

**Refuge**

# Annual Commissioning Report

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2024/25



For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.

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## Executive Summary

Domestic abuse and VAWG services in England continue to be predominantly commissioned through competitive tendering processes, shaping a landscape in which providers must continuously compete to sustain and grow service provision. To understand how this landscape is evolving, Refuge has tracked commissioning activity over the past eight years through a comprehensive pipeline, providing insights into how services are specified, funded, and delivered across the sector. This year's analysis draws on opportunities published between April 2024 and March 2025, alongside emerging trends from 2025/26.

### Commissioning activity has declined following a period of sustained growth

In 2024/2025, 112 commissioning opportunities for domestic abuse (DA) and VAWG services were published in England. This represents a notable decrease compared to the previous two years, which saw record highs of 172 opportunities in 2022/23 and 171 opportunities in 2023/24.

### Shifts in service focus reflect changing commissioning priorities

Throughout the year, the pipeline tracks key information on commissioning opportunities across the sector, including the types of services being commissioned and core service requirements.

Key findings note:

- A reduction in commissioning opportunities for refuge and dispersed accommodation services
- Relative stability in outreach and IDVA service commissioning
- Continued recognition of the need to support children and young people, although a gap remains between references to support and the inclusion of specific provision within service specifications, such as specialist staff roles or therapeutic support
- An increase in commissioning opportunities for perpetrator programmes
- Greater expectations around volunteer involvement within services
- A slight increase in opportunities referencing 'technology-facilitated abuse'

### The influence of the Domestic Abuse Act remains but is less explicitly referenced

The proportion of commissioning opportunities referencing the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) decreased from 19.9% in 2023/24 to 8.3% in 2024/25. Despite this, commissioning continues to reflect key priorities introduced by the Act, including support for children and young people, therapeutic provision, and accommodation-based services.

### Longer-term contracts are increasing, although local authorities remain under pressure

Local authorities remain the primary commissioners of domestic abuse and VAWG services, followed by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). There has been a continued reduction in contracts lasting one year or less, alongside a growth in longer-term commissioning arrangements, reflecting a shift toward greater stability in service provision. However, this trend sits within a wider context of ongoing financial pressures in local authorities, which continue to shape commissioning decisions and the overall funding environment.

## **Inequalities in commissioning persist across different groups of victim/survivors**

The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) highlights the need for specialist support for a range of groups, including Black and minoritised victim/survivors, LGBTQIA+ individuals, victim/survivors experiencing multiple disadvantage, those with disabilities, and those with No Resource to Public Funds (NRPF). However, commissioning activity continues to reflect uneven provision across different groups of victim/survivors with gaps between recognised need and the availability of dedicated, specialist support.

Key trends in equality, diversity, and inclusion include:

- A slight increase in reference to support for Black and minoritised women, although specific provision for specialist roles or 'by and for' services remain limited.
- Mentions of LGBTQIA+ support have decreased, although there is an increase in specifications requiring dedicated provision.
- References to support for victim/survivors with disabilities have increased, including more specific requirements. However, there remains an absence of fully dedicated services for victim/survivors with disabilities
- Mentions of support for those with No Resource to Public Funds (NRPF) have declined, despite a small increase in specifications including targeted provision.

## **Commissioning practices continue to create barriers for specialist providers**

As part of this analysis, Refuge identified examples of poor practice in the quality-of-service specifications and commissioning processes, informed by case study evidence from across the year.

Key themes include:

- Competitive procurement approaches with complex processes, stringent accreditation requirements, and unclear specifications create barriers for providers, particularly smaller and 'by-and-for' organisations.
- Some commissioning specifications set out models that we identify as (potentially) unsafe and/or place disproportionate emphasis on cost over quality, affecting service delivery and outcomes for victim/survivors.
- Social value requirements, while beneficial in principle, are often overly complex or onerous, unintentionally excluding specialist and 'by and for' services and failing to recognise the social value inherent in third-sector delivery of services.
- Unrealistic requirements, particularly relating to premises and accommodation, can exclude specialist organisations and fail to account for contextual and political challenges in the housing sector.

## Recommendations

Below is a summary of key recommendations for commissioners to consider when tendering domestic abuse services:

### Recommendations for high quality service specifications

1. Protect specialist provision for different genders, including single-gender accommodation and separate lots where appropriate
2. Commission specialist support for LGBTQIA+ survivors
3. Provide longer-term contracts to support sustainable services
4. Recognise the importance of and need for culturally specific services
5. Ensure provision for victim/survivors with NRPF
6. Provide accessible services for disabled survivors
7. Prioritise dedicated support for children and young people
8. Set realistic service requirements aligned with available funding

### Recommendations for commissioning practice

The full recommendations are set out at the end of this report. For the purpose of this executive summary, they have been grouped thematically as key considerations in the design and procurement of domestic abuse and VAWG services.

#### Ensure suitable and adequate funding

- Commissioners should ensure funding reflects the true cost of delivering specialist domestic abuse services, including maintaining or increasing budgets in line with inflation and rising demand.
- Commissioners should prioritise funding for victim/survivor services and avoid unintended diversion of resources, including through combined commissioning with perpetrator programmes.
- Commissioners should ensure core service delivery is fully funded, with fundraising recognised as a means of enhancing, rather than subsidising essential provision.

#### Prioritise quality and protect specialist provision

- Commissioners should prioritise quality over price with tender evaluations to support safe, effective, specialist service delivery.
- Commissioners should enable providers to design services based on their expertise and avoid a shift towards generic models that may not meet the needs of diverse groups.
- Commissioners should recognise and protect the value of specialist and 'by-and-for' organisations with commissioning approaches.

#### Remove barriers and improve accessibility to commissioning:

- Commissioners should simplify procurement processes and avoid unnecessary complexity that may exclude specialist providers.
- Commissioners should allow sufficient time for bid development and partnership formation and facilitate consortium approaches where appropriate.
- Commissioners should ensure funding reflects the full cost of partnership delivery.
- Commissioners should build in realistic mobilisation periods, within a minimum of three months recommended for complex services.

### **Strengthen commissioning practice and alignment with policy**

- Commissioners should ensure service specifications and procurement approaches align with the principles and statutory duties set out in the Domestic Abuse Act.
- Commissioners should commission perpetrator programmes separately from victim/survivor services to protect funding and ensure safe, specialist delivery.
- Commissioners should consider flexible and proportionate commissioning approaches, including grants and direct awards, where these better support the sustainability of specialist provision.

### **Prioritise quality and protect specialist provision**

- Commissioners should ensure that requirements relating to social value, training, digital delivery, environmental commitments, and reporting are proportionate, achievable, and appropriately funded.
- Commissioners should recognise the inherent social value delivered by specialist providers and avoid reliance on complex or costly mechanisms that may disadvantage smaller organisations.
- Commissioners should take into account the capacity and sustainability constraints of the specialist sector when setting requirements.

## Recommendations

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### Recommendations for high quality service specifications

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2. Commission specialist support for LGBTQIA+ survivors
3. Provide longer-term contracts to support sustainable services
4. Recognise the importance of and need for culturally specific services
5. Ensure provision for victim/survivors with NRPF
6. Provide accessible services for disabled survivors
7. Prioritise dedicated support for children and young people
8. Set realistic service requirements aligned with available funding

### Recommendations for commissioning practice

#### 1. Ensure suitable and adequate funding

Commissioners should ensure funding reflects the true cost of delivery, including inflationary pressures, so that specialist services are sustainably resourced and not reliant on fundraising to deliver core provision. Funding should prioritise victim-survivor services.

#### 2. Invest in the wider ecosystem of specialist services

Commissioners should take a strategic, long-term approach to funding a diverse range of specialist providers, including 'by and for' organisations, ensuring services are delivered by those best placed to meet local need.

#### 3. Use alternative commissioning approaches where appropriate

Commissioners should consider proportionate and flexible approaches, including grants and direct awards, alongside competitive tendering, to reduce unnecessary burden on specialist providers.

#### 4. Protect specialist services and models of support

Commissioners should ensure service specifications enable specialist organisations to design and deliver services based on their expertise, avoiding a shift towards generic models that may not meet the needs of victim-survivors.

#### 5. Prioritise quality over price in tender evaluations

Commissioners should ensure that evaluation criteria appropriately prioritise quality to support safe, effective, and specialist service delivery.

#### 6. Remove barriers for small and medium specialist and 'by and for' organisations

Commissioners should ensure commissioning processes are accessible, including through proportionate requirements, adequate timeframes, and support for partnership or consortium bids.

### **7. Ensure fundraising delivers added value, not core service sustainability**

Commissioners should fully fund core services and recognise that fundraising should enhance provision rather than subsidise essential delivery.

### **8. Allow realistic tender and mobilisation timescales**

Commissioners should ensure procurement and mobilisation timelines are achievable, enabling effective planning, staff transitions, and safe implementation of services.

### **9. Embed Domestic Abuse Act principles within commissioning**

Commissioners should ensure that service specifications align with the principles and duties set out in the Domestic Abuse Act and are supported by appropriate funding.

### **10. Commission perpetrator programmes separately from victim-survivor services**

Commissioners should commission perpetrator programmes as distinct lots to protect funding for victim-survivor services and avoid disadvantaging specialist providers.

### **11. Adopt fair and proportionate approaches to social value**

Commissioners should recognise the inherent social value delivered by specialist organisations and ensure that requirements do not create unnecessary financial or administrative burdens.

### **12. Provide support for increased compliance requirements**

Commissioners should ensure that additional requirements, including digital, training, and environmental expectations, are proportionate and supported through appropriate funding, guidance, and time.

### **13. Support effective partnership working**

Commissioners should enable sustainable partnership models by allowing sufficient time for development and ensuring funding reflects the costs of partnership delivery.

### **14. Recognise sustainability constraints within the specialist sector**

Commissioners should consider the capacity of charities to meet sustainability and climate-related requirements and provide appropriate support to enable delivery.

## INTRODUCTION

Refuge is a registered charity and the country's largest provider of specialist services for victim/survivors of domestic abuse (DA) and wider forms of VAWG. [1]

The majority of Refuge's services are funded via local authority commissioning arrangements and national government grant funding streams. These include:

- The 24/7 Freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline (including Live Chat and British Sign Language video interpretation service)
- Specialist refuge accommodation, including dispersed models for survivors fleeing DA
- Support in the community, such as independent domestic and gender violence advocacy and outreach
- Support for children and young people
- Technology-Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment Service

DA services are subject to periodic commissioning and recommissioning, predominantly through competitive tendering processes. To ensure sustainability and growth, Refuge has a dedicated Development Team focused on retaining existing service contracts and identifying new opportunities. The team carries out daily horizon scanning of the external environment for opportunities relevant to the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector in England. Whilst we do not compete against other specialist organisations, this work allows us to maintain an overview of commissioning activity across the sector. All relevant opportunities relating to DA are recorded, with key themes captured in a central pipeline. These opportunities are issued by central and local government, police and crime commissioners, grant-making trusts and second-tier organisations. They include refuge accommodation, independent domestic violence advocacy, outreach services, therapeutic services, perpetrator programmes, and training.

For the past eight years, Refuge has collected and analysed pipeline data to help us anticipate and respond to commissioning trends, as well as to influence sector-wide developments. Building on previous years, this report explores the themes and trends in opportunities published between April 2024 and March 2025.

### **A note on how we track and count opportunities**

The Development Team records all incoming opportunities via a live pipeline, including market engagements, requests for information (RFIs), surveys, grants, and invitations to tender (ITTs). Each is counted as a separate opportunity, even when early-stage opportunities such as market engagements or RFIs later progress into full tenders. While this could be seen as double counting, it reflects the reality that opportunities are subject to significant change – including variations in scope, incorporated feedback, and available funding. Tracking each stage separately allows us to monitor shifts in commissioning intent and better understand the lifecycle of opportunities from early dialogue to formal procurement.

