accommodation and support set out in questions one and three and with the necessary standards, safeguards and national oversight set out below. Success or failure of the model will also hinge on whether sufficient funding is provided to meet the policy objectives of the proposals set out in the consultation document.

It is also important to note that whilst Refuge supports the approach outlined by the MHCLG, it does carry risks for non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services. These services, such as outreach and IDVA, are absolutely essential services and need to be delivered alongside refuge provision and integrated within a single VAWG strategy. We therefore argue that Local Partnership Boards should be responsible for assessing need and setting strategies for *all* domestic abuse services, not only those that are accommodation-based. We also urge the Government to set out guarantees and safeguards to ensure the creation of a legal duty for accommodation-based services does not adversely impact the provision of equally important community-based services.

In order to be successful, we think that the following safeguards and criteria ought to be set out in statutory guidance:

Quality standards

The legal duty provides a vital opportunity to ensure minimum quality standards are met across all accommodation-based domestic abuse services. The statutory guidance should include clear minimum standards which must be met in order for a service to be commissioned. This should include the requirement that all services must be specialist, independent from the state, and provide a person-centred service in a trauma informed environment. Refuge recommends that MHCLG adopt the shared VAWG sector quality standards (<https://1q7dqy2unor827bjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Shared-Standards-Whole-Document-Final-30.11.2016.pdf>), or creates a set of analogous standards in the statutory guidance. Refuge would welcome the opportunity to input into the quality standards for the statutory guidance.

Commissioning practices

Refuge is the largest single provider of specialist services and our expert development team review all violence against women and girls-related tenders across the country. This gives us a unique view of the services being commissioned across this country. In recent years we have observed a marked decline in the quality of approaches to commissioning domestic abuse services, with an increase in dangerous service models, funding packages which are not sufficient to provide a safe service, very short contract lengths, and an increase in the commissioning of perpetrator programmes at the expense of services for survivors.

The statutory guidance provides an opportunity to define best practice and improve commissioning approaches overall. Clear guidance on how to commission domestic abuse services should be set out in the guidance, with the VAWG Commissioning Toolkit, providing a basis (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576238/VAWG_Commissioning_Toolkit.pdf). Refuge would welcome the opportunity to input into the detail of any commissioning guidance included in the statutory guidance at a later date.

Refuges as a national network

It is vital that the model leads to a national network of refuge services. Whilst we welcome the statement in the consultation that survivors who need 'cross-border support' should be provided for, we are concerned that this will not be sufficient to lead to the change needed. Last year, over 75 per cent of women and children coming to one of our refuges fled from a different local authority area, yet we commonly see local connection criteria requirements as part of tenders for refuge services. The statutory guidance should clearly set out that refuges should not apply local or regional connection criteria and that refuges are provided as part of a national network of services.

Alongside a clear statement in the statutory guidance, Refuge also supports the creation of a statutory bar on applying local or regional connection criteria to ensure that this damaging and dangerous practice ends for good. This should be introduced as an amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill alongside the legal duty.

National Oversight

Key to the success of legal duty will be the extent to which a robust national oversight mechanism exists to ensure compliance with the statutory guidance and sufficient provision of specialist services nationally. We are concerned that the national steering group proposed is not fit for purpose for this role and that a more robust oversight mechanism is developed (set out in detail in response to question 23 and copied below).

Refuge welcomes the inclusion of national oversight arrangements and the recognition of their importance. However, we are concerned that the proposals for the National Steering Group will not be robust enough to ensure local authorities are meeting their duty, and that the Group can act when service provision is insufficient, or does not meet the needs of diverse groups of survivors.

Last year, Refuge fed into and endorsed Women's Aid's proposed model for refuge funding, which included the creation of a 'National Oversight Mechanism'. It was proposed that this oversight mechanism would have the following role: 'hold the responsibility for undertaking a national needs assessment to feed into a standardised local needs assessment; have the ability to effectively hold local partnerships to account for delivery (with ability to sanction where required in cases of dangerous or inadequate practice or provision); have oversight of funding allocation for BME provision; have rigorous oversight of the monitoring framework for effectiveness of local partnership arrangements, service provision, standards and outcomes, including the quality of accommodation; and be responsible for securing value for money' (<https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Refuge-Funding-Model-Report-FINAL-WEB-1.pdf>).

