

04 March 2024

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Rt Hon Alex Chalk KC MP

Secretary of State for Justice Sent via email: ministerialcorrespondence@justice.gov.uk;
secofstate@Justice.gov.uk; public.enquiries@hmtreasury.gov.uk

Dear Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP and Rt Hon Alex Chalk KC MP,

We are writing as organisations who represent or provide specialist domestic abuse services and work to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) to highlight the urgent need for sustainable funding for specialist domestic abuse services. The upcoming Spring Budget presents a vital opportunity to address the postcode lottery domestic abuse survivors face in accessing support and ensure that no woman or child is turned away from lifesaving services.

According to Home Office estimates, domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the UK¹. Specialist domestic abuse services provide lifesaving support to survivors in refuge and community-based settings, enabling them to find safety and rebuild their lives free from dangerous perpetrators. Services use a trauma informed, needs and risk-led approach which meets women's often complex needs. Yet, many services are at breaking point². Long-term under-investment in the specialist domestic abuse sector has led to insufficient and inconsistent service provision across the country. This patchwork of provision is leaving many survivors unable to access the specialist support they so desperately need, often with devastating consequences. As outlined in Women's Aid's submission to the HM Treasury's Spring Budget on 24th January 2024, with 1 in 4 women experiencing domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime, it is imperative that specialist services receive dedicated, multi-year funding – including ring-fenced funding for services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, D/deaf and disabled women, those with No Recourse to Public Funds and LGBT+ survivors, who face even greater barriers to accessing support.

We therefore write to urge you to ensure adequate funding for domestic abuse services, starting with investment in specialist domestic abuse services in the Spring Budget 2024 by providing:

- **£427m annually for specialist domestic abuse services in England**; including £238 million ring-fenced for community-based services and £189 million ring-fenced for accommodation-based services³.
- Clause 13 of the Victims and Prisoners Bill offers a legislative framework through which sustainable funding for community-based services can be provided.
- **A separate, national 'by and for' funding pot** to provide long overdue investment for specialist services for D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, Black, minoritised, and migrant women, including those with no recourse to public funds.

Investing in specialist domestic abuse services can save money by providing an effective whole-system solution to the epidemic that is domestic abuse in our society, which is central

¹ Home Office (2022), 'Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan.'

² Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) A patchwork of provision

³ Women's Aid Federation England (2023) Investing to Save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Bristol

to reducing VAWG, as well as avoiding increased costs to stretched public services in the long run.

Safe-accommodation services

The Part 4 duty on tier one local authorities to plan and provide safe accommodation-services, introduced by the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, provided much-needed protection for accommodation-based services and a more sustainable model for their delivery. Whilst the duty has increased the provision of safe accommodation services across the country, new burdens allocations are simply insufficient to meet demand and a lack of space and capacity continues to be the main reason refuge referrals are rejected. **The £127 million allocated to Part 4 for the year 2023/24⁴ falls far short of the estimated £189 million needed to adequately fund refuges services in England⁵.** As a result, far too many women and children are being turned away from safety. In the year 2022-23, approximately 62% of women were turned away at first referral due to services not being able to meet their needs⁶. Funding challenges are particularly acute for specialist 'by and for' services who are six times less likely to receive statutory funding than generic specialist services⁷. Contracts are not rising in line with inflation and increasingly favour generic, rather than specialist providers, limiting their capacity to provide safe and effective service provision⁸. To enable the Part 4 duty to fulfil its transformative potential, adequate funding must be provided, alongside a clear and unequivocal recognition of the importance of specialist women's-led refuges.

We therefore urge you to prioritise tackling domestic abuse in the upcoming Spring Budget by committing £189 million per year in ring-fenced funding for refuges

Community-based support services

Community-based support services, which provide lifesaving support to survivors in a safe local setting, do not currently have the same level of investment and protection. These services use a trauma informed, needs and risk-led approach which meets women's often complex needs. Survivors can access community-based services at all stages of their journey; whether they are still living with an abuser, planning to flee, or have already left to rebuild their lives. They therefore play a pivotal role in early intervention and reducing the burden on statutory services. Survivors will often access both accommodation-based and community-based services during their journey. **The vast majority of survivors rely on some form of community-based service⁹.** This last year, the specialist domestic abuse support sector in England supported over 120,000 in community-based services¹⁰. Yet, many services remain chronically underfunded, and survivors face a postcode lottery in accessing support. **In 2022, less than 50% of survivors who wanted to access community-based services were able to¹¹** and 62% of women are turned away at first referral¹². There is a 22% shortfall in refuge spaces as recommended by the Council of Europe¹³. For minoritised women, barriers to access are even greater. The estimated annual funding shortfall for organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, minoritised women is between £63m and £114m¹⁴.

