

Refuge

2023/24

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# ANNUAL COMMISSIONING REPORT



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# INTRODUCTION

Refuge is a registered charity and the country's largest single provider of specialist support services for women and their children fleeing all forms of gender-based violence, including rape and other sexual offences, stalking, domestic abuse (DA), so-called 'honour'-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and 'honour' killings), 'revenge porn', and 'upskirting'.<sup>[1]</sup>

The services Refuge provides are mainly funded through local authority commissioning arrangements and national government grant funding streams. These include:

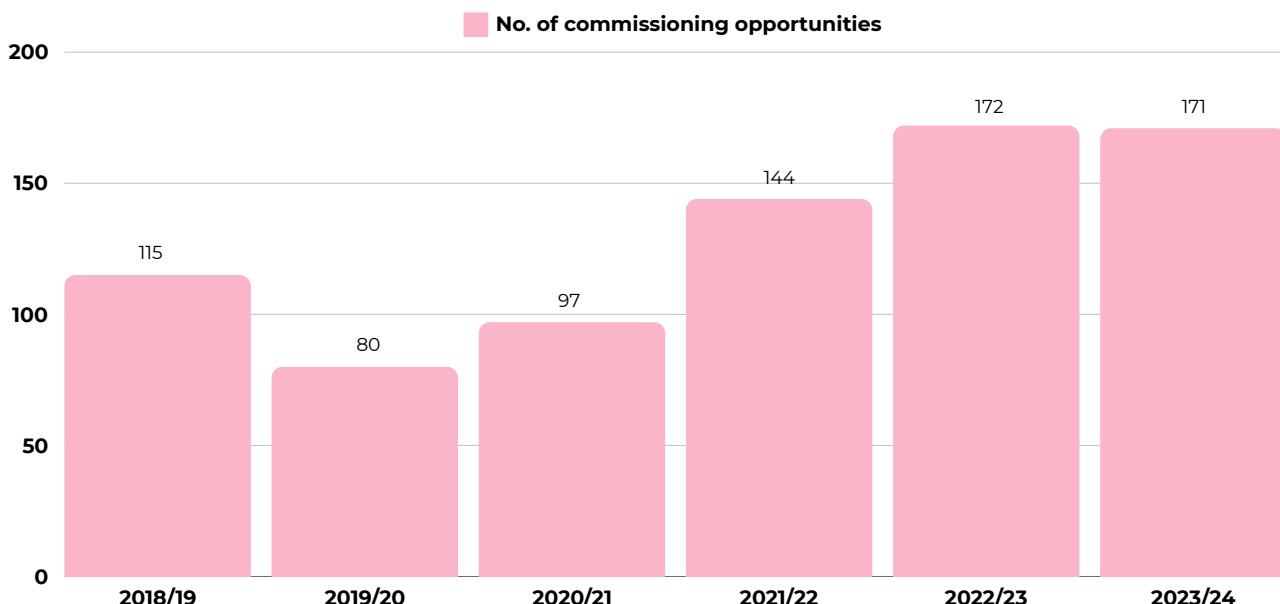
- The 24/7 Freephone National DA Helpline (including Live Chat and British Sign Language video interpretation service)
- Refuge, safe accommodation, and support for women and their children fleeing DA
- Support in the community, such as independent domestic and sexual violence advocacy and outreach
- Support for children and young people
- Technology-Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment Service

DA services are subject to periodic commissioning and recommissioning through competitive tendering. Therefore, Refuge employs a dedicated Development Team whose focus is on retaining our existing service contracts and identifying new opportunities for growth. Every day, Refuge's Development Team performs 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, we do this to maintain an overview of commissioning activity sector-wide. All relevant opportunities relating to DA, specifically, are recorded and themes noted on a central pipeline document.

For the past seven years, we have collected and analysed pipeline data to ensure Refuge is able to respond to and influence trends in commissioning. Following on from previous reports, this report will explore the themes and trends in opportunities advertised between April 2023 and March 2024. These opportunities were 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.

## 2023-24

2023/24 saw 171 opportunities published - one opportunity less than in the previous financial year. The last two years have jointly yielded the highest number of opportunities commissioned since Refuge began this annual analysis of commissioning in 2017/18:



## Report structure

The report is reflective of the past year, but also considers how the year's commissioning activity may be indicative of future patterns of commissioning. It begins by highlighting specific commissioning themes and trends of 2023/2024. We reflect on data collected over seven years (2018 – 2024) to identify reoccurring motifs, and take a more detailed look at the ongoing impact of the DA Act on the commissioning of services.

The latter section of this report provides commentary and real-life examples of concerning commissioning behaviour / strategies, concluding with a set of core recommendations that, if enacted, would ensure 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. We end with a reflection on emerging trends in anticipation of what the future may look like.

## 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 own definition which is "*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]. Refuge is a specialist organisation, and champions other specialist providers to run commissioned domestic abuse services to best support victim/survivors. Where victim/survivors have intersectional needs, it is even more crucial that support is provided by specialist, 'by and for' organisations.

Specialist services for victim/survivors of DA should be led by-and-for the communities they service, for example a service run for women by women. Specialist services can also have a focus on minoritised communities, LGBTQI+, disabled, and migrant victim/survivors. These services, which are led by-and-for these communities, play a vital role in victim/survivors getting the support they require. The services are experts in the nuanced contexts in which the abuse occurs and the different barriers the victim/survivors face in reporting the abuse.[3]

# TRENDS & THEMES: WHAT IS BEING COMMISSIONED

## Types of opportunities

We begin this report by looking back at VAWG-related services commissioned April 2023 – March 2024 (2023/24), and how this compares to last year's commissioning. There were 171 opportunities published in 2023/24 and 172 published in 2022/23, broken down as follows:

Type of opportunity	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Invitations to Tender (ITTs)</b>	96	84
<b>Grants</b>	20	26
<b>Engagement Opportunities – including Market Engagement events, Requests for Quotations, Prior Information Notice, and Expressions of Interest</b>	56	61

Notably, the number of ITTs and Engagement Opportunities fluctuated by less than 15%, whereas the number of grants published increased by 30% this financial year. It is important to note that grants are a less stable form of funding, with a tendency to be shorter term, however they are less bureaucratic and exclusionary, allowing smaller local organisations to access funds and increase capacity.

## Type of service

The table below provides a snapshot of number and types of VAWG services commissioned over the past six years (NB there may be more than one service requirement per contract).

Service Requirement	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
	<b>115 opportunities</b>	<b>80 opportunities</b>	<b>97 opportunities</b>	<b>144 opportunities</b>	<b>172 opportunities</b>	<b>171 opportunities</b>
<b>Accommodation (refuge)</b>	25	23	22	48	48	51
<b>Dispersed Accommodation</b>	9	10	4	28	31	30
<b>Counselling</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	56	29
<b>Support for children</b>	39	29	36	85	91	63
<b>Children's therapeutic services</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	46	21
<b>Female offenders</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	15	19
<b>IDVA</b>	31	26	25	29	55	37
<b>Outreach</b>	55	28	34	32	57	46
<b>ISVA</b>	10	10	13	11	14	8
<b>FGM</b>	3	3	4	4	24	20
<b>Group Work</b>	25	14	8	34	53	44
<b>Modern Slavery</b>	10	8	2	6	23	32

<b>Perpetrator programme</b>	18	10	16	19	31	19
<b>Resettlement</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	18	23
<b>Sex workers</b>	8	4	1	6	8	7
<b>Volunteers</b>	18	4	6	4	10	8
<b>Helpline</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	7	11	31	26
<b>Consultancy / Research</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	9	12	14	6
<b>Training</b>	25	16	14	26	37	41
<b>Digital offer</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	37	31
<b>Tech abuse</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	4	2	11	9
<b>Sanctuary</b>	Not recorded	27				

In 2023/24, Refuge saw a general continuation of commissioning of the services highlighted in last year's commissioning report. The main services commissioned in this financial year were accommodation-based, including dispersed accommodation; outreach; IDVA; and counselling and therapeutic support for both adult and child victim/survivors of DA.

