



For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.



June 2023

## **Local Lifelines:**

*The importance of domestic  
abuse community-based  
services*

# Foreword



## Foreword from Refuge's chief executive

Ruth Davison

Domestic abuse is at epidemic levels. In England and Wales, 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime. Many will experience multiple forms of abuse, from physical violence to technology-facilitated abuse, economic abuse, and coercive control, to name just some forms of abuse experienced by the many thousands of survivors Refuge supports on any given day.

While some assume that domestic abuse is limited to physical abuse, and that every survivor comes to Refuge about immediately fleeing their partner, the reality is different.

Every two minutes, someone turns to Refuge for help, and while when the first safe house for women and their children experiencing domestic abuse opened in Chiswick, in 1971, domestic abuse was predominantly seen as black eyes and broken bones, over the last half a century, our understanding of abuse has widened. Perpetrators have got smarter, and our job has got harder.

The focus must now be on what this means for the women and children we support. Not all are able, or want to flee to a refuge. This is why community-based services are so important.

95% of the survivors we support access this vital community-based support, enabling them to stay where they are, to make safety plans, to be guided through the criminal justice system, and to receive help where they need it, when they need it. While the government has made progress in creating a legal duty to fund emergency safe accommodation, there is no similar commitment to meet the funding needs of community-based services. I know how important these services are, and what an important role our community-based frontline specialist teams play in the support Refuge offers.

What is needed now is funding. Sustainable, ring-fenced funding which allows our community-based services to plan ahead, and ensures the right support is available, where and when survivors need it most.

The upcoming Victims and Prisoners Bill offers a timely opportunity for the government to sustainably fund vital community-based services, and to provide a more positive experience of the criminal justice system for survivors.

Refuge hopes that the government will take this opportunity and make good on its commitment to prioritise the response to domestic abuse, and to ensure survivors can access support in the ways that are safest and most practical, for them and their children. Refuge stands ready to support the government to make this a reality. Women's lives depend on these commitments being actioned quickly and with rigour.

This report highlights the ways in which funding challenges are currently impacting community-based services and the solutions needed to ensure every woman and child can access the specialist support they need.

**We are immensely grateful to all the women who have contributed to this report, and the bravery they have shown in being willing to tell their stories, in the hope that it will bring about real change.**

**THANK YOU TO YOU ALL.**

*R Davison*



# Executive Summary

## Nearly all (95%) of the women Refuge supports access a community-based service

Domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the UK<sup>2</sup>. For some survivors, fleeing to a refuge will be the only safe option. But many others seek tailored support in their own home or a safe place in their community to enable them to recover and rebuild their lives.

### This is where community-based services come in.

Community-based services are delivered by a network of specialist support roles including outreach workers, Young Persons Advocates (YPAs), and Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs). They are delivered to survivors in community-based settings by specialist professionals who recognise the gendered nature of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls<sup>3</sup>. Whether survivors are seeking support to secure a safe new home, access mental health services, or pursue justice in the criminal courts, community-based services meet women where they are, both physically and emotionally.

Despite the transformative role community-based services play in a survivor's journey, and the rising demand for these types of services, survivors are often unable to access the support they need. **Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales found that less than half of survivors who wanted to access community-based services in 2022 were able to<sup>4</sup>.** D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, Black, Asian and minoritised survivors, and migrant women face even greater barriers to accessing support.

Insufficient and short-term contracts, gaps in funding for specialist support, and recruitment and retention challenges exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis mean that service provision is inconsistent across the country and survivors face a postcode lottery in accessing support. Ultimately, government funding for community-based services falls far short of what is needed for all survivors to access the specialist support they need and deserve.

After years of funding cuts, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a statutory duty on local authorities to commission accommodation-based services.

Refuge has been monitoring the implementation of this duty, and despite some challenges, it is resulting in increased funding, increased commissioning opportunities and longer contract lengths.

Community-based services require the same focus, investment and protection. While the Ministry of Justice has committed some funding to community-based services within the Victims Funding strategy, it simply isn't enough to meet the demand for services across the country.

As the country's largest provider of specialist domestic abuse services, Refuge is in a unique position to investigate the impact of funding challenges on community-based services and make recommendations for change. Nearly all (95%) of the women Refuge supports access a community-based service.

Between February and March 2023, we conducted a survey of frontline workers in Refuge's community-based services. In this survey, we asked 58 respondents about the types of funding challenges facing community-based services and their experiences of supporting survivors against this backdrop. The experiences of survey respondents have been included as quotes and examples throughout this report. We also conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with women who had accessed Refuge's community-based services to explore the impact these services had on their lives<sup>5</sup>. Refuge is grateful to these survivors for sharing their stories with us. Survivors interviewed are referenced under a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.