The funding challenges facing community-based services are multi-faceted. Insufficient contracts are leaving specialist organisations reliant on insecure fundraised income. Short

⁴ Local Authority Domestic Abuse Duty: 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025 funding allocations - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

⁵ Women's Aid Federation England (2023) Investing to Save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Bristol

⁶ Annual Audit Infographic RTS.ai (womensaid.org.uk)

⁷ Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) A patchwork of provision

⁸ Commissioning-report-2022-2023.pdf (refuge.org.uk)

⁹ 95% of the survivors supported by Refuge, the country's largest provider of gender-based violence services, rely on some form of community-based services.

¹⁰ Annual Audit Infographic RTS.ai (womensaid.org.uk)

¹¹ Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) A patchwork of provision

¹² Annual Audit Infographic RTS.ai (womensaid.org.uk)

¹³ Annual Audit Infographic RTS.ai (womensaid.org.uk)

¹⁴ Imkaan (2020) Unpublished

term contracts are driving and sustaining a sector-wide recruitment crisis. The cost-of-living crisis is compounding these funding challenges, whilst causing more women to turn to community-based services for support¹⁵. **76% of frontline workers surveyed in Refuge's Local Lifelines report said their caseload had increased over the past 12 months**¹⁶. While funding for victim and witness support services has increased to £147 million per year until 2024/25, this funding is not ring-fenced to domestic abuse and is simply insufficient to meet the demand for specialist domestic services across the country. **Women's Aid estimates that it would cost at least £238 million per year to meet the need for community-based services across the country**¹⁷. This investment would urgently help community-based support services to support survivors of domestic abuse, as well as saving money in the long-term by enabling earlier interventions to protect survivors, as well as avoiding increased costs to already stretched public services.

The Victims and Prisoner's Bill: An opportunity for change

The Victims and Prisoners Bill presents a vital opportunity to address these funding gaps. Clause 13 – 'the duty to collaborate' - offers a legislative framework through which sustainable funding for community-based services can be provided. The Bill aims to improve victims access to support services. Yet it provides no new funding to address the significant shortfalls and myriad of funding challenges outlined in this letter; challenges that are only set to worsen with the concerning rise in local authorities issuing section 114 notices, effectively declaring bankruptcy. In December 2023, following the absence of council funding uplifts in the Autumn Statement, the LGA found that nearly **1 in 5 council leaders in England said they are likely to declare defacto bankruptcy before the end of 2024 as a result of a lack of government funding**¹⁸. This escalating financial crisis poses significant risks to specialist domestic abuse services and demonstrates the urgent need for adequate, ring-fenced funding for all domestic abuse services but particularly community-based services who do not have statutory protection. **8,725 members of the public have signed a [joint petition](#) coordinated by 11 women's sector organisations**¹⁹, including Refuge, Women's Aid, Solace Women's Aid, Agenda Alliance and Safe Lives, calling on the Secretary of State for Justice to provide sustainable funding for community-based services through the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

To ensure this long-awaited legislation creates the change survivors deserve, we urge you to provide at least £238 million per year for specialist domestic abuse community-based services via the Spring Budget and establish a separate 'by and for' funding pot for specialist services for D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, Black, minoritised, and migrant women, including those with no recourse to public funds.

Not only would this relatively small investment save lives, but it would also make significant cost savings to society. Women's Aid's and ResPublica's economic analysis found for every pound invested in domestic abuse support services is estimated to make at least £9 savings to the public purse, as they not only provide vital support to women and their children but also reduce pressure on other essential services such as the NHS²⁰. By the Government's own estimates, domestic abuse costs society a staggering £72 billion per year²¹. The economic case for investing in domestic abuse services is therefore clear.

¹⁵ Women's Resource Centre (2023). The impacts of the cost-of living crisis on the women's sector

¹⁶ Refuge (2023) Local Lifelines report

¹⁷ Women's Aid Federation England (2023) Investing to Save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Bristol

¹⁸ [Nearly one in five English councils at risk of bankruptcy, says LGA](#)

¹⁹ Refuge, End Violence Against Women, Women's Aid Federation England, SafeLives, Solace Women's Aid, Southall Black Sisters, Independent Domestic Abuse Services, IRISI, Imkaan, Agenda Alliance, Latin American Womens Rights Service

²⁰ Women's Aid Federation England (2023) Investing to Save: the economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Bristol

²¹ Home Office (2019) The Economic and Social Costs of Domestic Abuse

The Spring Budget presents a vital opportunity to bring long-overdue investment and protection to specialist domestic abuse services. As service providers and representatives of specialist domestic abuse organisations, we write to urge you to provide **£427m annually for specialist domestic abuse services in England and introduce a separate, national 'by and for' funding pot**. Without this, essential domestic abuse services will continue to be squeezed, putting increasing pressure on statutory services who are left to fill the gaps, and putting more women's lives at risk.

We hope that the Government will take this opportunity to prioritise women and girls in the Spring Budget.

Yours faithfully,

Abigail Ampofo, Interim Chief Executive, Refuge

Farah Nazeer, Chief Executive, Women's Aid

Indy Cross, Chief Executive, Agenda Alliance

Liz Thompson, Director of External Relations, Safe Lives

Nahar Choudhury, CEO, Solace Women's Aid