There were 51 safe accommodation opportunities released in 2023/24, of which 30 included dispersed accommodation. This is the highest number of safe accommodation opportunities we have recorded since beginning our analysis. Commissioning for dispersed accommodation decreased slightly with 30 opportunities compared to 31 for the previous year. We are pleased to see the continuation of commissioning of dispersed accommodation, as it allows greater flexibility in offering accommodation to victim/survivors of DA with varying needs and, therefore, enables local authorities to meet gaps identified in their needs assessments. Dispersed accommodation allows victim/survivors who may not be able to access traditional refuge accommodation equal access to safe accommodation and support when they need it. These victim/survivors may include:

- Those with physical and/or learning disabilities
- Larger families
- Families with older teenage boys

- Trans-identifying victim/survivors
- Those with pets
- Victim/survivors with multiple disadvantages
- Male victim/survivors

One of the most significant trends captured was the increase in training for professionals and government bodies within the service requirements. There were 41 opportunities stating this, compared to 37 in 2022/23. This is a trend that we had expected to rise this financial year, having seen services commissioned with onerous training offers since 2022. The training asks vary from a minimum requirement to deliver training sessions/workshops to partners and key stakeholders, delivering DA awareness training to council areas and partnership agencies, to supporting schools to deliver healthy relationship education workshops. Whilst these requirements can be very beneficial to staff, their service users and the community as a whole, as specialist services are already under a lot of strain, it is important that commissioners are realistic about what can be achieved within the budgets that they are providing.

Having seen the considerable impact that the DA Act 2021 has had on the commissioning of support for children, we have continued to monitor the number of mentions of support for children within the main body of DA contracts. We logged all mentions of support for children within the specifications of tenders and compared it with the number of specific provisions and services being commissioned to dedicatedly support children. We found that, although 63 opportunities mention support for children, only 25 opportunities (40%) actually commissioned specific posts and services which would support children.

Commissioning for IDVA and outreach services both decreased in 2023/24, with 37 IDVA and 46 outreach, compared to 55 IDVA and 57 outreach in 2022/23. We expect this decrease in commissioning may be due to a greater focus on commissioning safe accommodation. This year, we also saw a significant decrease in the commissioning of perpetrator programmes, 19 compared with 31 last year. We discuss potential reasons for this decrease on pages 19 and 20 of the report.

The mention of technology-facilitated abuse, or 'tech abuse', in commissioned services decreased slightly in 2023/24, with 11 mentions in the previous year compared with nine for 2023/24. Technology-facilitated abuse involves using online platforms and devices to control, coerce, and abuse. This includes online harassment, location tracking, and sharing – or threatening to share – intimate images without consent. This is an increasingly prevalent form of abuse: in 2023/24, on entry to our services, 927 victim/survivors reported that they were victims of tech abuse, and referrals to our specialist Technology-Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment team increased by 258% between 2020 and 2022. The team, which provides frontline support and training sector-wide, reported that referrals most commonly involved issues with compromised electronic devices, concerns for online security and stalking, issues surrounding social media, and economic abuse. This use of technology to inflict abuse shows how perpetrators use evolving ways to abuse their victim/survivors. The few mentions of tech abuse in commissioning opportunities do not yet reflect the prevalence of this form of abuse and increased need for expert responses.

## Reflecting on emerging themes for 2022/23

For our 2022/23 pipeline, we added five new themes to reflect those emerging in commissioning documents. These themes were:

- Counselling
- Children's Therapeutic services
- Female Offenders
- Resettlement
- Digital Offer

The following section will look at whether these themes are still prominent in commissioning in this financial year.

### **Counselling and therapeutic services for adults and children**

One of the significant new trends we captured in the last annual commissioning report was the requirement for counselling for adults and children within the main contract. In 2022/23, we noted 56 opportunities requiring counselling services for adults; whilst 46 required therapeutic services for children. This trend has significantly dropped in this financial year, with 29 opportunities requiring counselling services for adults and 21 requiring therapeutic services for children.

### **Female Offenders**

The mention of support for female victim/survivors who are also offenders and have spent time in prison has increased in the last financial year with 19 mentions in this financial year, compared to 15 in 2022/23.

### **Resettlement**

The requirement of resettlement support has continued to increase in this financial year, with 23 mentions compared to 18 mentions in the previous year. The resettlement support in the specifications varies from being vague and mentioning "tailored resettlement support", to specifications stating specific requirements such as for bidders to provide "time-limited resettlement support (up to 3 months) to individuals moving onto independent accommodation to gradual reduction level support until it is agreed by all parties that it is time for the tenant to move on."

### **Digital offer**

Another notable trend captured in 2022/23 was the increase in the requirement to deliver a digital offer / platform in bids. This trend is still prominent with 31 opportunities in 2023/24 stating the requirement to deliver some sort of digital offer (versus 37 opportunities in 2023/22). This requirement can include the creation and maintenance of a website, managing referrals through a website and / or creating an online live chat function. Contract funding rarely reflects the budget required for smaller specialist service providers to create a safe and accessible digital offer, therefore, this requirement favours larger non-specialist providers who have the resources to create and maintain digital platforms.

### **Environmentally sustainable commissioning**

In last financial year we also noted that we had seen a sharp increase in local authorities reflecting their environmental commitments in tender documents. This is still a prominent trend, despite a decline, with 35 opportunities (20%) in this financial year, compared to 50 opportunities (29%) in 2022/23, outlining the need for bidders to demonstrate and evidence an environmentally friendly and sustainable approach. A significant proportion of the Social Value requirement of tenders in this financial year required the supplier to explain how they would deliver the contract in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Some local authorities require organisations to commit to their carbon reduction plan charter.

**CASE STUDY:** Council A, in West London, stated that, on award, successful bidders would be required to sign the Council's Climate Commitment Charter to support the Council in achieving its low carbon objectives. In 2019, Council A had declared a Climate Emergency and, following this, the Climate Commitment Charter was created by eight local authorities in West London. This was to tackle the serious consequences of human-induced climate change. The Charter stated that all suppliers would be expected to work towards a set of actions and outcomes for mitigating and adapting to climate change.

These included:

- Reducing the impact on the environment, improving it where possible, through enhanced biodiversity and the use of sustainably sourced materials
- Providing a strategy to measure, monitor and reduce our carbon footprint in line with climate science and working towards net zero
- We would be required to develop and implement a carbon reduction plan that is 'aligned with climate science'

Whilst we fully support a move towards more sustainable commissioning, many smaller specialist organisations do not have the resources to respond to these requirements. Charities require more statutory support to successfully implement these green initiatives.