Our research findings are clear. The network of community-based services is under increasing pressure due to funding challenges and the resulting rising caseloads. **More than 4 in 5 (85%) frontline workers surveyed believe that their service is being impacted by insufficient funding and more than 3 in 4 (76%) said their caseload had increased over the past 12 months.**

Our research shows that services are struggling to meet demand. Survivors are coming to our services with increasingly complex circumstances and the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating the challenges they face when fleeing dangerous perpetrators, which is putting additional strain on lifesaving community-based services.

Despite these challenges, frontline workers in community-based services go above and beyond for the women they support every day. They are a lifeline to women. The survivors we interviewed told us that community-based services helped them to feel happier, more secure, and more hopeful about the future.

Through accessing expert advice and emotional support, survivors were able to transform their lives and become safer. Accessing support at any stage of their journey and without having to uproot their lives and move into a refuge is transformative.

Sustainable funding for community-based services is therefore urgently needed. Not only do these services enable survivors to transform their lives, but they also provide significant savings to society by relieving pressure on other public services. Every pound invested in domestic abuse support services will make at least £9 savings to the public purse<sup>6</sup>.

**It is therefore essential that the national network of community-based services is safeguarded. The Victims and Prisoners Bill, introduced to Parliament in March 2023, presents a vital opportunity to provide an adequate, sustainable funding offer for community-based services. Refuge urges the Government to provide funding of £238 million per year<sup>7</sup> to community-based services to ensure that all survivors and their children can access the lifesaving services they so desperately need.**

# A network of support

## What are community-based services?

Community-based domestic abuse services provide holistic, specialist support to women and children experiencing domestic abuse on both a short and long-term basis. Survivors can access support at all stages of their journey; whether they are still living with their abuser, planning to flee, or have already left to rebuild their lives.

**“My role is to support survivors to stay safe, whether or not they decide to leave.”**  
Independent Domestic Violence Advocate.

Specialist community-based services are provided by expert staff with an in-depth knowledge of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. Their primary purpose is to support survivors of gender-based violence to increase their safety and recover from abuse, which many generic victim support services are not equipped to do. They take a needs-led and trauma-informed approach that recognises the gendered nature of domestic abuse and puts survivors on a path to long-term safety. In practice, the support provided by frontline workers in community-based services could include accompanying a survivor to court, developing a safety plan, or supporting her to apply for Universal Credit.

**Between April 2021 and March 2022, Refuge supported 23,406 women and their children in our community-based services.**

The vast majority (95%) of the women Refuge supports rely on some form of community-based service. The breadth of support available in these services mean that they can support survivors with a whole range of different needs. Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that most survivors<sup>8</sup> want support from a community-based rather than an accommodation-based service, seeking both practical advice and emotional support<sup>9</sup>.

In accessing community-based services, survivors are supported by their own keyworker – someone to **inform** them of their options, **advocate** for their rights, and provide emotional **support**.



Frontline workers draw on their expertise in safety planning, legal remedies, housing, the welfare benefits system, and the dynamics of domestic abuse – amongst other issues – to tailor support to a survivor’s individual needs. Whatever their situation, survivors are supported to make their own decisions about the next steps in their journey.

**“ She (frontline worker) gave me so much support. She listened to me cry and rant. It made a massive difference at the time. It really did. Just having someone there who believed me more than anything. She came with me to court and everything and that made a huge difference to me. ”**  
(Mandy, supported by an outreach worker )

**Depending on their individual circumstances and needs, community-based services support survivors to achieve the following outcomes:**

- Develop a safety plan.
- Improve the safety of child contact arrangements.
- Access benefits.
- Build self-confidence and independence.
- Access legal support.
- Find safe accommodation.
- Secure tech devices and protect their location.
- Access immigration advice and support.
- Reconnect with their support network.
- Understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and its intersecting forms, including technology-facilitated and economic abuse.
- Access social care services for children.
- Access healthcare services.
- Budget, pay bills and access debt advice.
- Communicate with police, civil and criminal justice practitioners.
- Attend court.
- Obtain special measures in civil and criminal court.
- Access professional training, education, or employment.



# A network of support

## Frontline roles in community-based services

The support provided to survivors in community-based services is delivered by a range of specialist roles including outreach workers, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs), Independent Gender-based Violence Advocates (IGVAs), and Young Person Advocates (YPAs). Whilst each role type has its own specialism, in practice they operate as a network of support. This network includes refuge and other type of accommodation-based services, as survivors may access both types of service during their journey. At the core of this network of support is an understanding of domestic abuse as a pattern of behaviour designed to control a survivor, and a belief in survivors as experts in their own lives.

This report discusses the community-based services roles provided by Refuge. It does not cover all the role types and support provided through the national network of community-based services. Other role types, including specialist services provided 'by and for' minoritised women, may provide support not covered within this report.