We continue to support this model and strongly recommend that the Government establish this form of enhanced national oversight mechanism in order to ensure that the proposed model works to create a sustainable national network of specialist refuges.

Funding

The success of this model hinges on how much central Government funding is made available to deliver accommodation-based domestic abuse services. Funding for refuges and other specialist domestic abuse services has been severely reduced in recent years, leading to a sustained funding crisis, where demand for services far outstrips supply. Since 2011, Refuge has experienced cuts to 80% of its services, with refuge funding cut by an average of 50%. Refuge has to fundraise to subsidise

almost all of our refuge services, and despite this, several of our services are at risk of closure due to further local authority budget cuts. This is against a background of an average of 400 survivors and children being turned away from refuges every week (equating to approximately 60% of all referrals being turned down) (<https://1q7dgy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Annual-Audit-2019.pdf>). It is therefore essential that this model is accompanied by sufficient money to enable new refuges to be opened and existing refuges to be fully and sustainably funded.

Refuge strongly argues that the funding from Central Government needs to be large enough to ensure that refuge services are fully funded. In particular, it is very important that the funding attached to this model is developed with regard to the highly specialised work refuge workers, service managers, child support workers, and others who work in refuges do, and ensure that there is sufficient funding to pay them appropriately. It is also important that enough funding is provided to ensure appropriate staff ratios are maintained. We are also calling for accommodation-based domestic abuse services to be provided through annual, ring-fenced funding, rather than a single sum spread over several years.

The Government has not yet confirmed how much money will be attached to this proposal. However the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government indicated at the time the proposal was launched that it could be somewhere in the region of £90 million. However, he did not specify whether this would be per year, or spread over several years. Refuge is concerned that even the larger amount of £90 million annually will not be sufficient. Refuge has been working with the MHCLG to help ascertain the true cost of refuges and will continue to do so.

We strongly urge the Government fully funds this important new approach to ensuring survivors can access the life-saving refuge support they need. This funding should be drawn together across key Government departments which save substantial sums from the provision of quality domestic abuse services. As well as MHCLG, this should include the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Impact on non-accommodation based services

Refuge is concerned that the creation of a legal duty for accommodation-based domestic abuse services could have the unintended consequence of leading to withdrawal of funding for non-accommodation services. Accommodation-based services are just one part, albeit an essential part, of an overall specialist domestic abuse service model that must be provided if the needs of all survivors are to be met. If there is a statutory duty to provide one type of service, there is a risk that local authorities will *only* commission these services. This would be devastating to the thousands of survivors that rely on our community-based services. We therefore urge the Government to set out how it will guarantee that outreach, IDVA and floating support services, amongst others, will be protected as the Government proceeds with its proposals for a legal duty for accommodation-based domestic abuse services. Refuge would welcome a public consultation on how funding for other, vital non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services is safeguarded and their existence is guaranteed.

Interim period before the legal duty is implemented

The legal duty proposed in this consultation will not be in operation until April 2020 at the very earliest, and must be enacted via primary legislation. However, refuge funding is in crisis at this moment. Refuge has experienced significant cuts to its refuge services since 2011 and several of our services are likely to be cut further in the coming months, risking closure. We therefore strongly recommend that

the Government provide interim funding whilst the proposed legal duty is consulted on and implemented to ensure current service levels are maintained.

Q6 Do you agree with placing the statutory duty on Tier 1 Authorities (County Councils, Metropolitan Councils, Unitary Authorities and the Greater London Authority) as ‘Lead Authorities’?