## Emerging themes for 2023/24

In planning for the 2023/24 pipeline, we added one new theme, Sanctuary Schemes, to pick up on whether these were being commissioned by local authorities. These schemes are crucial as they enable victim/survivors of DA to remain in their own home where it is safe to do so. In 2023/24, 27 opportunities stated the requirement of a Sanctuary Scheme.

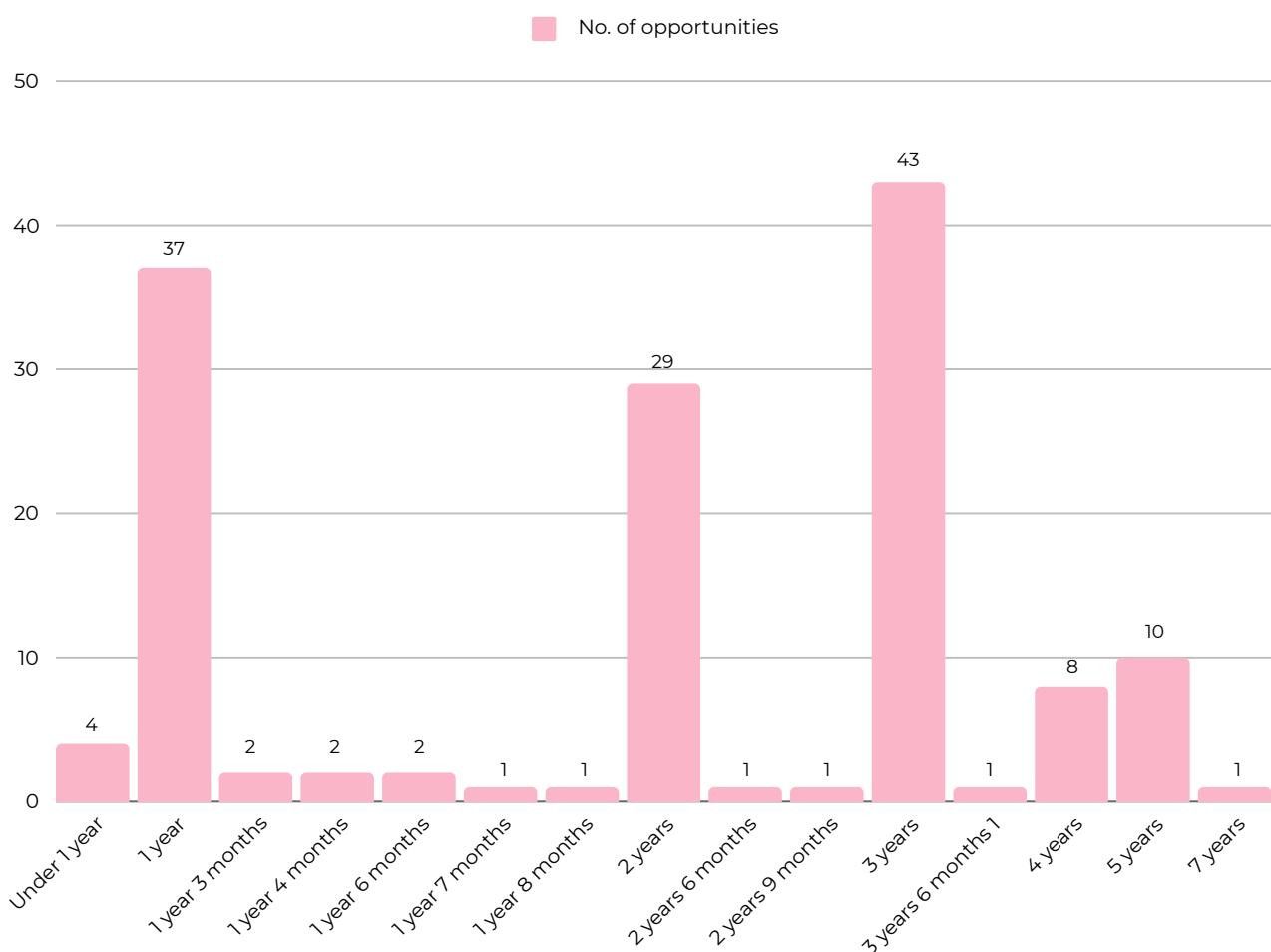
## Who is commissioning services?

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

<b>Health</b>	1	0	4	2
<b>Other</b>	9	4	1	9

The large majority of services (76%) are still being commissioned by Local Authorities. The Police and Crime Commissioner is the second largest commissioner. Funding from the MoJ decreased this year with only one opportunity being commissioned in 2023/24. This was a one-year grant, called the ISVA/ IDVA Training and Infrastructure Fund, which Refuge bid for and won. Commissioning by Health services also saw a decrease, with two opportunities being commissioned by the NHS.

## Contract length



\*\*Please note that there were 26 opportunities where the length of the contract wasn't provided due to the tenders being Prior Information Notices (PINs) or Market Engagement events (MEs).

In addition to the above, two opportunities were also one-off payments through grants. These one-off payments were to fund a range of events and projects to celebrate and promote equality and diversity within two council boroughs.

Worryingly, the prevalence of short-term contracts (one year or less) in 2023/24 has increased to 41 compared to 24 contracts in 2022/23, 33 in 2021/22 and 28 in 2020/21. This is the highest number of short-term contracts commissioned in the last four years. Analysis shows that 18 of the one-year contracts were grants commissioned by government bodies and local councils, and the others

were for a mixture of DA support services, target hardening services, Sanctuary Schemes, and contracts to deliver therapeutic support.

There are numerous challenges that we face with short-term contracts, mainly being the time and resources it takes to implement a new service. The VAWG sector continues to face difficulty in recruitment, and these challenges are amplified by having to recruit staff for short-, fixed-term contracts as individuals are looking for security in their job roles. Short-term contracts also have a detrimental impact on victim/survivors. Just as the service becomes embedded and known within an area, the service comes to an end, which can be unsettling and traumatic for victim/survivors who must then find alternative sources of ongoing support, during an already turbulent and challenging time in their lives.

#### **CASE STUDY: Short contract length**

Council B, in the West Midlands, released a tender, in September 2023, which contained four lots: refuge and dispersed accommodation for victim/survivors of DA; safe accommodation and floating support; floating support for men and boys; and a lived-experience advisory group co-ordination. The first and second lots of the tender required bidders to source 10 units of refuge accommodation and six units of dispersed accommodation as no properties were available for transfer.

The contract was for an initial one-year period, with potential to extend for a further four years in one-year increments dependent on performance. The short contract period would give no reassurance to a provider that the investment required to source and secure property would be worthwhile. Additionally, the provider would be expected to source the 16 units of accommodation as there was no available property to be utilised for this contract. This specification is likely to have meant that only a provider with existing properties in the area, such as a housing association (a non-specialist body), could bid.

In 2023/24, we saw a drop in the commissioning of long-term contracts, with 63 contracts (37%) commissioned for three years or more, compared with 72 (42%) in the previous year. Refuge would recommend a minimum contract length of five years in order to allow services to embed themselves in local communities and provide stability. However, in recent years, with the added issues brought about by the cost-of-living crisis, Refuge has seen longer services commissioned, without commissioners providing uplifts each year to allow for the increased cost of living and rises in inflation.