### **Report Structure**

The report reflects on commissioning activity over the past year, while also considering how patterns observed in 2024/25 may signal future trends. It begins by highlighting the key commissioning themes and trends identified over the FY 2024/25, before drawing on eight years

of collected data (2018-2025) to explore recurring motifs and examine the ongoing influence of the Domestic Abuse Act and other political developments on the commissioning of services.

The latter section of this report offers commentary and real-life examples of concerning commissioning behaviours and strategies, concluding with a set of core recommendations. If enacted, these recommendations would help ensure that domestic abuse services are commissioned to a high and safe standard, better enabling them to support women and their children to live free from violence and fear.

### **A note on ‘specialist services’ and ‘by-and-for’ organisations**

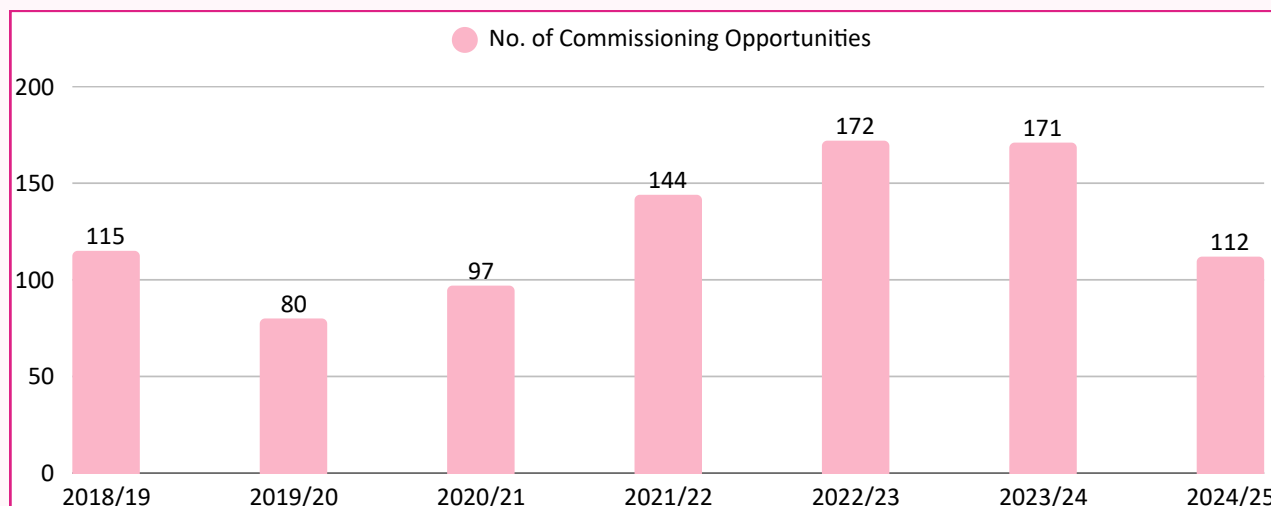
Refuge defines specialist VAWG services as those being delivered by providers who run services solely for victim/survivors of gender-based violence. We do not include more general providers, such as housing associations or charities who provide support to a broad range of vulnerable people, in this definition. Our definition reflects the Home Office’s definition of specialist services as *“a service which is specifically designed and whose primary purpose is to support someone who is, or has been affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or any other form of VAWG [2].”*

Specialist services for victim/survivors of DA should be led by-and-for the communities they service- for example a service run by women for women. Specialist services can also have a focus on ethnic minority, LGBTQIA+, disabled, migrant victim/survivors and other specific groups. These services play a vital role in ensuring that all victim/survivors can access the support they need. These services are experts in the nuanced contexts in which abuse occurs and in the specific barriers individuals may face in reporting abuse or seeking help [3].

## TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED?

### Types of Opportunities

In 2024/25, 112 opportunities were published compared to 171 opportunities in 2023/24. This represents a notable decrease compared to the record highs of the previous two years.



The 112 opportunities can be categorised as follows:

Type of Opportunity	2023/2024	2024/25
Invitations to Tender (ITTs)	84	52
Grants	26	9
Engagement Opportunities – including Market Engagement events, Requests for Quotations, Prior Information Notice, and Expressions of Interest	61	51

Notably, the number of ITTs fell by 38.1%, dropping from 84 in 2023/24 to 52 in 2024/25.

Engagement opportunities also fell by 16.4% from 61 to 51. While less steep than the ITTs, this still represents a notable reduction in early-stage procurement activity.

The reduction in the number of VAWG-related opportunities in 2024/25 may be influenced by several contextual and structural factors.

First, the general election and subsequent delay in the announcement of the national budget and spending review likely contributed to commissioners taking a more cautious approach, deferring new commissioning decisions until funding certainty was clear. Within our own services, we observed a consistent pattern of existing contracts being extended rather than going out to full recommissioning at their scheduled end dates. It is reasonable to assume that similar patterns

occurred across other local authorities, contributing to the overall decline in opportunities. This is further supported by the significant rebound in opportunities in Q1 of 2025/26, including 22 Prior Information Notices (PINs), suggesting that deferred commissioning activity is now being released. In comparison, only 11 PINs were published in 2024/25 demonstrating a lower intention to commission services.

Another contributing factor may be the lifecycle of contracts commissioned following the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), which drove previous peaks in opportunities – for example, rising from 97 in 2020/21 to 144 in 2021/22 and again to 172 in 2022/23. Many of these contracts remain within their initial terms and are not yet due for recommissioning, which may contribute to the reduction in the number of opportunities recorded in 2024/25.

The number of grants published also declined significantly – by over 65%. This is considerable, given the importance of grants in supporting smaller, specialist, and community-based providers. While often less stable than tenders, grants are typically more accessible and flexible. This decline raises concerns about accessibility and sector inclusion.

Several factors may explain this reduction in grants:

- Local authorities across England are facing significant financial pressures, leading to constrained budgets and difficult funding decisions. Since 2021, at least six councils have issued Section 114 notices, while over half of councils have warned they may be at risk of doing so in the coming years [4]. These pressures are contributing to reduced commissioning budgets and a decline in available grant funding.
- The general election and subsequent budget reviews may also have caused commissioners to delay new funding initiatives, awaiting clearer fiscal guidance.
- It is possible that grants previously dedicated to VAWG/DA are being repackaged under broader themes such as addressing inequalities or providing crisis support. This may reflect shifting priorities or a consolidation of funding streams. If opportunities are not explicitly VAWG-focused, they are less likely to be captured in our horizon scanning unless we are specifically researching funding available in locations where our services are already established.



## TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED?

The significant reduction in the overall number of commissioning opportunities, falling to 112 from 171 in 2023/24 and 172 in 2022/23, marks the lowest total since 2020/21 and reflects a broader contraction in commissioning activity.

This decline is particularly stark in opportunities including safe accommodation provisions. Only 26 refuge opportunities were recorded in 2024/25 (23.2% of all opportunities), down from 51 (29.8%) in 2023/24 and 48 (27.9%) in 2022/23 - indicating a concerning drop in commissioning for one of the most vital areas of support for victim/survivors. Dispersed accommodation also saw a sharp decrease; with only 16 opportunities this year (14.3%), compared to 30 (17.5%) in 2023/24, and 31 (18%) the year before. This is the lowest number of dispersed accommodation opportunities commissioned since 2020/2021.

The reduction in both refuge and dispersed accommodation services is concerning, given the essential role safe housing plays in enabling victim/survivors to flee abuse. Dispersed accommodation remains a critical model, especially for those who may face barriers accessing traditional refuge such as disabled survivors, larger families, male victim/survivors, LGBTQIA+ survivors, those with pets, or those experiencing multiple disadvantage. The decline in this type of provision raises questions about how local authorities are responding to identified gaps in their needs assessments and fulfilling duties under the DA Act, as well as what external factors may be influencing their ability to do so effectively.

Despite the overall drop in commissioning opportunities, outreach and IDVA services showed relative stability when considered proportionally. Outreach services were commissioned in 42 opportunities (37.5% of all opportunities) in 2024/25, a slight decrease from 46 (26.9%) in 2023/24, but representing a higher share of the total number of opportunities. Similarly, IDVA services featured in 33 opportunities (29.5% of all opportunities), down marginally from 37 (21.6%) last year but again making up a larger proportion of the total. These figures suggest a continued prioritisation of community-based advocacy and support for victim/survivors.

There were also continued efforts to support children, with 54 opportunities referencing support for children. However, as in previous years, there remains a critical gap between mere mentions of support for children within specifications and the actual commissioning of dedicated services. 18 opportunities (33.3%) out of the 54 that referenced support for children included therapeutic services, compared to 33.3% in 2023/24 and 50.5% in 2022/23. While the proportion is unchanged from last year, the overall number of therapeutic opportunities has declined, which is concerning considering the long-term impacts of domestic abuse on children and the DA Act's emphasis on children as victims in their own right.

Training provision featured in 28 opportunities in 2024/25 (25% of all opportunities), down from 41 (24%) in 2023/24, but fairly stable when viewed as a percentage. These training provisions vary from minimum requirements of delivering DA awareness sessions to more intensive workshops for schools, partner organisations, and statutory agencies. While valuable, commissioners must ensure training expectations are feasible and resourced to avoid overburdening already stretched specialist providers.

A modest decline was seen in perpetrator programme commissioning, falling to 17 opportunities (15.2% of all opportunities) from 19 (11.1%) the previous year. This remains well below the 31 opportunities commissioned in 2022/23. Considering the crucial importance of perpetrator

## TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED?

interventions in early prevention of domestic abuse, this comparatively low level of commissioning highlights persistent underinvestment in this vital area.

Lastly, 10 opportunities (8.9% of all opportunities) referenced technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) or 'tech-abuse', slightly up from 9 (5.3%) in 2023/24. Although frontline teams report growing demand and complexity in addressing TFA – including forms like online harassment, stalking via digital devices, and image-based abuse – the commissioning landscape has yet to reflect this urgency. This disparity illustrates a pressing need for enhanced funding and dedicated service development focused on this rapidly evolving form of abuse.

## The Ongoing Impact of the Domestic Abuse Act on Commissioning

The DA Act was passed and signed into law in April 2021. The Act places a statutory duty on tier one local authorities to provide support to victim/survivors of DA and their children within refuges and other forms of safe accommodation. Part of the framework around this duty includes the requirement for local authorities to assess the need for accommodation-based DA support in their area, including for those coming from outside the locality, and to develop and publish a strategy providing such support based on the needs assessment. This duty under the DA Act continues to influence commissioning, including through funding aimed at increasing or improving accommodation provision, support for children, and therapeutic services for both adults and children.

### Prospects identified as falling within the remit of the new Part Four DA Act Duties 2024-2025

To determine which commissioning opportunities published in 2024/25 relate to the Domestic Abuse Act, we identified opportunities that made explicit reference to the Act and its influence on service design. While many specifications include general references to the Act, this analysis focused specifically on those where the Act was clearly and substantively reflected in the service requirements, such as through defined provision for accommodation-based support, therapeutic services, specialist support for children and young people, and needs assessments as mandated by the Act. Opportunities considered within scope were typically funded by Tier 1 local authorities and included (at least some of) these elements as core requirements

As part of the analysis, Refuge distinguished between services that were being recommissioned and those introducing new provisions specifically designed in response to the Act. This enabled an assessment of how the Act is actively shaping new service delivery, rather than simply sustaining existing provision.

The table below presents the range of opportunities commissioned in 2024/25 that meet these criteria, representing new services or additional provision introduced since the DA Act.

Service Type	No. of prospects 2024-25*
Accommodation	1
Children and Young People's support	3
Therapeutic Services	1
Research/Evaluation	1
Other	3
Specialist Support -Protected characteristics/ complex needs	0
DA Needs Assessment	0
DA Training	0
Embedding Survivor Voice in the Service	0
<b>Total number of prospects relating to the DA Act 2021</b>	9
<b>Total number of prospects</b>	112

\*Please note these figures will differ in other tables as these figures only relate to prospects that fit the remit of the DA Act

Only 8.3% of all commissioning opportunities published in 2024/25 can be attributed to the Domestic Abuse Act, a decline from 19.9% the previous year. There is, however, no single clear explanation for this reduction. It may reflect the lifecycle of contracts commissioned under the Act (as previously mentioned), with many initial contracts still within their first term, as well as potential delays in commissioning due to the 2024 general election and ongoing financial uncertainty for local authorities.