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither Agree or Disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

Comments

On balance, Refuge agrees that the duty should be placed on Tier 1 Authorities. However, we think that this would be particularly problematic in London due to the size of the area, the huge diversity of need and the variation in the skills and experience of many London boroughs in developing VAWG strategies and commissioning services. We therefore argue that particular arrangements are needed for London, with the Greater London Authority (GLA) holding the overall duty, but with a requirement to delegate responsibilities for, developing strategies and commissioning and monitoring services to Tier 2 London borough authorities.

Another risk of Tier 1 authorities holding the duty is a single gateway approach could emerge, where all referrals for refuge places must go through a local authority. It is crucial that this is avoided and refuge referrals can be made in a range of ways, including self-referrals by survivors directly to specialist providers. Regional single points of entry for services can create additional barriers and delays to accessing services, which are dangerous for survivors. Service managers are always best placed to assess the appropriateness of any referral, and this must be maintained under the new model. We believe these risks can be mitigated through statutory guidance and a robust national oversight mechanism.

In addition, we think that the following must be set out in statutory guidance to ensure that placing the duty on Tier 1 authorities does not lead to unintended outcomes.

- a clear definition of refuge provision (as set out in response to question 1)
- a clear definition of specialist (as set out in response to question 1)
- detailed quality standards for services (as set out in response to question 5)
- clear requirements for good commissioning practice (as set out in response to question 5)
- detailed guidance on the duty to cooperate for Tier 2 authorities to ensure the expertise and knowledge of Tier 2 authorities as well as the relationships developed with specialist service providers are not lost

Q7. Do you agree that a duty to co-operate should be placed on Tier 2 Authorities and London Boroughs?

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither Agree or Disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

Comment

Refuge supports the duty for Tier 2 local authorities to co-operate with Tier 1. It is essential that Tier 2 Authorities work closely with Tier 1 Authorities to assess need, commission and monitor services.

As stated above in response to question 6, we think that particular arrangements are needed for London, due to the experience and expertise within boroughs and the significant risk that pan-London commissioning would not lead to the range of services required to meet diverse need across the capital. We argue that in the case of London, a stronger duty is needed, with Tier 2 authorities responsible for local needs assessments, developing strategies and commissioning and monitoring services.

In addition, we think that in order to ensure effective and meaningful participation in Local Partnership Boards, the duty to co-operate should extend to a broader range of partners, including Police and Crime Commissioners, Clinical Commissioning Groups and Public Health.

Accountability

Q8. Do you agree with the proposed representation on Local Partnership Boards?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither Agree or Disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

Comments...

Domestic abuse is everyone's business, and requires a multi-agency response. Refuge therefore supports the inclusion of a diverse range of stakeholders on Local Partnership Boards and particularly welcomes the inclusion of specialist domestic abuse services.

As well as being on Local Partnership Boards, it is crucial that specialist organisations are supported to fully participate, including by providing resources where necessary. In some areas it is likely that several specialist organisations will be delivering services and it might be unfeasible for a representative from each organisation to sit on the Local Partnership Board. In these cases resources should be provided to enable the relevant services to nominate a small number of representatives and create an infrastructure which enables meaningful participation.

It is also vital that the independence of specialist services involved in Local Partnership Boards is protected. Whilst working closely with statutory services is essential, it should be made clear in the statutory guidance accompanying the operation of Local Partnership Boards that the unique role of specialist services should not be compromised. This includes being survivor-centred, not sharing the addresses of refuges and not sharing any client information without consent.

In Refuge's experience, engagement from different statutory agencies in different multi-agency boards or groups can be patchy. We would welcome consideration of whether the duty to co-operate should be extended to all statutory agencies which need to meaningfully participate, and in some cases, provide funding for domestic abuse services.

Q9. Do you believe your local authority has an existing governance structure in place which could meet the proposed role of the Board?

- a. Yes
- b. No

c. Don't Know / No Opinion
Comment

Refuge recommends that the MHCLG require all Tier 1 Authorities to establish and convene a Local Partnership Board for *all* domestic abuse services, both community and accommodation-based. Significant time and expertise is required in order to assess need, and commission and monitor service provision. We are concerned that this will not be carried out in the manner necessary if these duties are part of a long list of responsibilities of another local board with a much wider remit.