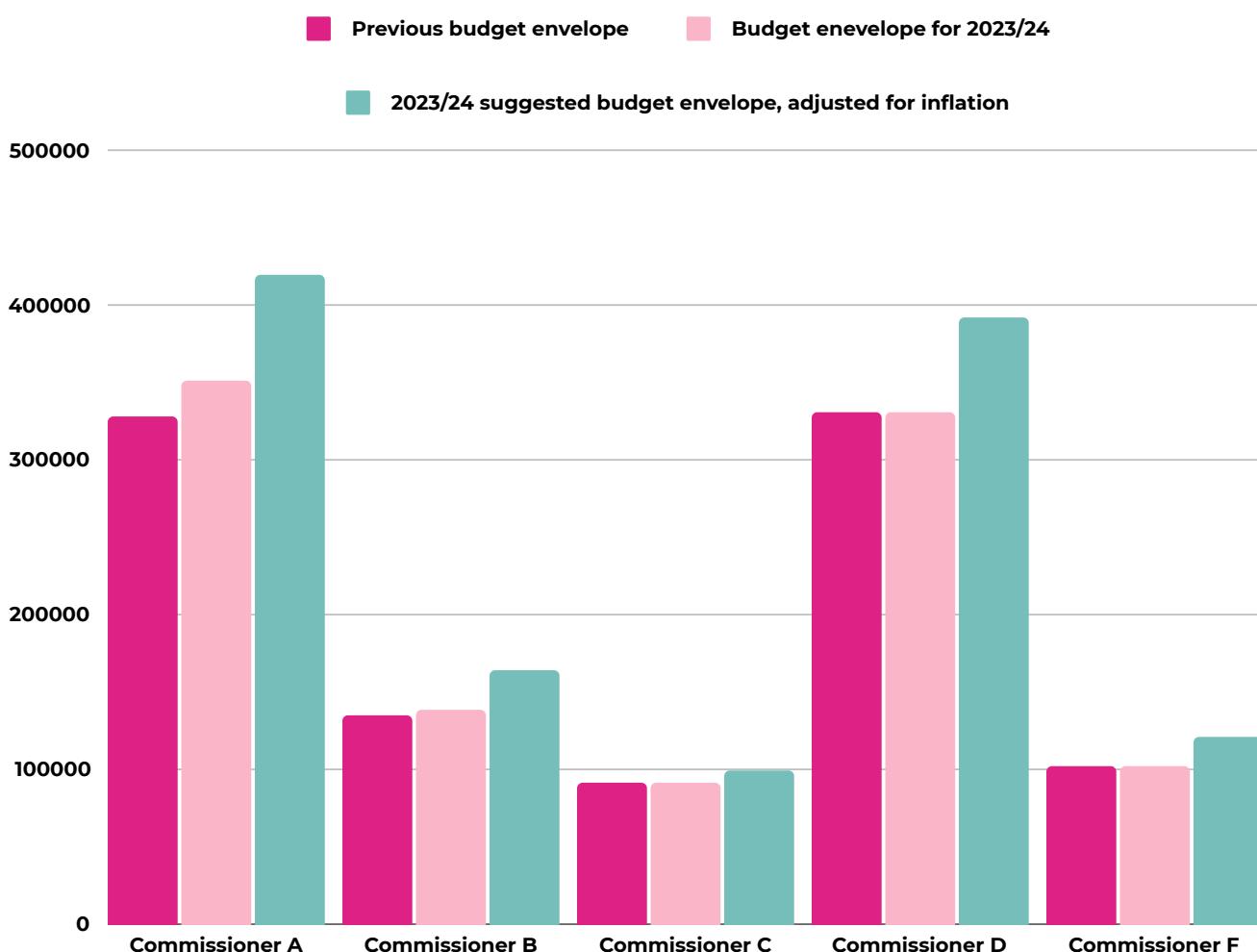
#### **CASE STUDY: Long contract commissioned by no uplift factored into the budget**

In January 2024, Council C, based in inner London, released a tender for DA refuge accommodation. The tender was made up of two lots, one for culturally-specific refuge accommodation, and the second was for generic refuge accommodation. The Council commissioned the service for five years, with the option to extend for a further two years in one-year increments. We were pleased to see the commissioning of a long contract length of five years. However, the Commissioners had not allowed for a yearly uplift in the funding envelope. A lack of annual uplifts in the contract value impacts providers in a number of ways, including not allowing for annual incremental uplifts in staff salaries, not considering the cost of living rises such as gas, electric, rental, and water costs within the refuges and office space. A lack of uplift also impacts services with the natural cost of items rising, such as food for residents, welcome packs, laptops and phones for staff, furniture for the refuge, and office furniture for staff.

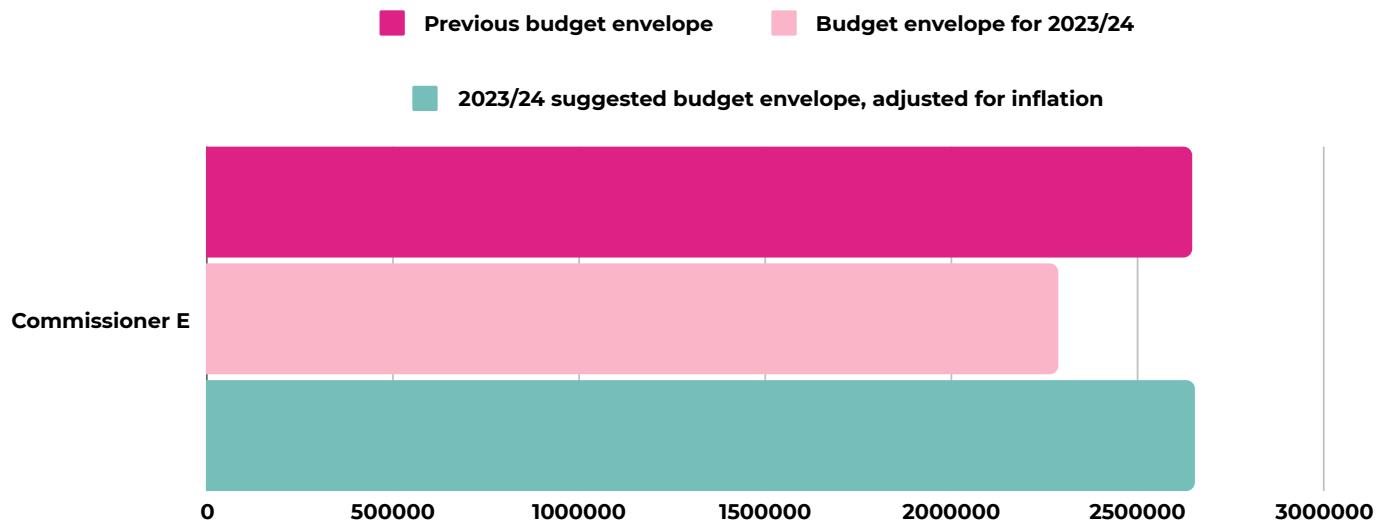
## Budget uplifts

The increased cost of living and rises in inflation directly impact the cost of running services, but often are not reflected in contract budget uplifts. This is a challenge for charities and not-for-profits, who lack financial resources to subsidise services where budgets are not uplifted and sufficient to run a safe, sustainable service. Uplifts are therefore essential for specialist providers to deliver services without compromising their quality, allowing them to accommodate the increased cost of everyday items (food, utilities) provided to service users, as well as offer annual incremental salary uplifts to staff.