Whilst it cannot be assumed that these projects or services would not have been commissioned without the influence of the Act, the continued commissioning of opportunities linked to its provisions indicates that the Act remains an important influence on commissioning. This influence is further reflected in the types of services being commissioned, with notable increases in support for children and young people. Counselling and therapeutic services, and accommodation-based provision.

## Reflecting on Emerging Themes

### Reflecting on Emerging Themes for 2023/24

In planning for the 2023/24 pipeline, we introduced one new theme, Sanctuary schemes, to track whether these were being commissioned by local authorities. Sanctuary schemes are a crucial form of provision as they enable victim/survivors of DA to remain in their own homes where it is appropriate and safe to do so.

We found that the theme of Sanctuary schemes remained relevant this year, with Sanctuary provision consistently appearing in commissioning across all quarters. In total, 11 opportunities included Sanctuary provision (10 ITTs and one market engagement). All of these were integrated into broader outreach or accommodation services rather than commissioned as stand-alone services. This compares to the previous year (2023/24), when 27 opportunities included sanctuary schemes (25 ITTs and one market engagement). Overall, the proportion of sanctuary schemes has therefore decreased from 15.7% of all opportunities in 2023/24, to 9.1% in 2024/25, raising concern that fewer victim/survivors may be supported to remain safely in their own homes.

### Emerging themes for 2024/25

Throughout the year we review and consider new provision themes to add to our pipeline for the following year, while also revising those from the previous year to enable comparison. Emerging themes are identified in response to changes in legislation, shifts in language or framing around key issues, and gaps highlighted through commissioning activity. In planning for the 2024/25 pipeline, we retained all our existing themes and did not add any new themes.

Some of the existing themes which have seen an increase in commissioning activity are:

- Children's services (increase of +11.6% as a proportion of all opportunities)
- Perpetrator programmes (+4.2%)
- Volunteer requirement (+7.8%)

Significant decreases in commissioning since 2023/24 include:

- Refuge accommodation (decrease of -6.5% as a proportion of all opportunities)
- Dispersed accommodation (-3.1%)
- Helplines (-4.4%)

## TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED?

Themes emerging in 2024/25 and identified for monitoring in the 2025/26 pipeline are:

- The framing of gender identities, particularly around trans people, following the UK Supreme Court's ruling on biological sex and the Equality Act
- The inclusion of funded Women's Safety Officers (or equivalent) within perpetrator programmes to ensure victim/survivor safety without overburdening existing IDVA provision
- Types of commissioning processes – capturing variations in procurement approaches such as light-touch, open, or competitive procedures, and alternative approaches such as direct awards
- References to the National Supported Housing Standards – in anticipation of their enforcement from early 2026, shaping requirements for supported and accommodation-based services.

### Who is commissioning services?

Funder	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Local Authority	59	113	120	130	76
Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC)	18	20	24	18	20
Home Office	7	4	8	2	0
Ministry of Justice (MoJ)	1	1	4	1	0
Other government department	2	2	6	9	11
Health	1	0	4	2	1
Other	9	4	1	9	4

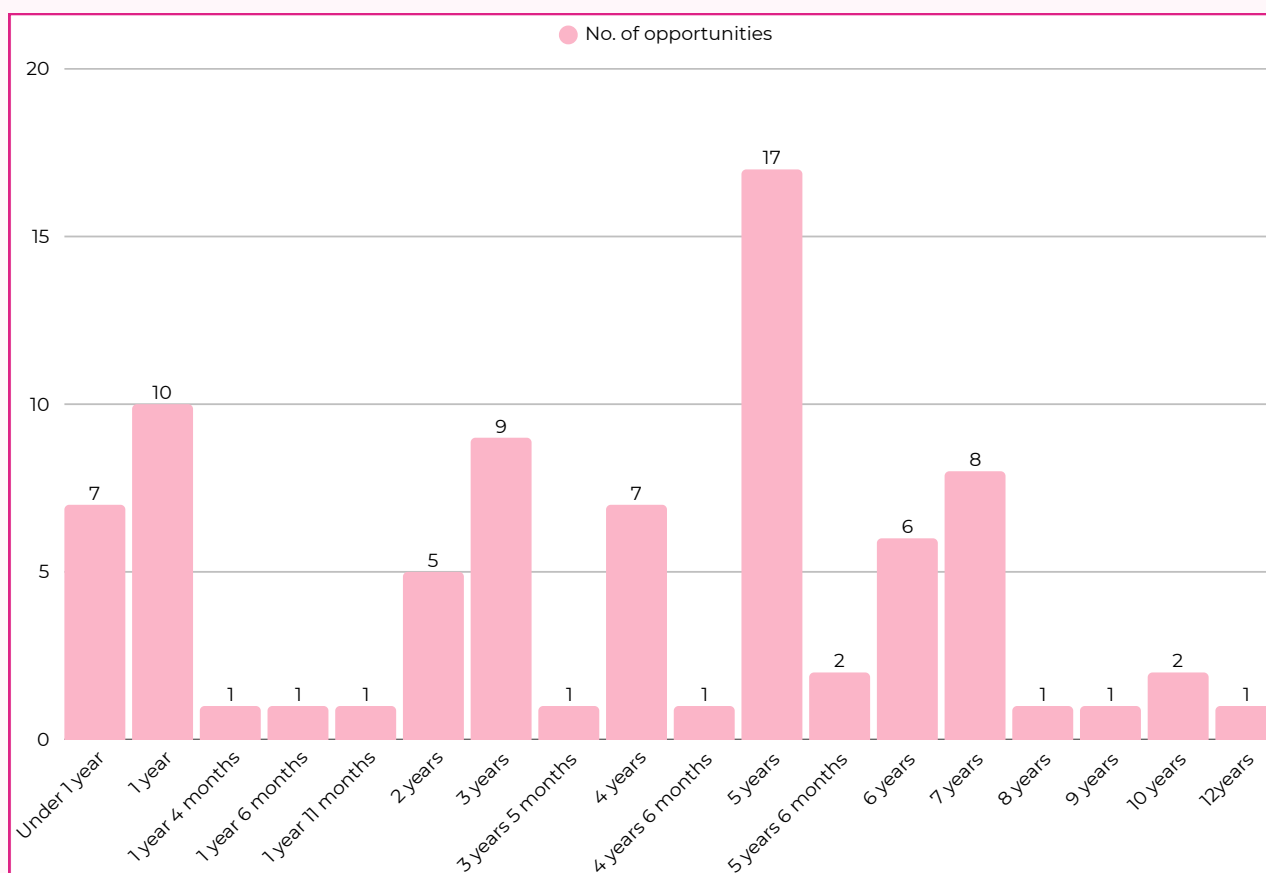
Most services (68%) continued to be commissioned by Local Authorities, with the Police and Crime Commissioner representing the second largest commissioner. Funding from the MoJ and Home Office decreased in 2024/25, with no opportunities being commissioned by either in this period. Commissioning by Health Services continues to be extremely low, and saw a further

decrease, with one opportunity being commissioned by the NHS. In contrast, other government bodies, such as the GLA and MOPAC, increased their funding in 2024/25 compared to previous years. The observed decrease in direct national government commissioning in 2024/25 may be attributed to two key factors:

- 1. Election and budget review delays** – The national election and subsequent budget review processes are likely to have caused delays in funding allocations and commissioning decisions. Such delays can impact the timing and volume of opportunities directly commissioned by national government bodies, both through requiring a hold on commissioning activity, and due to uncertainty around future government priorities and spending.
- 2. Devolution of powers and funding** – The UK government has been transferring powers and funding to local authorities and devolved regional governments. For instance, the English Devolution White Paper, published in December 2024, outlines plans to accelerate and standardise the process through which powers and funding are passed from Westminster to local areas. This shift enables local entities to have greater control over commissioning decisions.

It will be important to monitor these trends in future years to determine whether the decrease in direct national government commissioning is a temporary anomaly or part of a longer-term shift towards devolved commissioning structures.

### Maximum Contract Length



\*\*Please note that there were 30 opportunities where the length of the contract wasn't provided due to the tenders being Prior Information Notices (PINs) or Market Engagement events (MEs).

## TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED?

Thankfully, the prevalence of short-term contracts (one year or less) in 2024/25 has decreased to 26 (23%), compared to the worryingly high number of 41 (24%) in 2023/24, although the overall proportion of short-term contracts has remained steady. Analysis shows that 12 (71%) of the contracts for one year or less were grants commissioned by government bodies and local councils. The remaining contracts covered a range of activities, including needs assessments and research, pilot projects, IDVA clinical supervision, and the delivery of therapeutic support. This is a positive trend, as very short-term funding is largely being used for discrete or supplementary activities rather than core service provision.

Alongside this, there has been a clear shift towards longer-term commissioning. In 2024/25, 57 contracts (51%) were commissioned for three years or more, compared with 63 contracts (37%) in the previous year. Notably, contracts of five years or more have also increased significantly, rising from 16 in 2023/24 to 39 in 2024/25. Of these, 14 contracts ranged from 7 to 12 years in length, a substantial increase from the previous year, which saw only one contract of seven years and none exceeding this duration. This represents a positive shift toward longer-term commissioning, something Refuge has consistently advocated for with local and national commissioners.

To build on this progress, Refuge continues to recommend a minimum contract length of five years to enable services to become fully embedded within local communities and provide stability for victim/survivors. However, contract length alone is not sufficient. Contracts must also include guaranteed annual uplifts to reflect rising costs. In recent years, longer-term contracts have too often been commissioned without consistent uplifts, leaving providers to absorb increasing financial pressures associated with inflation and the cost-of-living crisis.

### Target Gender for the whole programme

The majority of commissioning is aimed at all genders, as demonstrated by the figures below. In 2024/25, 62.5% of services were commissioned to support 'all genders', encompassing women, men, trans, and non-binary victim/survivors. This mirrors the language of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which recognises that *"anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, regardless of sex, gender reassignment, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality, or background"* [5].

Gender for Whole Programme	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
<b>All genders</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	103	121	70
<b>Men Only</b>	8	1	2	2	3	1	0
<b>Women &amp; Men</b>	76	49	50	82	10	6	1
<b>Women Only &amp; Women and their Children</b>	29	20	29	34	21	17	10

<b>Women inc. trans women and non-binary adults</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	2	5	1
<b>Men inc. trans men and non-binary adults</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	0	1	0
<b>Unclear*</b>	/	/	16	14	22	20	20

\*Those that are at PIN or ME stage have not yet released the specifications and target gender for these services.

While many services are commissioned to support all genders, it is also important that commissioners recognise, acknowledge, and reflect the gendered nature of DA and VAWG within their commissioning practices. In the year ending March 2024, there were 108 domestic homicides, consistent with the previous year (107)[6]. Of these, 83 victims were women and 25 were men. Domestic homicides accounted for 18.95% of all homicides during this period; however, for adult female victims, 60% of all homicides were domestic homicides. Female victims were most commonly killed by a partner or ex-partner (42%) or a family member (18%). In contrast, adult male victims were more likely to be killed by a friend or acquaintance (24%) or a stranger (20%).