Q10. If you believe your local authority has an existing governance structure in place that could meet the proposed role of the Board...

- a. what is the structure of the Board?
- b. Who are the Board members?

Q11. Do you agree with a duty to convene a Local Partnership Board?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree**
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge agrees with the duty to convene a Local Partnership Board, subject to the safeguards and requirements set out in responses to questions 5, 8 and 9. However, we are concerned whether a duty only on Tier 1 and 2 Authorities will be sufficient to ensure buy-in, participation and, where appropriate, funding, from all of the crucial partner agencies involved. In order to ensure full participation by all the key statutory agencies, we recommend MHCLG consider placing a broader statutory duty to cooperate on all agencies listed as proposed members of the Local Partnership Board.

Q12. Do you agree with the role and remit of Local Partnership Boards?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither Agree or Disagree**
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

We think that the role and remit of the Local Partnership Boards should be extended in order to cover *all* domestic abuse services, not only those that are accommodation based. A clear focus on assessing need, developing strategies, commissioning services and reporting on outcomes could lead to significant improvement in the commissioning of quality services of all types.

Refuge has long advocated for refuges to be included as part of a broader VAWG strategy in every local authority's response to domestic abuse. Whilst we welcome the establishment of a legal duty for accommodation-based domestic abuse services, we also want to avoid encouraging a siloed approach to service provision which should be seen in the round. Survivors of domestic abuse should have the choice of a wide range of specialist services, depending on their need at the time. Whilst refuges must operate as a national network, it is also crucial that they are linked in with community-based services, and aligned with and developed alongside local housing, homelessness, supported housing, community safety, child and adult safeguarding, social inclusion, and health and wellbeing strategies.

There is also a practical argument for extending the role and remit of the Local Partnership Board to all services, as all of the organisations/bodies that have been proposed as members also have interest in the provision of community-based services. As set out in the response to question 9, we think that a specific partnership board should be set up for domestic abuse services due to the expertise and focus needed. It would also be more efficient in terms of the time of the representatives sitting on the board, as well as cost efficient, for the Local Partnership Board to have responsibilities for all services.

Establishing a Local Partnership Board with responsibilities for all domestic abuse services, but with a legal duty for only some services does raise risks that non-accommodation-based services will be viewed as less important and less in need of adequate funding (see response to question 5). Refuge is therefore calling for further detail and guarantees regarding how non-accommodation services will be protected and would welcome the opportunity to work with the MHCLG on this issue.

Q13. Do you agree with Local Partnership Boards assessing need for services?

a. Strongly Agree

b. Agree

c. Neither Agree or Disagree

d. Disagree

e. Strongly Disagree

Comments

Refuge strongly welcomes the focus on commissioning accommodation-based domestic abuse services on the basis of need. Currently, demand far outstrips supply, with 400 refuge referrals turned down every week on average. We welcome the move to tackle this shocking, life-threatening situation.

Refuge agrees that Local Partnership Boards should assess local need for services, but we are concerned about the focus on local need only, rather than national need. It is essential that refuges are able to operate as a national network, as set out in question 5. Last year, over 75 per cent of the women and children who came into one of our refuges fled from a different local authority area. Whilst Refuge welcomes the consultation highlighting the importance of meeting the needs of survivors and their children who require 'cross-border support', we do not believe the proposal goes far enough to ensure that the provision of refuges and other forms of accommodation-based service meets national need, and that they can operate as a national network. As such, we argue that a national needs assessment, which assesses national demand for refuge spaces is included as a core part of this model, rather than relying solely on local needs assessments. Local needs assessments should feed into this national needs assessment, however local needs assessments alone will not to provide a full picture of national need.

Further, specialist provision for minority groups, including BAME and LGBT survivors, ought to be assessed at a national level, with a dedicated funding stream and provision monitored centrally. Relying solely on local needs assessments are highly unlikely to enable the development of sufficient provision of meet the specific needs of these groups. This has been born out in recent years with a disproportionate number of BAME specific services closing (<https://www.imkaan.org.uk/alternative-bill>).

