

Refuge briefing: Domestic Abuse Bill, Second Reading, Sustainable Funding for Specialist Services

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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.

Summary

Specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) services are under significant financial strain. **Since 2011 Refuge has experienced cuts to 80% of its services; funding for our refuges has been cut by an average of 50%.** Our services save lives and are relied on by thousands of women and children every day. It is essential that the existence of refuges is guaranteed. Therefore, Refuge welcomes the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government's (MHCLG) proposals on the future of funding for accommodation-based domestic abuse services, involving a legal duty for local authorities to undertake needs assessments, and commission services on the basis of that need. However, the legal duty underpinning the Government's new proposals is currently missing from the Domestic Abuse Bill, and the overall success of the model depends on a number of factors, such as: whether it is accompanied by adequate sustained funding, whether it ensures refuges can operate as a national network, whether national oversight of services is sufficiently robust, and whether it ensures that the services provided under the model are specialist and delivered by experts, and whether the existence of non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services is guaranteed. Refuge is therefore calling for:

- **Duty in the Domestic Abuse Bill:** the Government to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to include the legal duty to fund accommodation-based domestic abuse services as a matter of priority
- **Adequate funding:** the funding proposals are underpinned by adequate, sustained funding
- **Specialist services:** the definition of accommodation-based domestic abuse support services clearly defines specialist
- **Ban on local connection criteria:** a statutory ban on local connection criteria for accessing specialist domestic abuse services is introduced
- **Outreach, IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy), and other services:** the Government provides further detail and guarantees that essential non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services will not be adversely affected by the creation of a legal duty to fund accommodation-based services
- **National Oversight Mechanism:** the Government ensures the duty will include a robust National Oversight Mechanism that has the power to act when local authorities fail to meet the duty and that refuges are able to operate as a national network

Refuge is urging MPs during second reading to call on the Government to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill so that it includes the legal duty to fund accommodation-based domestic abuse

services that incorporates the above recommendations, and that it is accompanied with adequate funding.

Adequate funding levels

The success of the Government's proposals hinges on how much central government funding is made available to underpin accommodation-based domestic abuse services. As it stands, the number of refuge bed spaces currently available across England falls far short of demand – [almost 60% of all refuge referrals were declined in 2017-18](#). It is vital that services are fully funded and that this funding is ring-fenced, especially given that Home Office research has shown that domestic abuse costs £66 billion per year in England and Wales¹. A new funding model is needed not only to safeguard existing provision, but to enable the national network of refuges to grow and meet demand. The Government has previously indicated funding would be somewhere in the region of £90 million, but it was not specified whether this would be annual or spread over several years. Refuge is concerned that even the higher amount will not be sufficient to ensure adequate refuge provision.

We strongly encourage MPs to urge the Government during second reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill to fully fund this policy, drawing on the resources of the many Government departments which directly benefit financially from improved outcomes for survivors of domestic abuse as a result of accessing and being support by specialist domestic abuse services.

Specialist refuge provision

It is essential that the proposed model guarantees the commissioning of a national network of *specialist* services that meet national need, including for survivors with complex needs and minoritised groups such as BAME and LGBT survivors. As it stands, the definition of 'accommodation-based service' and 'support' under 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 focussed support. Refuge therefore recommends that the term 'specialist' should be clearly defined in the definitions of 'accommodation-based service' and 'support' to ensure that quality, specialist services thrive under this model and to safeguard against the commissioning of generic, non-domestic abuse specific services.

It is also essential that specialist refuge accommodation forms the cornerstone of accommodation-based domestic abuse services, and that they can operate as a national, not local, service. 75 per cent of the women and children who come into our refuges have fled from another local authority, frequently for reasons of safety. Refuge therefore also recommends a statutory ban on any local connection criteria for accessing accommodation-based domestic abuse services.

We strongly encourage MPs to urge the Government during second reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill to clearly define 'specialist' in the definition of 'accommodation-based domestic abuse support service' and to introduce a statutory ban on any local connection criteria for accessing these services.

Impact on non-accommodation-based services

¹ 'The economic and social costs of domestic abuse: Research report 107', Home Office, (2019).
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772180/horr107.pdf

Whilst Refuge welcomes the creation of the legal duty for accommodation-based domestic abuse services, we are seriously concerned about the potential unintended consequences for non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services, particularly Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA) and outreach support. There is a real risk that local authorities will begin to only fund services required by the legal duty and decommission community-based services that are just as important in supporting survivors and keeping them and their children safe.

We strongly encourage MPs to urge the Government during second reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill to provide further detail and guarantees that essential non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services will not be adversely affected by the creation of a legal duty to fund accommodation-based services.

National oversight

Refuge welcomes the inclusion of national oversight arrangements and the commitment to create a National Steering group. However, we are concerned that the proposals will not be robust enough to ensure local authorities are meeting their duty, that the provision of services meets 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, a National Oversight Mechanism must be established that has the responsibility and power to:

- Ensure that accommodation-based domestic abuse support services, and in particular refuges, are able to operate as a national network and not a local service, in part by being responsible to conduct national needs assessments
- End the postcode lottery in the provision of specialist services by having the power to act when local authorities are failing to meet the duty

We strongly encourage MPs to urge the Government during second reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill to ensure that a robust National Oversight Mechanism is included in the legal duty to fund accommodation-based domestic abuse services, that can take action when local authorities are not meeting their duty, and that refuges are able to operate as a national network.

Conclusion

Refuges are life-saving services, but the specialist sector has been experiencing a sustained funding crisis for years, with supply falling far short of demand for these services. Urgent action is needed. As such, Refuge welcomes the Government's commitment to include a duty related to the future of funding for accommodation-based domestic abuse services in the Domestic Abuse Bill. We acknowledge that it was not possible to include the duty in the current draft of the Domestic Abuse Bill as it was published while the duty was still under consultation. However, refuge funding is in crisis *now*, so it is essential the Government addresses this issue as a matter of priority and amend the Bill to include this important duty. We are also clear that the overall success of the model depends on a number of factors:

- **Adequate funding:** that funding proposals are underpinned by adequate, sustained funding
- **Specialist services:** that the definition of accommodation-based domestic abuse support services clearly defines 'specialist'
- **Ban on local connection criteria:** that there is a statutory ban on local connection criteria for accessing specialist domestic abuse services is introduced

- **Outreach, IDVA, and other services:** that the Government provides further detail and guarantees that essential non-accommodation-based domestic abuse services will not be adversely affected by the creation of a legal duty to fund accommodation-based services

Refuge is urging MPs during second reading to call on the Government to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill so that it includes the legal duty for local authorities to:

- **Commission accommodation-based domestic abuse services on the basis of needs assessments**
- **That the duty incorporates the above recommendations**
- **That the duty is accompanied by adequate funding**