### Independent advocates

Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) and Independent Gender-based Violence Advocates (IGVAs) work with survivors at 'high risk' of harm. Whilst some community-based services operate on a risk-based model, Refuge and other specialist services take a needs-led approach as domestic abuse can escalate at any point and risk assessments are not always an accurate indicator of survivors' risk of harm. The role of an IDVA is to advocate for survivors' needs with statutory agencies and develop plans to address their immediate safety concerns. The support of independent advocates has been proven to reduce survivor attrition rates in the criminal justice system, which demonstrates the transformative role community-based services play in helping survivors' to pursue justice<sup>11</sup>.

IDVAs coordinate a multi-agency response, which often includes housing, children's social services and healthcare services, amongst other statutory agencies. Crucially, the independent status of IDVAs is vital for allowing them to build



trust with survivors and effectively advocate on their behalf. Worryingly, research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner shows that community-based services are the most likely type of domestic abuse service to be brought 'in house' by statutory agencies or commissioners<sup>12</sup>.

Whilst a critical part of the network of community-based services, a broad range of support beyond independent advocates is needed. In practice, the functions delivered by an IDVA are not exclusive to their role title but delivered by the entire network of community-based services and refuge workers too. Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that the majority of survivors seek support that would not typically be provided by an advocate<sup>13</sup>. Yet, in Refuge's experience IDVAs are often better recognised by statutory agencies than other community-based roles. It is therefore vital that all community-based services are given the recognition and funding they need to advocate on behalf of survivors and secure their path to long-term safety.

### Outreach

Outreach workers provide support to survivors in their own home or other safe spaces within the community. The focus of the support is mainly on helping survivors to continue living safely within their community. Outreach workers support survivors to create a support plan and make referrals to relevant services.



“My outreach worker listened to how I felt and really understood what I had been through whilst in the relationship and after. She supported me through the court process, attending with me and explaining at every step what was going to happen next. It was fantastic always having her at the end of the phone to reassure and support me. (Jane, supported by an outreach worker.)”

### Young Person Advocates (YPA)

Research shows that 97% of children living with domestic abuse are exposed to that abuse<sup>14</sup>. Young Person Advocates understand the complex ways in which this can affect children and provide the support they need to cope and recover. They support young people aged 11+ to create a support plan and advocate on their behalf with statutory services. Support is provided in a safe place in the community.

In recognition of the impact of domestic abuse on children, the statutory definition of domestic abuse introduced by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 regards a child who sees, hears, or experiences the effects of domestic abuse as a victim in their own right. Whilst this legal change is vitally important, not every community-based service is funded to provide Young Person Advocates and many children are unable to access the specialist support they need.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, 62% of women supported in community-based services in England had children<sup>15</sup>.

### Culturally adapted services

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone. But Black and minoritised women often face additional barriers to accessing support. Many women will prefer to access support from women who speak their language and understand their culture.

'By and for' organisations are designed and delivered by and for people who are minoritised, including D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, Black, Asian and minoritised survivors, and migrant women. 'By and for' services are rooted in the communities they serve. Survivors receive wrap-around, holistic support that addresses their full range of intersecting needs from people who understand them. Despite the transformative impact of accessing this type of specialist support, 'by and for' services are six times less likely to receive statutory funding than other specialist domestic abuse services and minoritised women are often locked out of support<sup>16</sup>.

Refuge provides some culturally adapted services delivered by multi-lingual expert practitioners. We are also the lead partner for the Ascent Pan London Floating Support Service (FSS), which provides specialist support and counselling in partnership with 10 other specialist domestic abuse organisations, including 'by and for' services. Our 'by and for' partner organisations are well-established in their communities and have the relationships and referral pathways minoritised survivors need to move forward with their lives. Crucially, whilst Refuge provides some culturally adapted services, we are not a 'by and for' organisation.

### Wendy's story

Wendy was supported by the Ascent Pan London Floating Support Service after fleeing domestic abuse. Wendy had left her home with nothing and was worried about moving into temporary accommodation with two children.

Wendy's support worker referred her to a local authority scheme to be provided with essentials for the flat, including a fridge and washing machine. Wendy was also supported to make an application for a grant to buy bedding for her two children. Wendy now feels settled in her new home and has been able to start rebuilding her life.

# A network of support

## Support in the criminal justice system and beyond

Just 1 in 5 (20%) of the women Refuge supports will report to the police. For the women that do, community-based services provide vital emotional and practical support, helping them to understand their rights, navigate the criminal justice system and access legal support. Prolific mistrust in policing, fears that they will not be believed or even blamed for the abuse perpetrated against them, and concerns that their abuse will escalate if their perpetrator finds out they have reported act as barriers to survivors seeking justice through legal routes.

For Black, Asian and minoritised survivors, and migrant women, these barriers are yet more pronounced as institutional racism<sup>17</sup> and poor police practice around data-sharing with Immigration Enforcement create further fears around reporting<sup>18</sup>. Among migrant victims and survivors interviewed by the Latin American Women's Rights Service in 2019, more than half (54%) feared that they would not be believed by the police because of their immigration status or felt that the police or the Home Office would support the perpetrator over them<sup>19</sup>. For women who choose not to report to the police, accessing community-based services enables survivors to take the steps forward that do feel right for them.