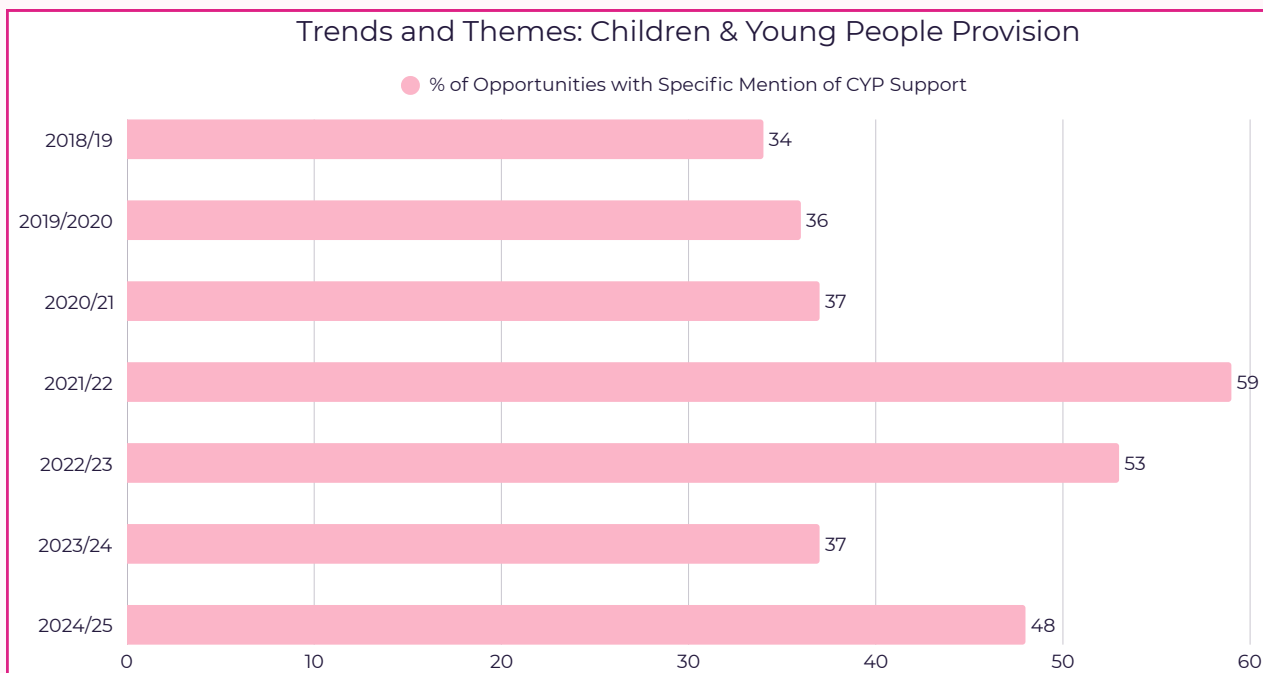
Domestic abuse experienced by people who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth is less well captured in the available data, however existing research indicates significant levels of need. A 2010 Scottish study found that 80% of trans people had experienced domestic abuse from a partner or ex-partner [7], while a 2018 study by Stonewall reported that 28% of British trans people in a relationship have faced domestic abuse from a partner [8]. In light of this and following the April 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling that the terms ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ in the Equality Act 2010 refer solely to biological sex assigned at birth, Refuge have begun tracking the impact of this decision in 2025/26 to better understand how access to services for trans victim/survivors may be affected.

The Violence Against Women and Girls Services: Commissioning Toolkit [9] provides guidance to commissioners to ensure that their services are inclusive and accessible to all genders, while acknowledging the unique experiences and needs of different groups. This approach supports the delivery of comprehensive, safe, and appropriate services to all survivors, regardless of gender.

In practice, commissioning remains more gender-specific within refuge and safe accommodation provision. Statutory guidance for local authorities in England highlights the importance of providing ‘single gender or single sex’ accommodation within refuges and other forms of specialist safe accommodation [10].

In 2024/25, 9% of services were aimed solely at women and their children. There were no opportunities supporting men only, and there were no opportunities released in 2024/25 that required the service to be delivered by male staff.

## Children & Young People - dedicated provision



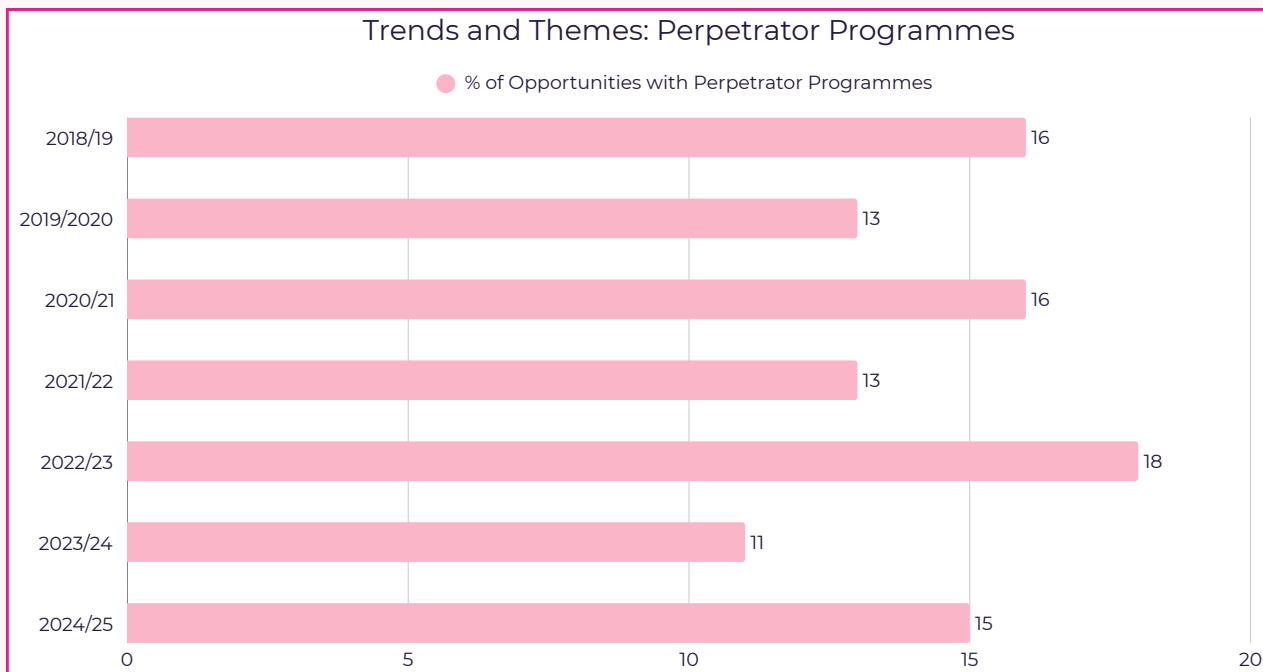
In 2024/25, there were a total of 112 commissioning opportunities, of which 54 (48%) referenced specific support for children. Of the 52 full ITTs issued, 37 (71%) included some form of children’s provision, yet only 18 (49%) specified the type of support offered, with 10 detailing therapeutic services and 8 outlining other forms of support, such as Children’s IDVAs, ISVAs, or support workers.

Comparatively, in 2023/24 there were 171 opportunities, 63 (37%) of which referenced support for children, representing an increase of 11.6% in 2024/25. Of the 84 full ITTs in 2023/24, 45 included support for children, but only 19 specified the type of support (14 therapeutic, 5 other). While the proportion of opportunities referencing children’s support has increased, the number specifying the type of intervention has remained low, with only roughly half of ITTs including children’s provision offering clear detail on the nature of the support sought.

These figures raise important considerations in the context of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which emphasises the need to safeguard children and ensure their welfare is explicitly addressed in commissioning. The relatively low proportion of opportunities specifying the type of children’s support suggests that while recognition of children’s needs is improving, there remains a gap in the clarity and quality of provision. It is also unclear as to whether budgets for services have increased to accommodate additional work with children and young people. Without clear expectations and dedicated funding for children’s provision, there is a risk that children’s support may be inconsistently delivered, insufficiently targeted, or provided at the expense of support for adult survivors, undermining the intention of the Act to provide consistent safeguarding and therapeutic support for children affected by domestic abuse.

### Funding for perpetrator programmes

In 2024/25, 17 opportunities included a perpetrator programme, compared to 19 in the previous year. As a proportion of commissioned activity this represents a modest increase of 4.2%.



Of these, four were standalone perpetrator programmes (23.5%), compared with six (31.6%) the year before. The remaining thirteen opportunities were integrated into outreach provision, including whole-family domestic abuse services. This continued shift towards integrated models is concerning, as organisations without existing perpetrator services are often excluded from bidding unless they can identify a suitable delivery partner. Establishing such partnerships is difficult within short tender timeframes, and potential partners are frequently providers with expertise in other areas such as drug and alcohol support, which are often not Respect accredited. This raises additional concerns around alignment of values – for example, whether domestic abuse is understood as a gendered issue, rather than reduced to substance misuse or other contributory factors.

At a national level, policy development in 2024/25 has signalled an increased emphasis on perpetrator accountability. In January 2025, the government announced a £53 million investment over four years to expand interventions targeting high-risk perpetrators.[11] This funding was given, as a direct award, to the Drive Partnership, without a competitive tendering process. In contrast, victim/survivor services are typically required to secure funding through resource-intensive and highly competitive commissioning or grant processes. The direct award of funding for perpetrator programmes demonstrates that alternative commissioning approaches are both possible and already in use and could be applied more widely to support victim/survivor centred services.

Alongside this, policing initiatives such as Project Bright Light [12] have been launched to prioritise early intervention and offender disruption. These announcements highlight a growing recognition that more needs to be done to hold perpetrators to account and prevent domestic abuse.

However, perpetrator programmes also risk diverting scarce resources away from victim/survivor services, where the need for safe, accessible, inclusive, and specialist support remains critical. A balanced approach is needed to ensure investment in prevention does not come at the expense of victim/survivors' safety and recovery. Continued analysis is needed to monitor this shift, including whether future opportunities will be integrated within broader services or commissioned as standalone programmes, and to assess the potential diversion of funds from victim/survivor support. Commissioners must also consider the impact of new perpetrator programmes on existing services for victims/survivors. For perpetrator programmes to be effective and safe, they must operate in close partnership with specialist victim/survivor services, which require adequate funding to manage increased demand and referrals generated by perpetrator interventions.

Looking ahead to 2025/26, we intend to consider whether perpetrator programme provisions explicitly include a victim/survivor facing element, such as a MATAC IDVA or Women's Safety Officer or equivalent, to reduce risk and ensure safeguarding remains central alongside accountability and prevention efforts.

## TRENDS & THEMES: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The DA Act outlines the need to deliver dedicated specialist support to victim/survivors with certain characteristics, including Black and minoritised victim/survivors, LGBTQ+ victim/survivors, those with multiple disadvantages, those with disabilities, and those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The DA Act recognises the value of ‘by-and-for’ organisations, which are designed and delivered by-and-for people who are minoritised, including D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQ+, Black, Asian and minoritised victim/survivors, and migrant women. ‘By-and-for’ services are rooted in the communities they serve, providing victim/survivors holistic, wrap-around support, that addresses their full range of intersecting needs, delivered by those with a deep understanding of their lived experiences.

A report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that, 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 DA services. [13] As a result, minoritised women are often locked out of support. ‘By-and-for’ services are also far more likely to be delivering support without any dedicated funding or be forced to cease provision altogether due to financial pressures [14]. This echoes findings from our pipeline analysis as Refuge continues to see a distinct lack of commissioning for culturally-specific services by local authorities. While there has been an increase in service specifications mentioning minoritised groups, this has not translated into the commissioning of dedicated specialist provision to meet their distinct needs.

### Culturally specific services

Black and minoritised victim/survivors of DA have historically been considered part of a ‘hidden’ group, meaning they are a group of victim/survivors less well served by the DA support services available in the UK [15]. They may also experience specific forms of domestic abuse, such as forced marriage, so-called ‘honour’-based violence, female genital mutilation, and other harmful practices.

Victim/survivors from minoritised ethnic groups have diverse needs and face specific barriers to support, for example:

- Language barriers
- Insecure immigration status
- No recourse to public funds
- So-called ‘honour’-based abuse
- Institutional racism

Many Black and minoritised victim/survivors face significant barriers to accessing mainstream domestic abuse services and often prefer to engage with specialist ‘by-and-for’ support, where available, to meet their needs [16]. The absence of sustainable funding for these services, which are best placed to deliver culturally competent and effective support, remains stark.