The bar chart below shows budget uplifts in a number of the contracts that Refuge currently holds in inner-London. We are comparing the difference in budget envelopes during the last commissioning round, this year, and the suggested value for this year in line with inflation (calculated using the Bank of England online inflation calendar). The increased cost-of-living crisis and inflation should have led to proportionately increased funding envelopes, but the data shows that commissioners are not increasing the budget envelopes in line with inflation.



The example below compares budget envelopes for a round of grants that were commissioned by Commissioner E in London for the improvement of safe accommodation provisions for victim/survivors of DA. Not only did Commissioner E not proportionately increase the budget envelope to reflect inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, they decreased the budget envelope when recommissioning this grant round in 2023/24:



## Target gender for the whole programme

The figures below show that most commissioning is aimed at all genders. In 2023/24, 71% of services were commissioned to support 'all genders', encompassing women, men, trans, and non-binary victim/survivors. This mirrors the DA Act's language, where it states that "*anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, regardless of sex, gender reassignment, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality, or background*"[4].

Gender for Whole Programme	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>All genders</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	103	121
<b>Men Only</b>	8	1	2	2	3	1
<b>Women &amp; Men</b>	76	49	50	82	10	6
<b>Women Only &amp; Women and their Children</b>	29	20	29	34	21	17
<b>Women inc. trans* women and non-binary adults</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	2	5
<b>Men inc. trans men and non-binary adults</b>	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	Not recorded	0	1
<b>Children only**</b>	/	/	/	12	10	8
<b>Unclear***</b>	/	/	16	14	22	20

\*Transgender

\*\*Those that are for children only are currently under 'all genders' on the pipeline.

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

It is also important that commissioners recognise, acknowledge and reflect the gendered nature of DA and VAWG in their commissioning practices. An estimated 1.4 million women and 751,000 men aged 16 years and over experienced domestic abuse in the last year; a prevalence rate of approximately 5.7% of women and 3.2% of men. Homicide Index data for the year ending March 2020 to the year ending March 2022 show that 67.3% of the victims of domestic homicide were female.

Of the 249 female domestic homicide victims, the suspect was male in the majority of cases (241). In the majority of female domestic homicides, the suspect was a male partner or ex-partner (74.7%), whereas in the majority of male domestic homicides, the suspect was a male family member (66.1%)[5]. The Violence against women and girls services: commissioning toolkit 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 helps in providing comprehensive support and protection to all survivors, regardless of gender.

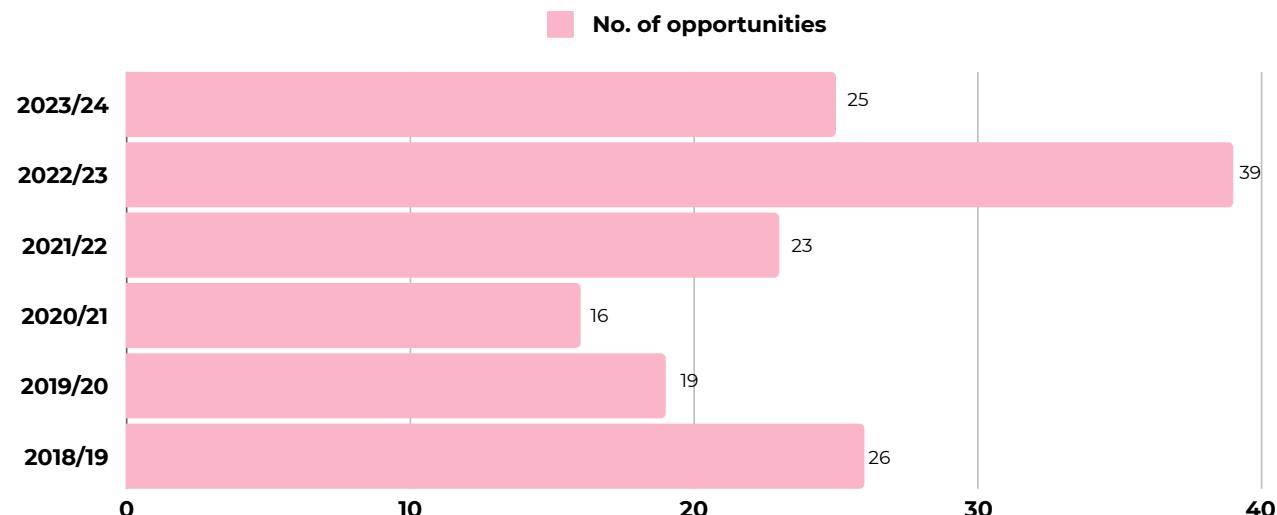
For example, Newcastle City Council's provision of integrated domestic abuse accommodation and outreach service specification stated that 'it recognises that domestic abuse is experienced by men and women and in same-sex, heterosexual and familial relationships. However, national and local evidence tells us that domestic abuse is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men. Whilst the statutory definition is not gendered, we recognise that domestic abuse is a gendered crime with women experiencing more frequent and more severe abuse than men, especially coercive control'.

Commissioning is more gender-specific where it pertains to refuges and other forms of safe accommodation. Commissioning gender-specific refuges and other forms of safe accommodation is a crucial aspect of supporting victims of domestic abuse. Statutory guidance for local authorities across England specifically highlights the need for single gender or single sex accommodation in refuges and specialist safe accommodation.[6]

In 2023/24, 10% of services were aimed solely at women and their children. There was only one opportunity in 2023/24 commissioned for men only, which was a service for provision of support for men and their children in a refuge.

Additionally, there were no opportunities released in 2023/24 that required the service to be delivered by male staff.

## Children and Young People - Dedicated Provision



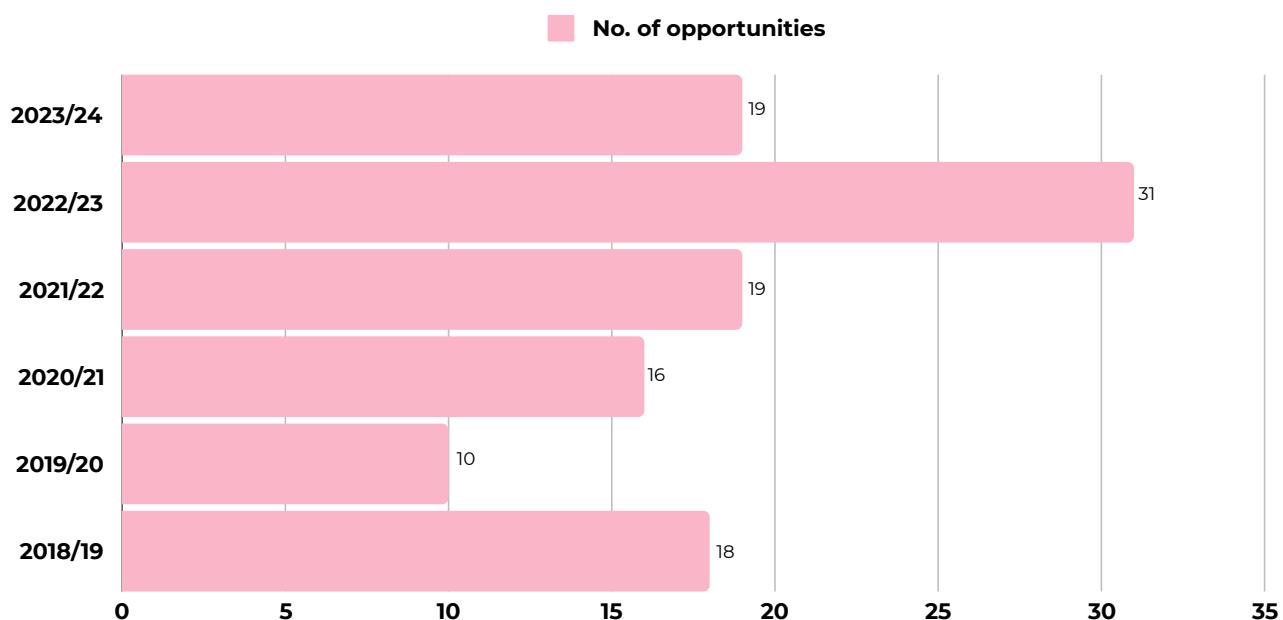
Due to the DA Act recognising children as victim/survivors in their own right since 2021, we expected to see a rise in the commissioning of services which provide a dedicated element of support to children and young people. This support can include the commissioning of a specific post or service, such as a Children's Support Worker or therapeutic support, or the commissioning of a service that is solely dedicated to supporting children and young people.