<sup>17</sup> The Metropolitan Police (2023) Baroness Casey Review Final Report: An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service  
<sup>18</sup> HMICFRS (2022) Safe to share? Report on Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' super-complaint on policing and immigration status  
<sup>19</sup> McIlwaine, C., Granada, L., Valenzuela-Oblitas, I. (2019), 'The Right to be Believed'. London: Kings College London, Latin American Women's Rights Service.

# Under pressure

## The impact of funding changes on community-based services

Despite the transformative role community-based services play in a survivor's journey, all too often, women are unable to access the community-based services they need. Due to inconsistent funding of support services across the country, survivors face a postcode lottery in accessing support, and many services are at "breaking point."<sup>20</sup> To explore this issue, we conducted a survey of 58 frontline workers in our community-based services.

The results of this survey show that community-based services are under increasing pressure due to funding challenges and rising caseloads. Some services are struggling to meet demand and survivors are often unable to access the type of specialist support they need. There has therefore never been a more important time to sustainably fund community-based services to ensure all women and children are able to access the support they need to be safe from abuse.

### An insecure funding landscape

#### Insufficient funding

Most community-based services are funded by local authorities through competitive commissioning. However, in most cases, contract values are less than the cost of running a safe and effective service. Specialist providers are therefore often forced to rely on insecure, fundraised income to provide lifesaving services to survivors of domestic abuse. Whilst some services receive suitable funding, many are chronically underfunded and the commissioning of community-based services across the country is inconsistent, which results in many survivors not being able to access the services they need<sup>21</sup>.

For the financial year 2021/22, more than half (56.6%) of Refuge's income was generated from fundraised sources. Relying on the good will of donors is fundamentally unsustainable and adequate government funding for community-based services is therefore greatly needed. Funding challenges are especially pronounced for specialist 'by and for' organisations<sup>22</sup>.



The survey results show that insufficient funding is a significant issue for many of Refuge's community-based services. Frontline workers told us that there needs to be greater consistency in funding for the entire network of community-based support roles. This is particularly needed for mental health support, early intervention and support for children and young people. Most survivors want support that will help them cope and recover emotionally from abuse, such as counselling, therapeutic support, and mental healthcare<sup>23</sup>. Investment in the entire network of community-based support roles is therefore vital.

**More than 4 in 5 (85%) of frontline workers surveyed believe that their service is impacted by insufficient funding.**

#### Staff recruitment and retention

**93% of frontline workers in Refuge's community-based services said that their service was being impacted by staff shortages.**

The impact of staff shortages on community-based services was a significant theme in responses to the survey. Frontline workers commented that staff shortages are putting increasing pressure on frontline workers, who are often already working over-capacity to provide vital



support to survivors and their children. Historically, the specialist domestic abuse sector has had challenges with recruitment and retention due to regular competitive commissioning, insufficient funding and short-term contracts. The cost-of-living crisis is adding to these challenges, with increased costs in providing services with no commensurate increase in funding.

Short-term contracts and uncertainty over future funding create issues for recruitment and retention of specialist staff.

**89% of frontline workers said uncertainty over future funding was impacting their service and 64% said their service was impacted by short-term contracts.**

Frontline workers highlighted the challenges of delivering a service under a short-term contract due to the time and resources it takes to implement a new service and embed it within an area. Often, if a contract is for two years or less, it takes the length of the contract for the service to become established within a local area. At which point, the service comes to an end and the survivors it supports must find new sources of ongoing support, which can be incredibly unsettling and traumatic for survivors. This also presents significant recruitment challenges, as the service can only offer fixed term, rather than permanent posts.

Given the transformative impact of community-based services on a survivor's journey towards safety and independence, ensuring services are staffed properly and well-established in a local area is vitally important. Through an adequate, sustainable funding offer for community-based services, delivered via long-term contracts, these services will be able to take root in the community and provide women and children with the security and stability they so desperately need.

### Rising caseloads

**More than 3 in 4 (76%) frontline workers surveyed said their caseload had increased over the past 12 months.**

Growing numbers of women are turning to community-based services for support. In just one year, the number of new clients supported by Refuge's community-based services has increased by 10%<sup>24</sup>. This follows a surge in demand for frontline domestic abuse services during the pandemic which continues to impact community-based services. For frontline workers, this increase in overall referrals is translating into rising caseloads and increased administration, as recruitment and retention challenges often mean that frontline workers take on additional clients. Refuge does not hold waiting lists in any of our community-based services in recognition that all survivors need timely support.