To help address these barriers, Refuge provides several culturally adapted services (Refuge is a specialist service provider, rather than a ‘by-and-for’ provider), including accommodation and outreach services for South Asian women, advocacy services for Eastern European women and specialist Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Outreach Workers.

However, this provision exists within a wider commissioning context where culturally specific support is not consistently prioritised. Our analysis below shows that, although support for Black and minoritised women is mentioned in 23 commissioning opportunities in 2024/25, only a relatively small number of commissioners included this as a specific requirement. Of these, just five opportunities were for a dedicated service for particular ethnic groups. This suggests that, while the value and importance of culturally specific services is recognised in some distinct localities, it is not yet consistently embedded in commissioning practice.

<b>Support for Black and Minoritised Women</b>	<b>2018/19</b> 115 Opportunities	<b>2019/20</b> 80 Opportunities	<b>2020/21</b> 97 Opportunities	<b>2021/22</b> 144 Opportunities	<b>2022/23</b> 172 Opportunities	<b>2023/24</b> 171 Opportunities	<b>2024/25</b> 112 Opportunities
Mention within the specification	21 (18%)	13 (14%)	17 (18%)	43 (30%)	51 (30%)	35 (20%)	23 (21%)
Specific requirement (specialist workers and/or specific service)	13 (11%)	9 (7%)	6 (6%)	9 (6%)	9 (5%)	12 (7%)	10 (9%)

### **LGBTQ+ victim/survivors of domestic abuse**

There are a limited number of LGBTQ+ services in the UK, the majority of which are based in London. On average LGBTQ+ services are small, often consisting of one or two paid staff members, and frequently operating beyond their geographical remit and their capacity in order to meet demand [17].

Challenges for provision also include:

- A Lack of emergency accommodation and housing services for LGBTQ+ victim/survivors
- Inconsistency in how mainstream DA and VAWG services embed LGBTQ+ inclusion – services delivering LGBTQ+ support are less likely to adopt key indicators of inclusion, particularly those relevant to trans and non-binary service users [18]. VAWG and domestic abuse organisations providing a specialist LGBTQ+ service are less likely to adopt key indicators for LGBTQ+ inclusion relevant to the needs of nonbinary and/or trans+ service users.

Our analysis below reflects these gaps. While support for LGBTQ+ victim/survivors was mentioned in the specifications of 25 commissioning opportunities in 2024/25, only 10 included a specific requirement – eight for specialist workers and just two for a dedicated service.

Support for LGBTQ+ Victim/survivors	2018/19 115 Opportunities	2019/20 80 Opportunities	2020/21 97 Opportunities	2021/22 144 Opportunities	2022/23 172 Opportunities	2023/24 171 Opportunities	2024/25 112 Opportunities
Mention within the specification	17 (15%)	10 (13%)	20 (21%)	35 (24%)	55 (32%)	51 (30%)	25 (22%)
Specific requirement (specialist workers and/or specific service)	8 (7%)	0	0	1	5 (3%)	2 (1%)	10 (9%)

Specialist accommodation remains particularly limited and very few accommodation-based services for LGBTQ+ victim/survivors are being commissioned by local authorities [19]. To date, there is only one specialist refuge that supports trans and nonbinary victim/survivors of DA, provided by the organisation Loving Me. In response to these gaps, more councils are offering a dispersed model of accommodation, which can reduce barriers for LGBTQ+ victim/survivors accessing emergency accommodation. For example, in Refuge’s Warwickshire Service over 30 units of self-contained accommodation are now available for victim/survivors, alongside tailored wrap-around support from specialist domestic abuse workers.

## Disability

Victim/survivors with disabilities are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse as those without disabilities [20] , and often face specific barriers to accessing support or fleeing abuse, including:

- Dependence on the perpetrator, who may also be their carer
- Existing care packages that would be disrupted if they fled
- The need for adapted accommodation and accessible services
- Fear of not being believed or heard by services, particularly for those with cognitive impairments or learning disabilities

Our analysis of commissioning specifications in 2024/25 shows that support for disabled victim/survivors was mentioned in 38 opportunities, however, only 8 required specialist support, and none mandated dedicated services. This indicates that disability remains an afterthought in commissioning, despite significant need.

Failure to embed accessibility can increase risk, prevent timely access to services, and exacerbate trauma. Commissioning practices must ensure that disabled victim/survivors can access safe, inclusive, and responsive services, in line with the Equality Act 2010. This includes accessible accommodation, communication support, and staff trained in disability-informed safeguarding.

To break some of these barriers Refuge has adapted several of its services to better meet disabled victim/survivors needs:

## TRENDS & THEMES: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- Refuge properties with wheelchair-accessible spaces, silent/vibrating fire alarms, and light-up doorbells
- BSL interpretation for hearing-impaired survivors via SignHealth, plus large print and easy-read materials
- Accessible support through the National Domestic Abuse Helpline with BSL interpretation

Embedding accessibility from the commissioning stage ensures that services can deliver safe, equitable, and effective support to disabled victim/survivors, rather than relying on providers to retrofit adaptations after contracts are awarded. Commissioners should treat disability inclusion as core to service provision, not an optional addition.

<b>Support for LGBTQ+ Victim/survivors</b>	<b>2024/25 112 Opportunities</b>
Mention within the specification	39 (35%)
Specific requirement (specialist workers and/or specific service)	8 (7%)

### Women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

Victims/survivors of domestic abuse with insecure immigration status, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), face significant barriers to accessing the support and protection they need. NRPF status often prevents access to refuge and other safe accommodation.[21] Many victim/survivors are financially dependent on the perpetrator and fear that they cannot support themselves and their children independently. Fear of data sharing with immigration enforcement also discourages reporting abuse to police or public services, and in turn, perpetrators frequently exploit insecure immigration status as a tool for coercive control, further entrenching risk [22].

Dedicated funding for specialist services is essential to provide long-term, consistent support to victim/survivors, enabling them to access safe accommodation, maintain safety, and navigate complex and lengthy immigration processes.

Our analysis of commissioning opportunities in 2024/25 shows that only 15 opportunities referenced support for victim/survivors with NRPF, a 59% decrease from the previous year, and of these, just nine included a specific requirement for specialist support. This highlights a concerning trend- despite clear need, support for this highly vulnerable group remains under-prioritised in commissioning.

<b>Support for Victim/Survivors with NRPF</b>	<b>2018/19</b> <b>115</b> Opportunities	<b>2019/20</b> <b>80</b> Opportunities	<b>2020/21</b> <b>97</b> Opportunities	<b>2021/22</b> <b>144</b> Opportunities	<b>2022/23</b> <b>172</b> Opportunities	<b>2023/24</b> <b>171</b> Opportunities	<b>2024/25</b> <b>112</b> Opportunities
Mention within the specification	12 (10%)	12 (15%)	11 (11%)	33 (23%)	30 (17%)	37 (22%)	15 (13%)
Specific requirement (specialist workers and/or specific service)	4 (3%)	2 (3%)	2 (2%)	2 (1.5%)	0	1 (0.6%)	9 (8%)

Refuge addresses some of these barriers through targeted interventions including our GLA funded Removing Barriers Fund. This fund offers enhanced support for victim/survivors facing additional barriers, covering translation costs, transport to safe accommodation, specialist immigration support and access to solicitors and specialist counselling.

However, the decline in commissioned opportunities and specific requirements for NRPF or insecure-status victim/survivors highlights gaps in current funding and commissioning practices, risking exclusion from statutory support. Commissioners must ensure contracts and service specifications enable access to safe, culturally competent, and legally informed support for all survivors.

## KEY FINDINGS IN COMMISSIONING TRENDS

- **Commissioning activity:** 2024/25 saw a notable reduction in commissioning activity. Most services were commissioned by Local Authorities (76.6%) and PCCs, although commissioning by other government bodies, such as the GLA/MOPAC, has been rising since 2022/23. We have seen a rise in the commissioning of one-year grants from local authorities and government bodies. There continues to be little activity from health services.
- **Services commissioned:** Accommodation-based services dropped significantly in 2024/25, however the proportion of advocacy and outreach services remained relatively stable. Demand increased in limited areas: technology-facilitated abuse support, ISVAs, consultancy/research, and requirements for volunteers rose from 4.7% in 23/24 to 12.5%.
- **Perpetrator programmes:** Commissioning of perpetrator programmes increased, as a proportion of commissioning activity, in 24/25, and a direct award for extensive funding (£53 million) the Drive Partnership has been announced by the Home Office in Q2 2025/26. Thirteen of the perpetrator services commissioned in 2024/25 were commissioned as part of a wider service, meaning that specialist providers who do not currently deliver perpetrator services (or do not wish to) would need to form partnerships to deliver this element of the service.
- **Target gender:** Of the opportunities reviewed, 62.5% (75.4% in 2023/24) required provision of services to support all genders. These opportunities were either community-based services, or refuges with dispersed accommodation. The need for women-only refuge provision, as enshrined in the Part IV Safe Accommodation duty, is clearly recognised by commissioners, however specialist services for trans and non-binary victim/survivors is severely lacking, with 0 opportunities exclusively for trans and non-binary victim/survivors. Ten opportunities included specific support for LGBTQ+ people.
- **Services for children:** As of April 2021, children are now regarded as victim/survivors of DA in their own right, which is a welcome development. In 2024/25, 54 opportunities mentioned support for children and young people, of these 18 opportunities required specific support for children, however it is difficult to identify whether this is being met with a proportionate increase in funding.
- **Dispersed accommodation units:** Dispersed accommodation requirements have almost halved, to 16, compared to 30 in the previous year. This is the lowest number since 2020/21 and could be, in part, due to a peak in commissioning due to the DA Act in 2021-2024. Dispersed accommodation allows for expanded accessibility for men and GBTQ+ people. We will consider the impact on access to accommodation-based services for men and GBTQ+ people against commissioning patterns for dispersed accommodation within our commissioning report further in 2025/26.
- **Contract length:** The prevalence of short-term contracts (one year or less) has decreased from a previous high in 23/24 (41 contracts in 2023/24; 26 in 2024/25), although as a proportion of commissioning activity the percentage remains relatively stable, at 23%.

- **Culturally-specific services:** Only 9% of services commissioned in 2024/25 contained the requirement for a culturally-specific post or specific service to support Black and minoritised victim/survivors. This is a slight rise from 7% in 23/24, but culturally-specific services continue to be under-resourced.
- **LGBTQ+ services:** Despite 24 mentions of the need to provide specialist support to LGBTQ+ victim/survivors of DA, only 10 opportunities in 2024/25 had a requirement for a specialist worker or specific service dedicated to supporting victim/survivors from this community in their specifications.
- **Disabled victim/survivors:** Victim/survivors with disabilities are twice as likely to experience DA as those without disabilities [23] therefore commissioners need to ensure adequate funding is available to provide accessible services. In 24/25 only eight opportunities (7%) required specific support for disabled victim/survivors, however this represented a huge increase from one (0.6% of opportunities) in 23/24.
- **NRPF:** Despite consistent feedback from the VAWG sector about the need for NRPF provision, there was a 59% decrease from the previous year in the number of opportunities where support for victim/survivors with NRPF was mentioned in the service specification. Of these, only nine included a specific requirement to support victim/survivors with NRPF.

## COMMISSIONING: BEST PRACTICE AND LEARNINGS

In this section, we will provide commentary and real-life examples of commissioning practice observed in 2024/25. To evidence best practice we will share example of strong commissioning and how it effectively supports victim/survivors' needs. We will also highlight examples of poor commissioning practice where approaches fail to adequately support women and children.