However, there was a significant drop in the commissioning of these services in 2023/24, with only 25 opportunities compared to 39 last year.

There were eight contracts (32%) solely aimed at supporting children and young people who are victim/survivors of DA. These commissioned services included counselling and therapeutic support for children and young people; the provision of DA Family Support Workers and generic support for children and young people affected by DA.

## Funding for perpetrator programmes

In 2023/24, there were fewer perpetrator programmes commissioned than the previous year.



Six of these opportunities were largely standalone services, but, as in previous years, some opportunities have featured the requirement to deliver both victim/survivor and perpetrator services. A further six of the commissioned perpetrator programmes were commissioned alongside other services, as an integrated model. This can prove challenging to organisations who do not run perpetrator services: they are excluded from bidding unless they can find a suitable partner to collaborate with. Not only is establishing a partnership challenging due to short turnarounds for tender submissions, but, given that providers supporting perpetrators are often specialists in other areas, such as drug and alcohol support, and are not Respect-accredited, this can cause challenges when scoping options around partnership working.

In order to understand the rise in the commissioning of perpetrator programmes, in last year's commissioning report we looked at how perpetrator programmes have been commissioned over recent years. In 2020/21, the Home Office committed £10 million to tackle perpetrators of DA[7].

From this, they awarded over £7 million to Police and Crime Commissioners to support innovative approaches to preventing DA, including the expansion of projects, such as the Drive Project. In 2021/2022, the Home Office provided an additional £25 million, more than doubling the resources for tackling DA perpetrators. It is possible that this funding is coming to an end, resulting in a decrease in the commissioning of perpetrator programmes.

In May 2022, commissioning guidance was published that aimed to support areas to develop and expand responses to perpetrators of DA in England and Wales. The UK Government's Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan[8] highlighted the government's intention to target perpetrators to prevent 'first-time, repeat, and serial offending'. The plan highlighted the cultural shift towards tackling DA at its root cause, rather than shifting blame or responsibility onto victim/survivors. Included in this plan was Home Office funding of £75 million over three years for behaviour change interventions research and evaluation, supported by a set of national principles and standards. This was the first multi-year funding of its kind for perpetrator work.

It is not certain why commissioning of perpetrator programmes has seen such a decline in 2023/24. We speculate that it may be that this funding from the Home Office is coming to an end, or, hopefully, that commissioners are recognising the need to focus on victim/survivors of DA. We know that we need to hold perpetrators accountable and more needs to be done to prevent DA, but often perpetrator programmes divert funds from support of victim/survivors. Therefore, Refuge sees a need to focus more on the support services for victim/survivors.

## EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The DA Act outlines the need to deliver dedicated specialist support to victim/survivors with protected characteristics (including 'by-and-for' specialist providers), including Black and minoritised victim/survivors, LGBTQI+ victim/survivors, those with multiple disadvantages, those with disabilities, and those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). 'By-and-for' organisations are designed and delivered by-and-for people who are minoritised, including D/deaf and disabled, LGBTQI+, Black, Asian and minoritised victim/survivors, and migrant women. 'By-and-for' services are rooted in the communities they serve, and, through these services, victim/survivors receive wrap-around, holistic support that addresses their full range of intersecting needs from people who understand them.

A report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner[9] 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, and minoritised women are often locked out of support. This echoes the findings from our pipeline research: through tracking the commissioning of culturally-specific services, Refuge has noted a distinct lack of culturally-specific services commissioned by local authorities. Although there has been an increase in the specifications of services mentioning minoritised groups, there has been a real lack of commissioning of services that provide dedicated specialist support to these groups.

### **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 who are less well served by the DA support services available in the UK[10]. They also may experience particular forms of DA, such as forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence and female genital mutilation. Black and minoritised victim/survivors often face multiple additional barriers to accessing support[11]. For example:

- Discrimination, language barriers, or immigration status can hinder some minoritised women's access to support
- Victim/survivors from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic, and Refugee backgrounds can face cultural and community pressures that may make it more difficult for them to escape the abuser

Our analysis below shows that, although support for Black and minoritised women is mentioned in 35 opportunities, only a relatively small number of commissioners required support for Black and minoritised women as a specific requirement. This would seem to indicate that the value and importance of culturally-specific services is not yet being recognised:

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

### LGBTQI+ victim/survivors of DA

Large areas of England and Wales do not have any specialist support available for victim/survivors from the LGBTQI+ community[12]. There are substantial gaps in specialist LGBTQI+ DA services: they are mostly based in or around London, or other major cities[13], making it harder for victim/survivors who live in more rural communities to access this type of specialist support. Issues also include:

- Non-specialist services tend to have a limited understanding around LGBTQI+ relationships and lack the skills to effectively respond to LGBTQI+ DA.[13]
- LGBTQI+ victim/survivors can be subject to prejudice and discrimination including not recognising self-identification documents, misgendering or not acknowledging correct pronouns, or statements which attempt to change or undermine their LGBTQI+ identity or orientation.[13]

Our analysis below shows that, although support for LGBTQI+ victim/survivors is mentioned in the specifications of 51 opportunities, only two opportunities state a requirement for a specialised worker and/or specific service to support the needs of this vulnerable group.

LGBTQI+	2018/19 115 opportunities	2019/20 80 opportunities	2020/21 97 opportunities	2021/22 144 opportunities	2022/23 172 opportunities	2023/24 171 opportunities
Mentioned within the specification	17 (15%)	10 (13%)	20 (21%)	35 (24%)	55 (32%)	51 (30%)
Specific requirement (including requirement for specialist workers and/or specific service)	8 (7%)	0	0	1	5 (3%)	2 (1%)

We know that specialist housing is very limited for victim/survivors from this community, with very few accommodation-based services being commissioned by local authorities[14]. In January 2024, LovingMe, an organisation that supports trans and non-binary victim/survivors of DA and sexual violence, opened the very first trans+ refuge without funding from the government. Through fundraising and donations, LovingMe was able to purchase and set up a seven-bed unit, which was refurbished by the members of the trans+ community. This specialist 'by-and-for' refuge provides trans and non-binary victim/survivors with the right support, as staff understand the context and complexity of their lived experience and are able to build the trust critical to effectively assess risk[15]. This example highlights the specialist support that 'by-and-for' organisations can offer victim/survivors as they remove barriers and improve outcomes for LGBTQI+ victim/survivors

accessing specialist by-and-for services[16].