Frontline workers attributed this rise in caseloads to both the insecure funding landscape facing community-based services, and to higher numbers of referrals from survivors presenting with multiple disadvantages, particularly in relation to economic and technology-facilitated abuse, housing, immigration, and mental health. Survivors coming to community-based services are experiencing multiple forms of intersecting abuse and often require support from multiple agencies. The new and evolving ways perpetrators are using technology to abuse survivors and the hardship caused by the cost-of-living crisis are examples of factors driving this increase in complex cases. Supporting survivors to cope with multiple disadvantages requires more intensive, time-consuming support, which prolongs the amount of time frontline workers support individuals and increases their overall caseload.

**Economic and technology-facilitated domestic abuse are two intersecting forms of abuse that are increasingly being used by perpetrators to control survivors. Economic abuse involves restricting a person's ability to acquire, use and maintain money. Technology-facilitated abuse involves using online platforms and devices to control, coerce and abuse. This includes online harassment, location tracking, and sharing – or threatening to share – intimate images without consent. Given the rise in online banking methods over recent years, these two forms of abuse are becoming increasingly intertwined. Refuge's specialist economic empowerment and technology-facilitated abuse team saw a 39% increase in demand between September 2022 and February 2023, compared to the same period last year<sup>25</sup>.**

# Under pressure

Ultimately, without urgent funding of community-based services, the increase in numbers of women needing support, set against a backdrop of historic under-funding, will impact the support frontline workers can provide to survivors. Services are going above and beyond to ensure survivors are receiving the support they need. However, with reduced capacity, frontline workers will be forced to make difficult decisions about what to prioritise in the limited time they have with survivors.

**55% of frontline workers surveyed said that higher caseloads were having a significant impact on the services they provide to survivors.**

With sustainable, long-term funding, frontline workers in community-based services would have more time to spend with survivors. In response to the survey, frontline workers told us they would like to spend more time on early engagement work, such as helping survivors to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse to help support their long-term recovery.

Sustainable funding for community-based services would also allow frontline workers to spend more time on partnership working with statutory services, which is vital to an effective local response to domestic abuse. Building strong partnerships can also help services resolve complex issues in a timely manner. For example, housing issues often require a significant amount of liaison with local authority housing officers due to systemic 'gatekeeping' of housing stock.

Despite the impact of rising caseloads on community-based services, the survivors we interviewed described the commitment of frontline workers to always deliver for survivors.



## The cost-of-living crisis

According to frontline workers, a significant cause of rising caseloads is the new and exacerbated challenges survivors are facing because of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly relating to mental health and financial hardship.

**94% of frontline workers surveyed said their service was being impacted by survivors' changing needs as a result of the cost-of-living crisis.**

Caseloads are rising as more women are coming to community-based services with financial support needs, such as foodbank referrals and debt advice. Our survey of frontline workers in community-based services highlights how the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating the financial challenges survivors face when fleeing their perpetrators and rebuilding their lives. Many survivors are forced to give up their jobs when fleeing perpetrators, which leaves them reliant on the benefits system and more vulnerable to rising costs of food and energy. Securing safe long-term housing is becoming increasingly difficult for survivors as the cost of private rented accommodation soars, which is pushing survivors into rent arrears.



Frontline workers told us:

**“We are seeing an increase in debts and housing arrears - all a direct result of the cost-of-living crisis.”**

**“There has been a huge increase in demand for supporting women with debts created by an abuser. These debts create barriers to women leaving and put them at increased risk of harm. As a result, women need more time and support from community-based services.”**

**“Clients (survivors) are reporting that they are less likely to leave the alleged perpetrator due to uncertainty around how they would financially support themselves if they left.”**

## Mental health

Growing numbers of women are reporting anxiety, depression and mental health support needs due to concerns over the cost-of-living. In the results of a survey Refuge conducted with frontline workers in November 2022, **over three quarters (77%) said that the crisis was impacting survivors' mental health**<sup>26</sup>.

Domestic abuse can have devastating consequences for a survivors' mental wellbeing. Survivors suffer from a whole range of mental health impacts including PTSD, suicidal ideation, lowered self-esteem, and an erosion of a sense of identity. The cost-of-living crisis is putting increasing pressure on survivors who are already facing enormous challenges and trauma because of their experiences of abuse.

In our survey of frontline workers in Refuge's community-based services, respondents said that survivors are increasingly unable to afford counselling fees. They reported that survivors often face barriers in accessing timely and effective mental health support due to under-funding for this type of specialist support within community-based services and long waiting lists for NHS mental health services. Investment in specialist mental health support, both in the NHS and by commissioners of domestic abuse services, is therefore vital to ensure the availability of timely and appropriate mental health interventions for survivors including children.