Undertaking a national needs assessment and monitoring the extent to which provision meets this need should be the primary role of a robust national oversight mechanism - our recommendations for which are set out below in response to question 23.

Q14. Do you agree with Local Partnership Boards developing local strategies?

a. Strongly Agree

- b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

As stated above in response to question 12, we strongly believe that Local Partnership Boards should assess need and develop strategies for all domestic abuse services, not only those that are accommodation-based, in order to ensure a range of services are available and to breakdown siloed working. We therefore recommend that the role and remit of Local Partnership Boards is extended to cover all domestic abuse services, and strategies are developed based on a *national* as well as local needs assessment.

Q15. Do you agree with Local Partnership Boards commissioning domestic abuse services in partnership with Tier 2 Authorities?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge supports the principle that Tier 1 and 2 Authorities should commission services in partnership. However, this should be subject to the requirements and safeguards set out in response to question 5 to guard against very large contracts for generic services which are highly unlikely to meet the needs of a diverse range of survivors, as well as ensure the relevant experience and expertise of Tier 2 authorities are taken into account. As set out in response to question 6, we think that London is a special case due to its geographic expanse and population diversity. We believe that London Boroughs should be responsible for commissioning services rather than the GLA.

Ensuring Tier 2 Authorities retain a central role in commissioning and monitoring all domestic abuse services is also important for securing value for public money and avoiding duplication or gaps in provision.

Q16. Local authority/ providers: What would be the practical implications of meeting the proposed requirements of the statutory duty?

As set out in the response to question 5 above, the success of this model hinges on how much central Government funding is made available to deliver accommodation-based domestic abuse services. Funding for refuges and other specialist domestic abuse services has been severely reduced in recent years, leading to a sustained funding crisis, where demand for services far outstrips supply. Since 2011, Refuge has experienced cuts to 80% of its services, with refuge funding cut by an average of 50%. Refuge has to fundraise to subsidise almost all of our refuge services, and despite this, several of our services are at risk of closure due to further local authority budget cuts. This is against a background of an average of 60% of all refuge referrals being turned down, equating to 400 survivors and children being turned away from refuges every week (<https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Annual-Audit-2019.pdf>). It is therefore essential that this model is accompanied by sufficient money to enable new refuges to be opened and existing refuges to be fully and sustainably funded.

Refuge strongly argues that the funding from central government is large enough to ensure that refuge services are fully funded. In particular, it is very important that the funding attached to this model is determined with regard to the highly specialised work refuge workers, service managers, child support workers, and others who work in refuges do. The attached funding must be sufficient to ensure staff are paid appropriately and services can operate with the staff ratios needed to provide a good service. We are also calling for accommodation-based domestic abuse services to be provided through annual, ring-fenced funding, rather than a single sum spread over several years.

The Government has not yet confirmed how much money will be attached to this proposal. However the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government indicated that it would be somewhere in the region of £90 million, but did not specify whether this would be per year, or spread over several years. Refuge is concerned that even the larger amount of £90 million annually will not be sufficient. Refuge has been working with MHCLG to help ascertain the true cost of refuges and will continue to do so.

We strongly urge the Government to fully fund this important new approach to ensuring survivors can access the life-saving refuge support they need. This funding should be drawn together across key Government departments which save substantial sums from the provision of quality domestic abuse services. As well as MHCLG this should include the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Q17. Local Authority: What would be the financial implications of meeting the proposed requirements of the statutory duty?

Comments...

Needs Assessment

Q18: Do you think that Government should develop a standardised needs assessment form for local areas to use in assessing need for domestic abuse support services?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Don't Know / No Opinion

Comments

Refuge agrees that the Government should develop a standardised needs assessment to assess need for domestic abuse services in local areas. However, as stated above in response to question 13, we think that local needs assessments alone will be insufficient to ensure that *national* need is established. We therefore strongly recommend that any local needs assessments are grounded in a national needs assessment. Local needs assessments should feed into and help inform national needs assessments, but cannot be the sole method of assessing need for accommodation-based domestic abuse services.