## **Disability**

Victim/survivors with disabilities:

- Are twice as likely to experience DA[17]
- Are more likely to suffer for longer (nine years compared to six and a half years)
- May be more vulnerable to technology-facilitated-abuse, due to a heavier reliance on tech to live their lives and as a channel to get support [18]
- Are 50% more likely to face barriers to online services[19]

Victim/survivors with disabilities can be more reliant on others to care for them, which makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse. Where the perpetrator is the victim/survivor's carer, this reliance or dependency can be exploited by the perpetrator to exert coercion and control. This can be a barrier to victim/survivors making disclosures and accessing support.

Even once they have been able to reach out for support, disabled victim/survivors may face barriers to fully accessing available services, e.g. refuges and community-based services may not be adapted to their physical accessibility needs or lack appropriate means of support for blind and/or d/Deaf victim/survivors.

These barriers to support mean it is essential that commissioners invest more in services that are accessible to all disabled victim/survivors, ideally by commissioning specialist 'by-and-for' services that fully meet their needs.

Historically, we have not collected data regarding services commissioned for disabled victim/survivors, but we have added this to our pipeline for 2024/25, and will track the types of specialist services, if any, being commissioned to support those with physical and/or mental disabilities. We will also be tracking the mainstream provision that places a requirement on local authorities to support victim/survivors with disabilities and/or to make services accessible.

## **Women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)**

Victim/survivors with NRPF are among the most marginalised members of UK society.[20] The reason for their ineligibility can mean they are particularly vulnerable, e.g. they have been trafficked or have an insecure immigration status. The result of having NRPF is that they are unable to claim any welfare benefits and access statutory services as easily, meaning they can experience financial hardship and isolation, and fall through the gaps. They face multiple barriers to support as a consequence, such as:

- Being unable to claim benefits to cover the rent in refuge and other safe accommodation.
- Feeling unable to leave the perpetrator, due to fear that, once known, their immigration status will lead to criminal prosecution or deportation. Therefore, perpetrators may use the victim/survivor's insecure immigration status as a tool for coercive control[21].

These victim/survivors often require longer-term and very specialist support to address their multiple needs, so dedicated funding for such services is essential.

As highlighted in last year's commissioning report, there continues to be a lack of provision for victim/survivors with NRPF, which has been identified as one of the biggest issues frontline workers face when trying to help women stay safe and rebuild their lives. This lack of funding means that, where there are services that support women with NRPF, there is extremely high demand.

Despite 37 opportunities mentioning the needs for support for victim/survivors with NRPF, only one opportunity in 2023/24 included a specific requirement to support victim/survivors with NRPF:

NRPF	2018/19 115 opportunities	2019/20 80 opportunities	2020/21 97 opportunities	2021/22 144 opportunities	2022/23 172 opportunities	2023/24 171 opportunities
Mentioned within the specification	12 (10%)	12 (10%)	11 (11%)	33 (23%)	30 (17%)	37 (22%)
Specific requirement (including requirement for specialist workers and/or specific service)	3 (3%)	3 (2%)	2 (2%)	2 (1.5%)	0	1 (0.6%)

## Support for marginalised and minoritised communities delivered by Refuge

For a multitude of reasons, Black and minoritised women often face additional barriers to accessing support.

For example, discrimination, language barriers, cultural and religious pressures, economic dependency, inappropriate professional responses or immigration status can hinder some minority women's ability to access support [22].

In order to break down these barriers to accessing help, Refuge provides several culturally specific services including: accommodation and outreach services for south Asian women, advocacy services for Eastern European women, a Vietnamese and Chinese outreach service and a refuge for African and Caribbean women. Whilst we are contracted by a local authority to deliver the accommodation-based service for African and Caribbean women, the other culturally specific services are not commissioned and are funded through a patchwork of voluntary income which is received through our Fundraising team as well as being subsidised from Refuge's financial reserves. Refuge has also worked collaboratively with the London VAWG consortium and other specialist domestic abuse charities and third sector partners on initiatives to address these barriers by providing services of tailored support.

### Pan-London Floating Support Service

In June 2022, Refuge, alongside ten partners, launched the Ascent Pan-London Floating Support Service. The service works alongside ten specialist DA organisations, many of which are led by-and-for the communities they serve, to provide high-quality DA support, including specialist 'by-and-for' provision, and counselling. Our 'by-and-for' partner organisations are well-established in their communities and have the relationships and referral pathways minoritised victim/survivors need to move forward with their lives. The partnership enables Refuge to deliver trauma-informed, wrap-around, victim/survivor-led support across London to those in safe accommodation, but for whom refuge accommodation is not suitable. This can include to those living in single-sex temporary accommodation, a property not known to the perpetrator, or one where a sanctuary scheme has been put in place to provide additional security measures and support. We are also delivering resettlement support to victim/survivors moving on from refuge accommodation. This service is being run in addition to and alongside existing local services, to supplement and support current DA and VAWG service provision.

### A more accessible National Domestic Abuse Helpline

Refuge has operated the 24-hour National DA Helpline (NDAH) since 2003, and independently since

2019. Since then, we have continued to invest in the NDAH, with a focus on improving access and responding with more languages, by connecting victim/survivors with interpreters. In 2021, we introduced a Live Chat service to enable victim/survivors to contact our Helpline online and in silence. In May 2021, we launched the NDAH British Sign Language video interpretation service, enabling deaf victim/survivors to speak to Helpline Advisors via a British Sign Language interpreter.

### **Vision Foundation**

In 2022/23, Refuge was awarded funding from the Vision Foundation, London's leading sight loss charity, which supports blind and partially-sighted people. A strategic focus for Refuge is to increase pathways to support for victim/survivors who face additional barriers, including those who are visually impaired. Our perception is that many DA professionals lack the confidence to effectively support blind and visually impaired victim/survivors of DA – usually because they have not had the opportunity to receive training in this area. Therefore, we submitted a proposal to provide bespoke training and resources to our specialist DA support staff, co-created with a specialist sight loss organisation, in order to crucially reduce barriers to support for visually impaired survivors. This project is well underway, and the bespoke training and resources should be available for our staff in the next couple of months.