By addressing and highlighting best practice alongside key sector challenges, we have built on previous years' work to continue to develop a core set of recommendations aimed at ensuring DA and VAWG services are commissioned to a high and safe standard, enabling women and children to live free from violence and fear. This section covers:

- Examples of best practice
- Unsafe support models
- Perpetrator programme within core contract
- Unrealistic premises requirements
- Poor commissioning practice
- Short-term funding
- Insufficient funding
- Price versus Quality
- Exclusion of smaller providers
- Additional barriers faced by specialist 'by-and-for' organisations

There were numerous examples of best practice in 2024/25, where commissioners listened to specialist recommendations and incorporated them into their specification. The following case study has been selected as good practice as it illustrates how collaborative commissioning, grounded in local need and informed by specialist expertise, can lead to more effective and sustainable service design.

### CASE STUDY: Positive Practice

In February 2024, Council A, in the South of England, released a tender through an open process to commission a new Housing Advocacy Service. The Service was an evolution of a previous pilot, requiring Housing Advocates to co-locate across district housing teams, focusing on housing needs for victim/survivors across risk levels, and working in collaboration with existing DA services. The service specification was in line with DAHA and Whole Housing models, based on local needs assessments, and firmly centred victim/survivor wishes and needs.

Council A consulted with stakeholders prior to ITT publication; however, the specification required a 24/7 service, and the budget envelope did not support the minimum stated posts. Despite this, Council A collaborated with bidders and awarded the contract to an existing local specialist, having been willing to flex the specification based on evidence of need. Additional funding was later found to raise the contract value and provide additional coverage in the county.

It is encouraging to see commissioners firmly centre victim/survivor needs and wishes in a meaningful way and to work collaboratively with local specialist to create sustainable and effective delivery.

### Unsafe support models

In 2024/25, Refuge identified the following three opportunities assessed as having an unsafe support model. The funding envelope for all these services was not sufficient to provide a safe and sustainable service model or meet the requirements of the specification.

- Council B commissioned a borough-wide IDVA service with a low annual budget which was insufficient to fund management support for the number of IDVAs required. The specification also required for IDVAs to carry a caseload above SafeLives guidance of 25-30 cases at any given time. This is unsafe for service users and unsustainable for staff as it does not support safeguarding, staff supervision, and staff wellbeing.
- Council C issued a tender for a countywide Outreach Service to work with domestic abuse victim/survivors of all genders and across risk levels. At the time, the local IDVA service was undergoing a restructure and reduction in size and there was a stated expectation that the IDVA Service could signpost to the Outreach Service. The anticipated number of service users in the specification appeared to underestimate population need, especially when considering the additional cases likely to be passed on from the local IDVA service. Additionally, the budget envelope did not support safe staffing, particularly for mobile outreach and did not align with SafeLives guidelines regarding safe caseloads.
- Council D released a tender for a community-based VAWG service. Included within the specification was a requirement to design and implement new risk assessments and perpetrator interventions for all forms of VAWG. Establishing safe, effective risk assessments and perpetrator interventions is a lengthy and detailed process requiring extensive funding, specific in-depth research and analysis skills, and access to large data sets with which to build an evidence base. This was not recognised by the specification or reflected in the budget envelope. If such work was to be commissioned at borough council level, this work should be tendered as a separate lot from service delivery to recognise the academic expertise required. It should also be appropriately funded over multiple years in order to ensure safe and effective outcomes.

### Perpetrator programmes commissioned as part of core contracts

Integrating perpetrator programmes within broader domestic abuse services can create barriers for specialist DA organisations, as distinct expertise is required to manage the different needs of victim/survivors and of perpetrators. Many specialist domestic abuse organisations are unable to deliver perpetrator services independently due to the specific training, accreditation (e.g., Respect standards), and experience required to deliver behaviour change interventions. As many specialist providers are gender-informed, feminist organisations focused exclusively on supporting victim/survivors, they do not work with perpetrators, in order to both maintain victim/survivor safety and to avoid conflicts of interests and values. Consequently, specialist providers often need to form partnerships or consortia to bid for integrated contracts. While partnership models can facilitate comprehensive service delivery, they also introduce challenges, including:

- **Complex accountability arrangements**, where responsibilities for safeguarding, risk management, and operational decisions may be unclear between partners
- **Capacity and resourcing issues**, as smaller specialist providers may be subordinated to larger lead organisations, potentially limiting their influence or the quality of victim-focused provision
- **Barriers to entry**, as smaller specialist organisations may be unable to participate unless partnered, reducing competition and potentially excluding providers with deep expertise in trauma-informed care
- **Misalignment of values**, where providers of perpetrator programmes may not fully understand domestic abuse as a gendered issue, which can compromise service approaches and outcomes for victim/survivors

Including perpetrator services within the same contract as victim/survivors support can also divert resources away from specialist services for victim/survivors and their children. Commissioning these as separate lots or contracts – while ensuring perpetrator programmes are complemented by dedicated funding for associated victim/survivor support, in line with the *Standards for Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Interventions* [24]- can help ensure that both victim/survivor services and perpetrator interventions are adequately resourced, specialist-led, and delivered safely.

### CASE STUDY: Poor practice

In 2024/25, Council E commissioned a domestic abuse service to deliver a whole-system response. This included supporting victim/survivors and children and young people affected by domestic abuse, providing specialist behaviour-change interventions for perpetrators, and coordinating services across whole families. The entire model was to be delivered by a single provider.

Although the intention was to create a comprehensive, integrated offer, the approach demonstrates poor commissioning practice. Placing responsibility for victim/survivor support, children's services, and perpetrator interventions within one contract—and under one organisation—creates significant safeguarding risks. Expecting a single provider to deliver both survivor support and behaviour-change work for perpetrators can compromise survivor safety, create inherent conflicts of interest, and undermine the independence that is crucial for trauma-informed practice.

This example illustrates why perpetrator programmes and victim/survivor services must be commissioned separately. Separate commissioning ensures each service can operate with the specialist expertise, independence, and accountability required to protect survivors and deliver safe, effective interventions.

## Unrealistic premises requirements

In 2024/25, Refuge evaluated two refuge service opportunities in which none of the existing properties were made available to the new provider. This represents two out of 26 accommodation-based services (7%), compared to six out of 51 (11%) in 2023/24. While this indicates a slight proportional improvement, it highlights an ongoing commissioning challenge; expectations placed on providers to source new refuge accommodation without sufficient time, funding, or market consideration.

Securing premises takes significant time and resource, particularly in larger cities like London, where the housing crisis continues to drive up property and rental prices. In 2024, tenants in England spent an average of 36.3% of their income on rent in 2024 – up from 34.2% in 2023 – and London remains the least affordable region at 41.6% [25].

Commissioning approaches that do not include access to existing properties- or fail to account for the time and cost required to secure new premises- risk creating unrealistic and unviable service models. The substantial costs associated with establishing a new refuge, including property acquisition, refurbishment, and compliance with safety standards, are rarely reflected in funding envelopes or mobilisation periods. Commissioners must ensure that accommodation-based services are designed with a realistic understanding of the housing market, with appropriate funding, timelines, and consideration of existing assets built into commissioning process.

### CASE STUDY: Poor Practice

Council F, in South East England recommissioned their domestic abuse accommodation service with the aim of expanding provision and improving accessibility. The contract included the transfer of 37 units across four buildings, with capacity to support up to 50 children. In addition, the provider was required to source 18 units within three months, bringing the total to 55 units. These units were expected to accommodate both single individuals and families, using either a dispersed or single-location model. Within six months, the provider was also expected to ensure that at least two units could accommodate pets and that reasonable adjustments were made to support individuals with sensory impairments. Whilst positive provisions, the budget allocated did not reflect the actual condition of the available premises, many of which required investment to meet safety, accessibility, and service delivery standards.

This case highlights the disconnect between commissioning expectations and the practical realities of property sourcing and service mobilisation. The scale and pace of property sourcing required, combined with limited capital investment, can disadvantage specialist DA and VAWG providers who are best placed to deliver holistic, trauma-informed support to victim/survivors. These organisations, however, often lack the property portfolios or financial reserves of larger, generic housing providers, who may be better positioned to meet accommodation targets but are less equipped to deliver the specialist care and safeguarding required. As a result, commissioning practices that prioritise rapid expansion without adequate infrastructure or funding risk pushing out specialist providers and undermining the quality and appropriateness of support available to those who need it.

## Short-term Funding

In 2024/25, there were 17 contracts of 12 months or less. Short contracts create instability for both service providers and victim/survivors. A significant proportion of the early stages of a contract is spent on mobilisation, with services taking on average 3-6 months to become established. This limits the time available for services to be embedded within communities and to build meaningful partnerships before being recommissioned or decommissioned. The VAWG sector also continues to face recruitment and retention challenges, which are further exacerbated by the need to recruit staff for short or fixed-term contracts. Short-term contracts can also have a detrimental impact on victim/survivors. Just as services becomes embedded, known, and trusted within an area, they may come to an end, requiring victim/survivors to seek alternative support. This disruption can be unsettling and, in some cases, retraumatising during an already challenging period in their lives.

### CASE STUDY: Poor Practice

Council G, in the West Midlands, released a tender in January 2025, for the provision of a Domestic Abuse Specialist Community Support Service. The service was to provide, free, independent, flexible, time-limited support to victim/survivors of DA, while working in partnership with other local providers.

The contract was for a period of one-year, with no option to extend. This timeframe provides very limited opportunity for the service to become established as it can take 1-2 years for services to become fully embedded within a local area and build effective partnerships links. A one-year contract risks the service ending before it is fully operational, disruption support for victim/survivors and requiring them to seek alternative provision.

Alongside short-term contracts, an emerging trend in 2024/25 was the commissioning of multi-year services without secured funding for the length of the contract period, with continuation dependent on annual MHCLG New Burdens settlements. This creates precarious service models, generating insecurity for providers, staff, and service users, and undermining the continuity, resourcing, and delivery needed to fully meet local demand.

### CASE STUDY: Concerning practice

Council H, in the West Midlands commissioned a community-based domestic abuse service funded through MHCLG allocations within the council's annual settlement. The initial contract term was set at 11 months, with the option to extend for a further 12 months, dependent on annual grant funding being confirmed.

The reliance on short-term, annually confirmed funding creates ongoing uncertainty, undermining service stability and limiting the ability of providers to plan, invest, and sustain delivery. This includes reduced capacity to secure additional grant funding to enhance service delivery and support innovation, as often requested by Commissioners.

There was, however, also some examples of positive commissioning practice.

### **CASE STUDY:** Positive Practice

In December 2024, Council I in North London released a tender for domestic abuse and VAWG support services, structured across seven specialist lots. These included refuge accommodation, community-based services, provision for ethnically minoritised and LGBTQIA+ communities, support for children and young people, MARAC coordination, and IRIS delivery within GP practices.

Each lot was commissioned for a period of six years. This longer-term approach enables services to become fully embedded within communities, supports the development of strong partnerships, and provides stability for both staff and victim/survivors. It represents a more sustainable model of commissioning, aligned with the delivery of high-quality, specialist support.

### **Insufficient funding**

For well over a decade, specialist DA and VAWG services have been seriously impacted by a lack of funding. Local authorities, police and crime commissioners, and other statutory funders have implemented a wide range of 'efficiency savings' and continue to seek 'more for less' through competitive commissioning. This is reflected in a growing mismatch between available funding and the level of demand and service provision required, with sector evidence, including reports from Women's Aid Federation of England, highlighting ongoing funding shortfalls, rising demand, and services being forced to subsidise provision or turn victim/survivors away. For example, in 2022/23 nearly two-thirds of referrals to refuge services were declined, primarily due to lack of capacity [26]. Refuge, like other specialist providers, had subsidised services from its own reserves for many years. This has become increasingly unsustainable, particularly amid rising energy costs and other inflationary pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis.

Smaller, especially 'by-and-for' specialist providers are particularly vulnerable, as they may lack the capacity and resources to generate sufficient levels of fundraised income to subsidise contracts. It is important that commissioners understand the need for full cost recovery. Building appropriate costs into budgets ensures specialist organisations are adequately resourced for the time and knowledge they need to commit to secure engagement and deliver equitable, inclusive, and high-quality services.