We have some concerns around the proposed inputs to the needs assessment, particularly data from existing specialist domestic abuse services. Provision of such specialist services varies hugely across the country, both in terms of level and access criteria (such as local connection criteria). Some areas may have no refuge bed spaces, or very limited refuge bed spaces, so would not necessarily be in the position to supply the necessary data to the Local Partnership Boards for the purpose of assessing need. Further, to our knowledge, very few local authorities measure the number of women moving out of their areas as a consequence of moving to a refuge. It is essential that other data sources are input into needs assessments to ensure a full picture of current provision is developed. Refuge would welcome engaging with the Government on alternative data inputs and methods of assessing need. We

would also welcome the opportunity to consult on and feed into the standardised needs assessment document.

Q19. How often should the needs assessment be conducted?

- a. annually
- b. every 2 years
- c. every 3 years
- d. every 5 years
- e. other...

It is important that need for specialist services is kept as up to date as possible to ensure levels of provision meet need and that areas which are not providing sufficient service levels can be identified quickly. We therefore recommend that both national and local needs assessments are conducted annually.

We think it's crucial that annual needs assessments do not lead to very short commissioning cycles, the negative impacts of which are set out in response to question 5. Clear requirements that commissioning cycles should usually be no less than every three years should therefore be set out in the accompanying statutory guidance.

Reporting on Outcomes

Q20. Do you agree with Local Partnership Boards making commissioning decisions in partnership with Tier 2 Authorities?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge agrees with Local Partnership Boards making commissioning decisions in partnership with Tier 2 Authorities. In our experience, this is happening in many areas at present. However, we do have concerns about the potential impact in London, where boroughs currently have significant autonomy over commissioning decisions and in many areas align and integrate refuges with IDVA and outreach services. We therefore recommend particular arrangements for London, with boroughs retaining responsibility for setting strategies, commissioning and monitoring services (see response to questions 6 and 7).

Q21. Do you agree that standardised reporting would promote accountability and transparency?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comment

Refuge set up the world's first refuge in 1971 in West London and has been running specialist domestic abuse services ever since, which now includes 46 refuges across England. Throughout our existence,

the frontline staff in our services have engaged in various reporting mechanisms, which differ depending on which local authority is commissioning the service. From this long-term, wide-ranging experience, our frontline staff tell us that standardised reporting would be the most efficient way of monitoring services. However, it is essential that the reporting themes are appropriate and do not, for example, prioritise through put or other blunt numerical measures, and that standardised reporting would not require the unnecessary spending of precious resources on particular software packages.

Q22. Do you agree with the reporting themes suggested?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither Agree or Disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

Comments

Refuge is supportive of the majority of the reporting themes suggested in the consultation, however, we are concerned that some of the reporting themes will not measure the quality of services appropriately, particularly the outcomes for survivors of abuse and their children.

First, as argued in previous answers (see responses to questions 5 and 18), it is essential that the commissioning of services is based on a national needs assessment, and informed by local needs assessments (i.e. where local needs assessments identify which localities are lacking in provision, where overall need for services is determined by a national needs assessment). Therefore, while Refuge agrees in principle with the reporting requirements that adequate needs assessments have been undertaken and that commissioning decisions have been informed by needs assessments, the local needs assessments in question should be informed by overall, national need.

Refuge is also concerned about the reporting theme, evaluating the impact of decisions locally, *i.e. the number of victims supported and service delivery outcomes*. In particular, we are concerned that, unless the content of these evaluations is developed and set out in a way that does not prioritise through put and/or other blunt, numerical measures, the quality of the service may not be accurately reflected in these reports.

Survivors who have fled abuse and are staying in one of our refuges more often than not have various complex needs such as mental health support, substance misuse support, and physical disability support needs. According to our frontline staff, there has been an increase in the proportion of women that present to our refuges that have complex needs. Survivors with complex needs often require intensive, wrap-around support, which can last a significant amount of time. If measures such as through put or number of survivors supported are prioritised, we are concerned that the quality of service delivered to survivors, particularly those with complex needs, will not be captured, which could result in the service presenting as underperforming, despite very high levels of service.