## A disproportionate impact

The hardship caused by the cost-of-living crisis is particularly acute for disabled, minoritised and younger survivors. Universal Credit rates are lower for women under 25, so they have even less money to try and meet the increasing costs of essentials. Migrant women with no recourse to public funds often feel as though they have no choice to stay with their perpetrator due to their inability to access support services or vital welfare-benefits. The Support for Migrant Victims (SMV) funding from the Home Office is welcome but insufficient to provide support to all migrant survivors with no recourse to public funds<sup>27</sup>. For disabled women, who typically experience higher living costs and are often excluded from employment, the cost-of-living crisis is also having a disproportionate impact. Sustainable investment in specialist 'by and for' services who provide tailored support to minoritised women, and whom minoritised groups are more likely to trust with disclosures of abuse, are therefore vital.

**“I'd get prompt replies if I reached out to [my support worker] despite her caseload. You've always been just lovely and warm and supportive, and comforting.”**  
(Jessica, supported by an outreach worker).

**“Often [if I] have any questions, I'd get a call back in a short window of time. I also noticed there was a lot of cases. With their workload there, somehow, I managed to get a reply in a good timely manner, and I could see how the caseworker from Refuge was handling the big picture of the case.”**  
(Felice, supported in a community-based service).



# A safe place where you're understood and believed

## Outcomes of community-based services

The survivors we interviewed had come to Refuge's community-based services from a variety of different referral pathways including the police, social services, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline and other specialist violence against women and girls' organisations. The length of time they received support for ranges from 1 month to 4 years.

**The survivors' experiences provide a snapshot of the transformative impact accessing specialist support in the community has for survivors of domestic abuse including their children.**

Simply put, survivors seek specialist help and support from community-based services because these services are effective. Survivors interviewed felt that community-based services had made a positive difference to their lives, providing them with the information, expert advice, and emotional support they needed to transform their lives and be safe from abuse.

**Of all the survivors who left Refuge's community-based services between April 2021 and March 2022:**

- 97% said they felt safer.
- 96% said they felt less frightened.
- 95% said their quality of life had improved.
- 99% said they felt confident knowing how to access help.

This is in keeping with research conducted by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, which found that survivors who access specialist services are far more likely to feel safe and in control of their lives than those who do not<sup>28</sup>.



### The community-based services journey

**"I just couldn't see any way out."  
(Amelia, supported by an IGVA).**

Before accessing support from community-based services, survivors told us they felt isolated and hopeless. Lisa, a survivor supported by an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate, told us, "Before I very first accessed support, I was stuck in the relationship, so I wasn't able to leave or protect my children. I couldn't see a way out basically. I tried so many different things and everything I tried; my life was worse than if I'd stayed in the situation. So, I kind of felt like that was going to be it forever. So yeah, helpless, I guess..."

In the interviews, survivors explained how the abuse they had suffered had caused them to experience feelings of self-doubt, low confidence, and confusion. Jessica said, "[I felt] really confused. Very distressed. I think remembering back I was kind of believing his narrative about me – that it was my stress, my background, and my mental health that was causing all of the problems. I just felt very inadequate and very broken. Like I wasn't good enough and needed fixing. A lot of self-doubt. I think I felt in total disarray and disconnected from who I used to be."

The trauma caused by domestic abuse often has a devastating and long-term impact on survivors' mental health. Perpetrators will often manipulate and emotionally abuse survivors as a way of eroding their confidence and self-worth and ultimately exercising power and control over them. Name-calling, threats, and manipulation or 'gas-lighting' can all contribute to a survivor's declining mental health and self-esteem. To help survivors rebuild confidence, community-based services take a trauma-informed approach that centres an understanding of the impact of trauma in the services they provide.

### Practical support and expert advice

Whatever their situation, the survivors we interviewed told us that the support they received from community-based services helped them to take practical steps forward to rebuild their lives. In addition to support with issues such as housing, legal remedies, and benefits, survivors told us about how they were supported to understand the dynamics of abuse and the impact this had on their mental wellbeing.

**Becki, a survivor supported by Refuge's outreach services told us,**

**"She (frontline worker) made me understand things that weren't right because...there were no punches. It was all verbal abuse and things. It was nice to be able to talk to her and hear, 'that's not ok, that's not right'. So, I told her things that I've not told anyone before."**

**"I can see it for what it is now".  
(Lisa, supported by an IDVA)**

### Safety planning

**"[I feel] much safer, physically safer and emotionally safer"  
(Lisa, supported by an IDVA).**

Survivors told us that support from community-based services helped them to feel safer. Safety planning is often one of the first things a survivor will be supported with by community-based services, whether that be developing a plan for her to continue living safely in her home or supporting her to secure protective orders in the Family Court. As Lisa told us, "They supported me to change the locks and gave me a safety plan."

Community-based services support women to both be safe and have the perception of feeling safe. The survivors we interviewed also told us how they were supported to secure their devices to protect them from technology-facilitated domestic abuse. Jessica said, "The sanctuary scheme (run by the support service) secured my property, told me how to settle my passwords on my phone and make my devices safe."