Funding for local VAWG services is largely stagnant, with many contracts rolling over without adjustments. As a result, services are often operating on outdated budgets, propped up by injections of grant funding through Tier One authorities. At the same time, specialist DA organisations are struggling to meet rising costs driven by the cost-of-living crisis, increased employer National Insurance contributions, and significant hikes in utility bills. Many organisations are reaching deeper into reserves or having to reduce the scope of their services to survive. Despite these pressures, appropriate uplifts that reflect the true cost of service delivery are not consistently applied, partly due to financial constraints on local authorities, including obligations under Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act.

There are very few commissioners who support full cost recovery. Commissioning models based on price evaluation immediately prioritise large-scale organisations with cheaper salaries and economies of scale. At the very least, contracts should provide funding for safe staff/client ratios relative to unmet demand and robust management structures, alongside the rising costs of running these services. If digital solutions are specified, these should also be funded, to ensure they are safe for victim/survivors to use.

Since the Procurement Act 2023 came into effect in February 2025, however, a shift is being encouraged towards Most Advantageous Tender, and away from Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT) under previous legislation. This encourages commissioning authorities to focus on quality when awarding funding, as well as the utilisation of more flexible competitive award procedures. We will continue to monitor implications from the Procurement Act, alongside alternative commissioning processes, in 2025/26.

### CASE STUDY: Poor Practice

Council J released a tender for an accommodation and community-based service in London, with pricing weighted at 45% of the overall score. Weighting price above 30% represents poor practice, as it places greater emphasis on cost than on the quality and safety of the service. The financial envelope for the contract also failed to take into account increases in the London Living Wage, tax thresholds, and employers' National Insurance contributions.

Even with additional funding streams (DASA and Sanctuary), the overall budget did not fully cover the cost of the existing staffing model and resulted in a reduction in staff capacity. In addition, bidders were required to explain how they would mitigate the impact on service delivery if the additional funding streams were not confirmed after the first year, and to identify alternative sources of grant funding to meet the requirements of the service specification.

Such insufficient contracts and funding gaps leave domestic abuse services reliant on short-term arrangements to fill financial shortfalls. This contributes to instability in provision and creates a postcode lottery of support for victim/survivors across the country.

### Poor commissioning practice

A variety of funding methods are available for commissioners, which can support targeted and skilled provision to meet community needs, and enable fairer access to contracts for smaller specialist and by-and-for organisations [26]. Despite options such as grants, direct awards, and reserved contracts for public benefit providers, competitive procurement continues to be favoured for the vast majority of contracts. Commissioners could consider investment in the wider ecosystem of specialist services to better meet needs of victim/survivors and the workforce, alike.

### CASE STUDY: Concerning practice

Council K published a tender for a community-based VAWG service through a multi-stage procurement process. While this process was intended to encourage efficiency and collaboration, the multiple submission stages and dialogue meetings proved highly resource-intensive over a four-month period. Repeated rounds of dialogue and submission can create intense competition between bidders, driving down standards and price, while also requiring significant time and labour from providers. This level of competitive pressure can ultimately incentivise organisations to reduce quality or cut essential costs in order to remain competitive.

While collaborative commissioning practices should be encouraged, commissioners should remain mindful of creating unnecessary burdens on providers and of the risk that overly complex processes may inadvertently drive down standards. Commissioning practices can also create inherent power imbalances between commissioners and providers, limiting providers' ability to challenge unrealistic requirements or timelines.

This is further compounded by shifting or extended commissioning timescales, which hinder effective planning and contribute to uncertainty for both organisations and staff. These conditions place additional strain on a workforce already under pressure. The VAWG sector has seen many skilled staff leaving the sector since 2020 and has faced subsequent recruitment challenges, with 78% of specialist services struggling to recruit at the salaries they can pay and this rising to 92% for 'by-and-for' Black and minoritised women's services. When service contracts come to an end, frontline staff frequently seek alternative employment (with 67% of specialist organisations losing staff to higher-paid roles or because they could no longer afford to stay) [27], regardless of whether the service continues or not. The greater the insecurity surrounding a service, the more likely staff are to leave the service early, compounding workforce challenges across the sector.

Recognising this, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) highlighted the importance of building sector resilience within its 2022-25 VAWG Strategy [28]. In this context, if commissioners wish for skilled and experienced frontline staff to deliver work in their areas, greater consideration should be given to the wellbeing and resilience of staff, and the financial health of the charities that employ and support them.

**CASE STUDY:** Poor Practice

London-based Council L commissioned a combined VAWG community-based and accommodation-based service. The contract was awarded more than two months after the award date stated in the ITT, despite numerous requests for updates. Despite this delay, the new service was still expected to commence within three weeks of the award letter finally being issued.

Although the Council reserves the right to amend the procurement timetable, the lack of timely communication and transparency left the provider with an extremely limited window to begin implementation. This included staff consultations and potential redundancies, processes that can take up to three months. As a result, services are placed at risk of accruing significant overspend, as the new contract does not cover the costs of posts that must be retained during consultation periods. This also leaves staff uncertain and at risk during periods of organisational change. Commissioners should make every effort to ensure that timescales and deadlines are fully agreed before the ITT is released. Where amendments are unavoidable, it is imperative that they are communicated promptly and that timelines are adjusted accordingly to avoid destabilising essential VAWG provision.

**Price versus Quality**

A comparison of tender evaluation weightings between 2023/24 and 2024/25 indicates a noticeable shift in commissioning priorities

Price Weighting	2023/2024 (84 ITTs)	2024/25 (52 ITTs)
0%	10.7%(9)	21.2% (11)
0-10%	5.9% (5)	0% (0)
10-30%	46.4% (39)	40.4% (21)
30-40%	3.6% (3)	17.3% (9)
40-50%	9.5% (8)	9.6% (5)
50-60%	2.4% (2)	1.9% (1)
60%+	1.2% (1)	0% (0)
Pass/Fail	1.2% (1)	0% (0)
Unknown/Unrecorded	19% (16)	9.6% (5)

## COMMISSIONING: Best Practice and Learnings

In 2023/24, pricing carried considerable weight in many opportunities. Of the 84 ITTs with scoring data, nearly half (46.4%) placed price between 10-30%, and 13.1% weighted price at 40% or above, including one instance at 60%. Only 10.7% of opportunities gave zero weighting to price, while 19% were unrecorded or unknown.

In 2024/25 (52 ITTs), the pattern shifted towards a more balanced approach. Opportunities with 0% price weighting increased to 21.2%, indicating more tenders prioritising quality over cost. The majority of tenders clustered at moderate levels: 40.4% weighted price between 10-30%, and 17.3% between 30-40%. Only 11.5% of tenders allocated price weighting of 40% or above, with just one opportunity at 50%, and none exceeding this.

These changes suggest that commissioners are placing greater emphasis on quality and outcomes, while still maintaining some consideration of price. Refuge's position is that best practice in commissioning should place the greatest emphasis on quality, keeping price weightings as low as possible and generally below 40%. Excessive focus on price can encourage providers to adopt under-staffed, non-specialist models that are less able to deliver safe, effective, trauma-informed support, placing victim/survivors at greater risk. Maintaining quality as the central factor in tender evaluation supports both effective service delivery and the safeguarding of those accessing support.

### CASE STUDY: Poor practice

In 2024/25, Council M in the East of England published an ITT for a service specifically supporting children experiencing domestic abuse, providing enhanced emotional and therapeutic services for victims aged 7-18. The commissioning of such services is encouraging in light of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which emphasise the need of tailored support for children affected by domestic abuse. However, the tender evaluation allocated a price weighting of 50%, which is alarmingly high for a service aimed at highly vulnerable children. In this context, we would expect a much greater emphasis on quality, including trauma-informed practice, specialist staffing, comprehensive safeguarding measures, and programmes that address the complex emotional and developmental needs of children. High price weighting risks prioritising lower cost-providers who may lack the expertise or capacity to deliver safe and effective services, potentially compromising both outcomes and safety for the children accessing support.

There were, however, also examples of good evaluation practice in 2024/25. Eight opportunities applied a 100% quality weighting, with a further four opportunities weighting quality at 90% and another four at 85%. These high-quality evaluations provide a benchmark for best practice and reinforce the importance of maintaining quality-led commissioning.

However, in one instance, a commissioner awarded a 100% quality score for a submission that included two questions relating to value for money. This approach effectively repackaged price considerations as quality, despite the tender being presented as fully quality based. Such practices can be misleading. They risk inflating 'quality' scores and reduce transparency, undermining both the credibility of the evaluation process and the principles promoted by the Procurement Act 2023. True quality-led commissioning requires a separation between quality and price to ensure that high scores accurately reflect high-quality, safe, and effective service delivery. Refuge will continue to monitor how commissioning practices evolve in responses to the Act and the extent to which its principles are reflected in implementation. 41

### Exclusion of smaller providers

Larger non-specialist providers and housing associations often have several advantages that allow them to distribute costs more effectively, making them appear better value for money in the tender process:

- **Economies of scale:** Larger providers can benefit from bulk purchasing and negotiating better deals with suppliers, reducing the cost per unit for materials and services.
- **Resource allocation:** They have more resources to allocate towards specialised staff and technology, improving efficiency and reducing overhead costs.
- **Risk management:** With a larger portfolio, large providers can spread risks across more projects, which can lead to lower insurance and financing costs.
- **Operational efficiency:** Larger organisations often have more streamlined processes and management practices, which can lead to cost savings.
- **Access to Funding:** They typically have better access to funding and can secure loans at more favourable rates due to their size and stability.

#### CASE STUDY: Poor practice

Council N held a Market Engagement event for an upcoming tender to pilot an early-intervention whole-family service.

To qualify, bidders were required to complete a two-part pricing schedule. The first section was a budget for the £100,000 initial “design and development” envelope. The second section requested an “in-kind financial contribution to be provided by your organisation at no cost to the Council.” The Council also stated that “no guideline values will be provided,” and there was no financial limit for Section Two.

This requirement inevitably disadvantages smaller specialist providers and favours larger, non-specialist organisations that are more likely to have the financial capacity to offer a substantial in-kind contribution. When this concern was raised at the Market Engagement event, the commissioner’s response was that the model could be delivered through a partnership—where one partner brings specialist DA expertise and the other contributes the financial resources, potentially a non-specialist or corporate partner

These factors collectively enable larger providers and housing associations to offer more competitive bids in the tender process and can be viewed as giving better value for money.

In contrast, smaller, specialist ‘by-and-for’ organisations face additional barriers to successfully securing funding for their services. They often do not have dedicated resource to write bids, and are faced with challenges that prevent them from accessing sustained local funding, including:

- Competition with large organisations and other specialists for a limited pool of funding
- Short turnaround time for tenders
- Overly complex and time intensive bidding processes
- Requirements for a single provider

- Stringent accreditation requirements, including environmental and technological requirements
- Vulnerability to irregular and short-term funding cycles
- Minimum yearly turnover requirements
- Small and insufficient budgets
- Rising service pressures without equivalent growth in funding
- Increasing need for highly specialised expertise (e.g. immigration advice, trauma-informed support, and culturally informed advocacy)
- Social value required as added value

As a result, many organisations are at risk of becoming financially and operationally unsustainable, which threatens the availability of specialist provision for minoritised women across England.

### CASE STUDY: Poor practice

In 2024/25, a Tier One authority recommissioned a large community-based domestic abuse service. As part of this process, the authority decided to end a complementary contract—also funded by the same authority—which had been delivered by a group of smaller specialist providers and ‘by-and-for’ organisations. The delivery of this specialist work was absorbed into the larger, generic contract, forcing the smaller organisations to choose between losing a significant proportion of their income or partnering with the large generic provider delivering the remaining contract whose values and approach did not necessarily align with their own standards of practice.