Instead, reporting outcomes need to focus on quality of outcomes, with these being person-centred. As such, narrative outcomes will certainly have a role, although a balance must be struck between such reporting requirements and reporting not becoming overly onerous. Refuge would welcome the opportunity to work with MHCLG on developing the right reporting themes in more detail.

Q23. Do you agree with the role and remit of the National Steering Group?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree

- c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. **Disagree**
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge welcomes the inclusion of national oversight arrangements and the recognition of their importance. However, we are concerned that the proposals for the National Steering Group will not be robust enough to ensure local authorities are meeting their duty, and that the Group can act when service provision is insufficient, or does not meet the needs of diverse groups of survivors.

Last year, Refuge fed into and endorsed Women's Aid's proposed model for refuge funding, which included the creation of a 'National Oversight Mechanism'. It was proposed that this oversight mechanism would have the following role: 'hold the responsibility for undertaking a national needs assessment to feed into a standardised local needs assessment; have the ability to effectively hold local partnerships to account for delivery (with ability to sanction where required in cases of dangerous or inadequate practice or provision); have oversight of funding allocation for BME provision; have rigorous oversight of the monitoring framework for effectiveness of local partnership arrangements, service provision, standards and outcomes, including the quality of accommodation; and be responsible for securing value for money' (<https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Refuge-Funding-Model-Report-FINAL-WEB-1.pdf>).

We continue to support this model and strongly recommend that the Government establish this form of enhanced national oversight mechanism in order to ensure that the proposed model works to create a sustainable national network of specialist refuges.

Q24. Do you agree with the proposed representation on National Steering Group?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. **Disagree**
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

As stated above in response to question 23, Refuge strongly recommends that a more robust national oversight mechanism be established, rather than a steering group alone. Ministers from all key government departments should be required to attend relevant meetings of the national oversight mechanism, alongside representatives of specialist services and survivors themselves.

Guidance

Q25. Do you agree with the overall approach of the statutory guidance?

- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. **Agree**
 - c. Neither Agree or Disagree
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
- Comments

Refuge supports the overall approach of the statutory guidance. However, it is vital that this is overseen by a robust national oversight mechanism in order to be effective. Previous guidance, such as the

National Statement of Expectations, has not been as impactful as desired, in large part because adherence to the guidance has not been monitored and the relevant authorities were not held to account. Further, we urge the MHCLG to ensure that clear requirements and minimum quality standards are set out in the guidance, rather than more nebulous 'expectations' or 'ambitions', to ensure that the commissioning practices are improved and the number of quality services increases.

Q26. What else would you like to have set out within the Guidance?

As detailed in response to question 5 and 7, the statutory guidance ought to include:

- Robust quality standards for services
- Requirements for best practice commissioning of services
- Clear prohibition on any local connection criteria
- Clear detail on how Tier 1 and Tier 2 Authorities are to work together to ensure quality, specialist services are commissioned and large, generic provision is avoided
- Clear detail on the role of specialist services within Local Partnership Boards and how the independence of these services will be safeguarded

Q27. What support would you find most useful to meet the requirements of the statutory duty and guidance?

Comments...

Funding

As set out in response to question 5, the success of this model hinges on how much Central Government funding is made available to provide accommodation-based domestic abuse services. It is essential that the number of specialist refuge beds increases and such services are fully funded. We must move away from the current situation, where the level of provision falls far short of what is needed to meet demand, and where all of Refuge's services require additional charitable fundraising in order to provide the service. This is fundamentally unsustainable. It is crucial that the right level of funding is made available each year and ring-fenced for domestic abuse accommodation-based services (defined as recommended response to questions 1 and 2)

National oversight

As set out in response to question 23, Refuge is concerned that without robust national oversight arrangements, the model will not be as effective as it needs to be to ensure a national network of quality, specialist services. The national body should:

- be responsible for undertaking a national needs assessment to feed into a standardised local needs assessments
- have the ability to effectively hold Local Partnership Boards to account for delivery (with the power to sanction responsible authorities in cases of dangerous or inadequate practice or provision)
- have oversight of funding allocation for BME provision
- have rigorous oversight of the monitoring framework for effectiveness of Local Partnership Boards, service provision, standards and outcomes, including the quality of accommodation
- be responsible for securing value for money

Q28. Do you think that the proposed policy will help local areas ensure the needs of all victims and their children can be met?