# A safe place where you're understood and believed

## Emotional support

**"I feel really proud, but I wouldn't have been able to do it without the emotional support."** (Hazel, supported by an outreach worker)

Survivors described to us how they felt emotionally supported throughout their journey in community-based services. Accessing justice in the criminal and family courts, securing affordable long-term housing, and becoming financially independent from perpetrators can be incredibly challenging and often retraumatising processes for survivors of domestic abuse. The emotional support offered by specialist frontline workers is therefore vital to help survivors feel safe and empowered to take these difficult steps. As Nayami, a survivor supported by Refuge's early intervention service told us, "Having someone who can support me through the highs and lows was really beneficial at the time."

**"It's always a safe place where you're understood and believed."** (Lisa, supported by an IDVA)

One of the most significant impacts of accessing community-based services survivors told us about was feeling as though they had been listened to and believed. This is significant because, when accessing statutory services, particularly the police and criminal justice system, survivors often face victim-blaming and a culture of disbelief. These attitudes often erode survivors' trust in these services and their confidence in reporting.

In contrast, when accessing community-based services, survivors are supported by specialist professionals who understand the dynamics of abuse and can validate their experiences. For some survivors, this will be their first disclosure of the abuse they have suffered. Serwa, a survivor supported by Refuge's community-based services told us, "You just feel comfortable. You feel like you've been listened to, and you've been cared for emotionally."



## Freedom and independence

**"Without the support, I wouldn't feel like there was a possibility of being free."** (Jessica, supported by an outreach worker)

Survivors described the transformative impact of gaining independence from their perpetrators on their lives and the lives of their children. Hazel told us, "I can come home now and there's no worry about what I'm coming into; what mood he's in. He was this really kind, attentive partner when we were out in front of people, then when we got home, we got backlash. We have the same issues as every other family now, but we haven't got that added stress of him, and it's just a relief."

**"It's given me a newfound confidence."** (Becki, supported by an outreach worker).

The significance of survivors of domestic abuse gaining freedom cannot be understated. In most cases, survivors face many forms of abuse and perpetrators control multiple aspects of their lives, including their finances, social life, ability to access employment and connection with family members. Survivors interviewed told us that through accessing community-based services, they were supported to rebuild confidence and regain control over their lives.

Hazel told us, "I always look back at the September before we left, and I was scraping around for £5 to buy a new school jumper for my son. Now, their uniform was bought in July this year. It was all done; everything was all in the wardrobe and ready to go. It's not just about the money but having the freedom that actually, if there is free money, it doesn't get spent on him (the perpetrator) or what he wants. I can't tell you – like coming home and just being able to put your pyjamas on and your heating when you want it and sit and watch the kids without him kicking off about something."



## Hope for the future.

### Hopeful. Worthy. Happy. Secure.

These are just some of the ways survivors describe the positive impact community-based services had on their lives. Through accessing these services, survivors told us that their quality of life had improved as they were supported on a path to a more fulfilling life.

**"Ever since I get to know the organisation, I immediately felt very positive and more hopeful about the future, and I am just hoping that the organisation will be around to help people like me."** (Huong, supported by Vietnamese and Chinese outreach).

**"I think not only is it (the outreach service) providing a service, I think it's also reminding people – mostly women – that they matter and that they're worthy, and they can learn new skills. You can laugh again. I think that's really important in recovery."** (Jessica, supported by outreach).

**"I feel happier and more secure. I always felt that I've got to put up with abuse and everything. Whereas now, I know I don't, or I know how to go and ask for help – and what to ask for."** (Becki, supported by outreach)

# The economic case

## Investing in community-based services

**Not only do community-based services transform survivors' lives, but they also make financial sense. An economic analysis published by Women's Aid Federation England in February 2023 shows that every pound invested in domestic abuse support services will make at least £9 savings to the public purse<sup>4</sup>.**

Due to the insecure funding landscape underpinning the network of specialist domestic abuse services across the country, survivors are often forced to turn to statutory services such as the police, NHS, and social care for support. This comes at huge cost to society. In 2022, the estimated economic and social costs of domestic abuse was a staggering £78 billion per year<sup>29</sup>.

Community-based services make savings by preventing further abuse, relieving pressure on public services, and managing the far higher costs incurred when a survivor moves into refuge accommodation. By accessing support from a specialist domestic abuse service, Women's Aid Federation England estimate that one woman's journey could save a total of £159,406 in costs to public services<sup>30</sup>.

Community-based services also provide significant social value to society. In 2021, Refuge commissioned the New Economics Foundation to conduct an analysis of the social value generated through our frontline services<sup>31</sup>. In this analysis, 'social value' is defined as the social, environmental, and economic impact created by Refuge's frontline services for women, children, and the state. This was measured using the outcomes that survivors identified as being most important to them – safety, health, social wellbeing, and economic wellbeing.