This approach devalued the knowledge, skills, and grassroots expertise of smaller specialists and ‘by-and-fors’, and increased dependency on larger, generic organisations with greater relative power and more secure access to funding. It also risked damaging trust between organisations, commissioners, and the communities served. This example highlights the sustainability challenges faced by smaller organisations, and the threat posed to the delivery of highly specialised and culturally specific work within communities when commissioning structures consolidate provision into larger generic contracts.

Refuge encourages commissioners to adhere to the VAWG commissioning toolkit by recognising the value of smaller specialist organisations and removing as many barriers as possible that may exclude them from commissioning processes. Commissioners should take a strategic, long-term approach to meeting local and regional needs of victim/survivors, investing in an ecosystem of specialist providers best placed to deliver high-quality support. Nurturing relationships with and the work of ‘by-and-for’ and specialist organisations is critical to sustaining culturally competent and culturally specific support for minoritised victim/survivors, those experiencing multiple disadvantage, and their children for years to come.

Where competitive processes must be used, Refuge encourages commissioners to recognise the value of partnership bids for complex, multi-element specifications and ensure that the full costs of partnership delivery are reflected in funding. Where partnerships are required, adequate time should also be provided between the release of invitations to tender and submission deadlines to enable time to form sustainable partnerships with other specialist and ‘by-and-for’ organisations to deliver the service.

Refuge also recommends greater diversity in commissioning approaches across the domestic abuse funding landscape. This should include a mix of direct awards, competitive commissioning, and the introduction of medium-term grant funding (three to five years) to increase access opportunities for specialist domestic abuse and 'by-and-for' organisations. Commissioners are also encouraged to draw on the Women's Aid Alternative to Procurement: Guidance for Commissioners [29], which sets out more flexible and proportionate approaches to commissioning specialist VAWG services. As domestic abuse services can fall within the Light Touch Regime (LTR), which applies procurement threshold of £663,540, commissioners have flexibility to avoid overly complex processes, reduce barriers to entry, and support capacity-building within the specialist sector [30].

Lastly, given the increasing specification and compliance requirements relating to training, digital, social value and environmental requirements in commissioning in 2023/24 and 2024/25, commissioners should adopt a balanced and realistic approach to ensure these do not create unintended barriers for specialist and 'by-and-for' organisations seeking to deliver vital services.

### The ongoing impact of Social Value

Specialist domestic abuse charities are centred upon providing services to people in their localities and communities, meaning that their core service delivery represents inherent social value. Since the Public Services (Social Value) Act came into force in 2013, commissioners have been required to consider social value in procurement. Prior to this, social value evidence was frequently requested, but was, overall, a manageable part of the commissioning process. In recent years, there have been notable shifts towards more extensive and resource-intensive requirements. Refuge has observed commissioning opportunities that place increasing demands on providers to deliver additional, often unfunded, social value commitments. These expectations can require further investment of time and resources, including free labour from frontline staff, beyond any added value brought to the service and the intrinsic social value already delivered through specialist services. Whilst these expectations may be feasible in private sector procurements, not-for-profits do not have the same margins within which to offer additional value beyond the social value at their core. Women's Aid *Alternatives to Procurement: Guidance for commissioners* [31] states:

Perversely, specialist services often find themselves marked down on "added value/social value" because they may not be delivering activities which align to the local authorities social value priorities. Given the inherent social value provided through their life-saving services, the Social Value Act should 'provide a source of competitive advantage' for smaller specialist domestic abuse services.

Some emerging promising practice has been observed in 2025/26, such as:

- Commissioners using preliminary market engagements to consult interest stakeholders on preferred, proportionate and meaningful social value measures.
- A PCC in the South of England understanding social value as inherent within quality, assessing it across all technical responses rather than requiring additional unfunded commitments through a separate social value question.

Despite this, increased emphasis on social value continues to present challenges for specialist providers. In particular, the use of the Social Value Portal, first introduced in domestic abuse commissioning in 2021/22, has been identified as a barrier due to its complexity and costs. Encouragingly, its use has declined year on year from 11 opportunities (6% of bids) in 2022/23, to nine (5% of bids) in 2023/24, and down to 5 (4% of bids) in 2024/25. A corresponding reduction in social value weighting has also been observed, and in 2024/25:

- 33% of bids had a social value score of 10% or more of the total evaluation (59% in 23/24)
- 3% of bids had a social value score of 20% or more of the total evaluation (7% in 23/24)
- 4% of bids had a requirement to use the Social Value Portal

This reduction in the use of the Social Value Portal is a positive development, helping to alleviate concerns that overly complex and resource-intensive approaches divert capacity and resources away from frontline service delivery. Ultimately, the use of the Social Value Portal favours large, resource-rich, 'catch-all' providers, creating huge barriers to entry for small specialist organisations and limiting their ability to compete effectively. Specialist charitable organisations should be recognised for the inherent social value of the services they provide. Refuge encourages commissioners to consider the most proportionate and equitable approaches to assessing social value, ensuring that requirements do not disadvantage smaller or 'by-and-for' providers and that the true impact of local specialist services is appropriately recognised.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGH QUALITY SERVICE SPECIFICATIONS

- 1. Protect and value specialist services, including those for women and trans people:** Commissioners should continue to protect and value single gender safe accommodation and ensure opportunities that require accommodation support for different genders are published as separate lots, so that specialist women's service providers are not excluded from bidding. Commissioners should ensure that equitable, tailored, specialist services are available and accessible for every gender, recognising unique challenges faced by different genders.
- 2. Meet the needs of LGBTQ+ victim/survivors:** We know that there are substantial gaps in specialist support for LGBTQ+ victim/survivors of DA. Commissioners should recognise the importance of specialist support so that this group of victim/survivors can receive support from those that understand the context and complexity of the abuse they have experienced.
- 3. Sustainable contract terms:** Despite a general increase in longer-term contracts, there are still a significant proportion of contracts that are commissioned for one year or under. Some contracts have longer contract terms, however, only have funds guaranteed for one year or less. Refuge recommends a minimum contract of five years to ensure that services are sustainable and can become embedded and known to victim/survivors and referring professionals in the area. Refuge recommends that national government allocates longer-term funds to local authorities to support stability in contract length and security in contracts.
- 4. The importance of and need for culturally specific services:** These services are essential for victim/survivors with additional and intersectional needs, however, 2024/25 saw only 9% of opportunities included a specific requirement to provide support for Black and minoritised women. Refuge would encourage commissioners to fund specific posts and/or services for victim/survivors with culturally-specific needs, so that they have access to more tailored and effective support.
- 5. Meet the needs of victim/survivors with NRPF:** Commissioners should provide funding to ensure victim/survivors with NRPF are supported. NRPF cases are complex and require greater time for casework. Services for those with NRPF are in high demand and support some of the most marginalised people. It is important that their voices are heard and considered in future duties and service specifications.
- 6. Adequate funding to support disabled victim/survivors:** As disabled victim/survivors are twice as likely to experience DA and are more likely to suffer abuse for longer [32], it is vital that Commissioners provide adequate funding so that providers can offer accessible services for victim/survivors with disabilities.
- 7. Children's services:** There is a major gap in services being commissioned with dedicated support for children and young people, with many commissioners mentioning support for all age groups within specifications without the requirement or budget to support specialised provision to meet distinct needs of children and young people. Commissioners should review and prioritise support for children and young people in their strategies to tackle for VAWG.
- 8. Ensuring contract requirements are not overly onerous:** Commissioners should be considerate with their requirements, e.g., for digital platforms, training to agencies, significant expansion of support areas, or creation of new tools, when writing specifications for tenders. As specialist services are already under a lot of strain, it is important that commissioners are realistic about what can be achieved within the budget that they are providing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMISSIONING PRACTICE

- 1. Ensure adequate funding for DA Services:** Refuge and other specialist DA providers are increasingly needing to rely on fundraising income for core service delivery. To ensure victim/survivors can access the support they need, it is essential that there be no cuts to future funding and that funding rises with inflation. It is also vital that victim/survivors are prioritised, and essential funding is not filtered to perpetrator programmes.
- 2. Invest in the wider ecosystem of specialist services:** Rather than funding through competitive commissioning practices, commissioners should strategically consider local and regional needs in the long-term, where high quality support can be delivered, and the nurturing of specialist and 'by-and-for' organisations best placed to offer them. Commissioners should consider alternative procurement processes to ensure the long-term health of organisations that can have the greatest impact for victim/survivors.
- 3. Use of alternative commissioning processes:** Commissioners should ensure that processes are proportionate, collaborative, and not unduly arduous. Procurement processes, and multi-stage award procedures in particular, can be a huge drain on time and resources. Alternatives to procurement could be considered, e.g. grant making, direct awards, or community asset transfer.
- 4. Protect specialist services:** Specialist services should be protected, and their value recognised. When commissioning services, ensure that services can be modelled by specialist organisations (i.e. are not prescribed), utilising their expertise to deliver the safest service for victim/survivors. Realistic funding is integral to protecting specialist services. Without this recognition, and with continuation of budget cuts, specialist providers will be pushed out, in favour of generic models of support that do not meet the needs of victim/survivors.
- 5. Quality should hold a higher weighting:** Quality should always take precedence over price when assessing tender responses. This will allow for quality-focused, effective, and specialist service provision.
- 6. Removing barriers in the commissioning process for small and medium specialist 'by-and-for' organisations:** Currently it is very challenging for small specialist organisations to receive sustained funding from commissioning exercises. Where commissioning does take place consideration should be given to fair accessibility, including adequate tender turnaround times, sufficient funding, a simple bidding process and the acceptance of consortium/ multiple provider bids.
- 7. Fundraising is for added value and innovation:** Commissioners should not be reliant on specialist services to subsidise funding for core contracts through fundraising, particularly in the current financial climate. Fundraising should bring added value and innovation to services, rather than be a means to subsidise services.
- 8. Allow for realistic timescales:** Commissioners should ensure realistic tender turnaround and mobilisation timescales, to create a fair process for prospective bidders. Commissioners should allow adequate time and support to source new refuge properties when the existing refuge accommodation are not transferring. Commissioners should also recognise that complex services require funded mobilisation periods due to the high costs associated with setting up large, complex services. A minimum of three months between a contract award and go live date is required to accommodate staff consultations, TUPE processes to ease undue stress on staff and to prevent charities being forced to fund staffing costs when they are no longer supported by a new service contract.

9. **Adhere to DA Act requirements.** We have seen examples of procurement practice that directly contradicts DA Act requirements. For example, specifying that refuge spaces should prioritise local women, when the Act makes it clear that refuges are part of a national network of provision. We encourage commissioners to embed the Act's principles and recommendations into future service specifications, whilst budgeting appropriately to enable delivery of the specification.
10. **Commissioning of perpetrator programmes:** Perpetrator programmes should be commissioned as separate lots from other DA services to ensure that specialist providers who do not deliver (or do not wish to deliver) perpetrator services are not disadvantaged. Commissioning perpetrator programmes as a separate lot also protects the budgets for victim/survivor facing services.
11. **Consider the fairest way to assess social value.** The continued use of the Social Value Portal is challenging for specialist organisations. Bidders should not be required to pay to participate in the Social Value Portal without adequate funding. Specialist organisations should be given the opportunity to showcase their social value in other ways.
12. **Provide support to specialist organisations for increased requirements.** We have seen a continued requirement for digital, training and environmental requirements in commissioning in 2023/2024 and 2024/25. Local commissioners should provide adequate guidance, funding, and time for specialist providers to be able to deliver on these requirements.
13. **Supporting strong partnerships:** Recognition of the value of partnership work is reflected increasingly in service specifications, however it is recommended that commissioners consider how commissioning processes can support strong partnership building. Time is needed to develop sustainable partnership work, which should be accommodated by extending the period between publication of opportunities and submission dates. Partnership delivery of contracts reduces economies of scale, and so commissioners encouraging partnership bids should consider how this will need to be supported within budget envelopes.
14. **Sustainability and commissioning:** Commissioners should consider that charities may not have the resources or means to commit to requirements within Climate Commitment Charters at the speed that would be required for certain bids. Furthermore, charities require more statutory support in order to successfully deliver on climate commitments.

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