- a. Yes
- b. **No**
- c. Don't Know / No Opinion

Comments

Whilst Refuge welcomes the Government's intention that this proposal will enable services to 'support all victims of domestic abuse', we are concerned that without the combination of significant policy reform and sufficient funding, this is unlikely to be achieved.

Migrant survivors

Refuge is very concerned about the ability to support the needs of survivors who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) or have insecure immigration status without further legal and policy change. While we welcome the importance the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government has placed on ensuring the needs of all survivors are met, this cannot be done unless the immigration rules around migrant survivors' access to public funds are reformed. Public Bodies must be permitted to fund provision for all women, including migrant women.

Specifically, the destitute domestic violence concession, an exemption to the NRPF condition for migrant women on spousal visas who are fleeing domestic abuse, should be extended to cover all women, regardless of visa type or immigration status. Further the length of time for which the DDVC applies should be extended to a minimum of 6 months. Only then will all women, including migrant women, have access to the vital state support that is needed to financially support a stay in refuge.

Meeting the needs of survivors with complex needs

Refuge welcomes the statements from MHCLG that more service provision is needed for women with complex needs. However, without sufficient funding and quality standards for services, we are concerned that this ambition will not be achieved.

Many women coming into a refuge will have multiple and complex needs. The nature of domestic abuse and the consequences of having to flee your own home for the safety of you and your children means that many survivors will need support for a variety of needs and priorities. Specialist refuge can provide excellent support for survivors with a wide range of complex needs provided they have sufficient resources to maintain low staff-survivor ratios and provide high quality training and supervision to frontline staff. Funding combined with minimum quality standards for services to ensure that all services can respond to survivors is therefore crucial.

Meeting the needs of children

Funding is critical in determining the extent to which this model is able to increase service provision to meet the needs of children. The funding situation for child survivors of domestic abuse requires significant change, with very few local authorities currently providing any funding to deliver support for children whatsoever. They are instead reliant on charitable fundraising from third party providers such as Refuge. If the needs of all survivors are to be met, there must be adequate funding provided, and clear requirements to have highly skilled and trained child support workers for services that accommodate children.

Local connection criteria and robust national oversight

As set out in response to questions 5 and 23 above, we also argue that a prohibition on local connection criteria and a stronger national oversight mechanism are needed to ensure the proposed policy is effective in meeting the needs of all survivors.

Q29. What more could the Government do to ensure the needs of victims and their children with protected characteristics are supported?

As set out in further detail in the response to questions 5 and 28, we argue that the Government should do the following to help ensure the needs of all survivors, including children and survivors with protected characteristics are met:

- End the no recourse to public funds condition for all survivors, regardless of immigration status, to ensure all survivors can access support. This can be achieved by extending the domestic violence rule and destitute domestic violence concession (see response to question 28)
- Extend entitlement to priority need for housing to all survivors through the Domestic Abuse Bill
- Commit to ring-fenced funding for refuges that ensures there are enough quality refuge services to meet demand and provide specialist support for women and children (see response to question 5 for further detail)
- Set out clear quality standards for services and commissioning best practice in statutory guidance (see response to question 5 above)
- Legislate for a prohibition on local connection criteria for domestic abuse services (see response to question 5 above)
- Create a robust national oversight body (set out in response to question 23 above)
- Set out plans to ensure that community-based domestic abuse services will be sustainably funded and not adversely affected by the creation of this legal duty (set out in response to question 5 above)