**This analysis found that, for every £1 invested, Refuge's IDVA services generate an average of £9.40 in social value and Refuge's outreach services generate an average of £23.35 in social value. Safety accounts for 59% of the social value generated through Refuge's services, followed by social wellbeing (21%), economic wellbeing (11%) and health (8%)<sup>32</sup>.**



The case for investing in community-based services is therefore clear. Sustainably funding specialist support services, who reduce the need for survivors to use statutory services, will save money in the long-term and generate social value for society whilst transforming the lives of survivors and their children.

To meet the need for community-based services across the country and ensure all survivors have access to lifesaving support, an estimated £238 million of funding is needed per year. This represents just 0.02% of total government spending in 2020-21<sup>33</sup>.

29/30 Women's Aid Federation England (2023) Investing to Save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Bristol  
31 New Economics Foundation (2021) Refuge: Social Return on Investment  
32 New Economics Foundation (2021) Refuge: Social Return on Investment  
33 Women's Aid. (2023) The Domestic Abuse Report 2023: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid



# Recommendations

The findings of this report clearly show the transformative impact of community-based services for survivors of domestic abuse. The vast majority (95%) of the survivors Refuge supports rely on these types of services, yet many remain chronically underfunded, and survivors face a postcode lottery in access to support.

The Victims and Prisoners Bill, introduced to Parliament on 29 March 2023, presents a vital opportunity to safeguard community-based services and ensure all survivors can access the specialist support they so desperately need. The proposed 'duty to collaborate' (clauses 12 – 14) would require Police and Crime Commissioners, health and local authorities to work together when commissioning support services. But without any new funding to support the new duty, it will fail to improve survivors' access to the specialist support they so desperately need.

Refuge urges the government to safeguard community-based services through:

**1. Adequate, sustainable funding for community-based services**, estimated by Women's Aid Federation England to be £238 million per year. This would provide for all community-based services to be commissioned at a level that meets local need.

**2. A requirement for relevant authorities to conduct a joint strategic needs assessment to support commissioning of community-based services.** Understanding local need is vital to providing an effective network of community-based services and evidencing gaps in commissioning that require additional funding, particularly for specialist 'by and for' services.

**3. A requirement for relevant authorities to commission specialist, gendered services, including specialist services 'by and for' minoritised women.** Specialist services are essential for providing safe, trauma-informed, and expert support to survivors of domestic abuse, including specialist services delivered 'by and for' D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+ survivors, Black, Asian and minoritised survivors, and migrant women.

**4. A requirement for relevant authorities to commission the full range of community-based services, including specialist mental health support within domestic abuse services.** The increase in numbers of women coming to community-based services with mental health needs is putting increasing pressure on already over-stretched services. The entire network of community-based services is essential for an effective response to domestic abuse.

**5. A requirement for relevant authorities to commission community-based services on sustainable contract terms of a minimum of 3-5 years.** Longer-term contracts will help to ease the insecure funding landscape currently facing the specialist domestic abuse sector and enable community-based services to take root in the local area, recruit to permanent contracts and provide women and children with the security and stability they so desperately need when fleeing domestic abuse.

## Conclusion

Every day, frontline workers in community-based services are going above and beyond to support survivors. Through providing expert advice and emotional support, these services enable survivors to transform their lives and keep themselves, and their children, safe.

Despite the transformative impact of community-based services, survivors often face barriers in accessing the specialist support they need. This report shows that community-based services are under increasing pressure due to funding challenges and rising caseloads. More than 4 in 5 (85%) frontline workers surveyed believe that their service is being impacted by insufficient funding and more than 3 in 4 (76%) said their caseload had increased over the past 12 months.

Survivors are coming to our services with increasingly complex circumstances and the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating the challenges survivors face when fleeing dangerous perpetrators. This insecure funding landscape is putting the lifesaving network of community-based services upon which most women and children affected by domestic abuse rely, under severe pressure.

**Adequate, sustainable funding for community-based services is therefore urgently needed to protect this essential network of support and ensure all survivors can access specialist, tailored support in a safe place in their community.**

**"The future – I can see it. It's a little bit of the brighter side."** (Huong, supported by Vietnamese and Chinese outreach).

Author: Sophie Ireland



## About Refuge

Refuge is the largest specialist provider of gender-based violence services in the country, supporting thousands of women and children on any given day. Refuge opened the world's first refuge in 1971 in Chiswick and, 50 years later, provides: a national network of 44 refuges, community outreach programmes, child support services, and independent advocacy services for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence.

We also run specialist services for survivors of tech abuse, modern slavery, economic abuse, and female genital mutilation. Refuge runs the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline which receives hundreds more calls and contacts from women experiencing domestic abuse every day and can be reached on **0808 2000 247**.

[www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

[www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk)

[www.refugetechsafety.org](http://www.refugetechsafety.org)