# KEY FINDINGS IN COMMISSIONING TRENDS

- **Commissioning activity:** Most services were commissioned by Local Authorities (76.6%) and PCCs (9.4%). 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:** The same number of opportunities was commissioned in 2023/24 as in the previous year. In this financial year, the most common type of service commissioned was accommodation-based services, followed by IDVA and Outreach services.
- **Perpetrator programmes:** Commissioning of perpetrator programmes has decreased this financial year. Six of the perpetrator services commissioned in 2023/24 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, 75.4% (67.4% in 2022/23) 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.
- **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. During 2023/24, 63 opportunities mentioned support for children and young people, of these 25 opportunities required specific support and/or services for children.
- **Dispersed accommodation units:** Dispersed accommodation requirements have stayed the same with 30 opportunities commissioned this year, compared to 31 in the previous year. This is, in part, a recognition that those with large families, older teenage sons, disabilities, or multiple disadvantages are not always able to access refuge accommodation. Dispersed accommodation also allows for male and LGBTQI+ victim/survivors to be housed and supported.
- **Contract length:** The prevalence of short-term contracts (one year or less) has increased from the previous year (41 contracts in 2023/24; 24 in 2022/23).
- **Research:** Six opportunities were commissioned for research purposes. This included research into the efficacy of DA interventions and services and engagement work with victim/survivors of DA.
- **Counselling and therapeutic support:** 2023/24 has seen a drop in the requirement for counselling for adults and children becoming a consistent feature of tenders. 29 opportunities required counselling services for adults; whilst 21 required therapeutic services for children.
- **Sustainable commissioning:** 20% of opportunities outlined the need to address how bidders would demonstrate an environmentally friendly and sustainable approach.
- **Culturally-specific services:** Only 7% of services commissioned in 2023/24 contained the requirement for a culturally-specific post/or specific service to support Black and minoritised victim/survivors.
- **LGBTQI+ services:** Despite 51 mentions of the need to provide specialist support to LGBTQI+ victim/survivors of DA, only two opportunities in 2023/24 had a requirement for a specialist worker or specific service dedicated to supporting victim/survivors from this community in their specifications.
- **Disabled victim/survivors:** As disabled victim/survivors are twice as likely to experience DA, and are more likely to suffer for longer, it is vital that local authorities commission specialist services

so that victim/survivors can be supported as soon as possible to prevent the long duration of abuse which increases the risk of escalation of incidents[23]. Refuge will be monitoring these opportunities going forward.

- **NRPF:** Despite consistent feedback from the VAWG sector about the need for NRPF provision, there was only one opportunity commissioned in this financial year that had a requirement for a NRPF post within a service.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Protect and value women-only services:** 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. The UK government has a dedicated strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), which includes domestic abuse, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence. This strategy emphasises the need for specialised women's services to support women and their children, recognizing the unique challenges they face[24].
- 2. Sustainable contract terms:** Despite an overall increase in longer-term contracts, there is still a significant proportion of contracts that are commissioned 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.
- 3. Contract uplifts:** Despite a welcomed increase in the number of longer-term contracts being commissioned, we have noted the commissioning longer services without providing yearly uplifts to allow for the rises in the cost of living and inflation. These uplifts are essential for providers to deliver a safe service, as well as to be able to provide staff with annual incremental uplifts in salaries.
- 4. The importance and need for culturally specific services:** These services are essential for victim/survivors with additional and intersectional needs. However, 2023/24 saw only 7% of commissioned services had 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. Meeting the needs of LGBTQI+ victim/survivors:** We know that there are substantial gaps in specialist support for LGBTQI+ 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 faced.
- 6. Meet the needs of victim/survivors with NRPF:** Commissioners should provide funding to ensure victim/survivors with NRPF are supported. 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.
- 7. Adequate funding to support disabled victim/survivors:** As disabled victim/survivors are twice as likely to experience DA, and are more likely to suffer for longer[23], it is vital that Commissioners provide adequate funding so that providers can offer accessible services for victim/survivors with disabilities.
- 8. How perpetrator programmes are being commissioned:** 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 would also protect the budgets for victim/survivor facing services.
- 9. Sustainable 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 it would be required for certain bids. Furthermore, charities require more statutory support in

order to successfully deliver on climate commitments.

**10. Children's services:** There is a major gap in services being commissioned with dedicated support for children and young people. Commissioners should review and prioritise support for children and young people in their strategies to tackle for VAWG.

**11. Ensuring contract requirements are not too onerous:** Commissioners should be considerate with their requirements for digital platforms and/or training to agencies when writing the 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.

# 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/safe accommodation. Part of the framework around this duty includes the requirement for local authorities to assess need for accommodation-based DA support in their area (including for those who come from outside the area), and to develop and publish a strategy for the provision of such support to cover their locality, with regard for the needs assessment. The DA Act continues to influence commissioning, including through funding to increase/improve accommodation, provision for children and therapeutic services for both adults and children.

## Local Authority Responses to the Act

The DA Act was cited in the majority of tendering documents, but to different degrees. It was often unclear as to whether a local authority was simply mentioning the Act, or whether it had influenced their commissioning model.

To track patterns of commissioning, only local authority DA commissioning was considered, the influence of the Act was seen in both accommodation and community-based services.

There were 25 opportunities with a requirement for specific support for children and young people, as opposed to 39 in 2022/23, 23 in 2021/22, and 9 in 2020/21. They were either standalone services or part of wider DA service provision, this included accommodation-based and community-based services. In this year's pipeline, we also captured all mentions of support for children as a result of the DA Act. 63 opportunities mentioned support for children, but only 25 opportunities commissioned specific posts and services for children. This indicates a gap in support for children being properly resourced.

## Prospects identified as falling within the remit of the new Part Four DA Act duties 2023-2024

To establish which opportunities to report on in relation to the DA Act, we identified which prospects fit the remit of the Act. We thought it was important to distinguish between which services were just being re-commissioned and which were new provisions which met the requirements set out in the DA Act. Those that met the remit of the DA Act were opportunities funded by tier one local authorities, which contained requirements for the types of DA support services (accommodation; housing related support; therapeutic support; support for children and young people; specialist support) and needs assessments required in the Act.

The table below shows the range of opportunities commissioned that fit these criteria in 2023/2024, which were new services or additionality to services since the DA Act.

Service type	No. of prospects 2023-24*
Accommodation	15
Housing related support	1
Children and young people's support	4

Therapeutic services	6
Specialist support – protected characteristics/complex needs	1
DA Needs Assessment	1
DA Training	1
Embedding survivor voice in the service	2
Other	2
<b>Total number of relevant prospects</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Total number of prospects</b>	<b>171</b>

\*Please note these figures will differ to the figures in other tables as these figures only relate to prospects that fit the remit of the DA Act. I.e., 51 safe accommodation opportunities were released in 2023/24 but only 15 opportunities directly relate to the Act.

Whilst nearly all opportunities released in the last year reference the DA Act, only 19.9% of all commissioning opportunities in this year can be deemed attributable to the DA Act. This is a slight decline from 20.3% last year. Whilst we cannot assume that these projects / services would not have been commissioned without the influence of the Act, the continued commissioning of opportunities in relation to the Act would suggest that the DA Act has certainly influenced commissioning. The type of services being commissioned also suggest the DA Act has influenced commissioning, with an increase in opportunities for support for children, counselling and therapeutic services, and new provision that relates to the Act.

## The Victims and Prisoners Act

Over the last few years, Refuge relentlessly called for a strengthening of the Victims and Prisoners Bill during its progress through Parliament. We welcomed the 'duty to collaborate' for local authorities, PCCs and health bodies to collaborate in the commissioning of community support services for victims of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and serious violence. Our Policy team lobbied peers to support amendments to the then-Bill to ensure DA services get the funding and stability they so desperately need. Refuge called on the government to introduce adequate, sustainable funding for community-based DA services, estimated by Women's Aid to cost at least £238 million per year, and provide guidance for local commissioners to ensure community-based DA services are delivered on sustainable contract terms of at least three, and preferably five, years.

Community services are a lifeline for victim/survivors: 95% of victim/survivors supported by Refuge in the last year used these services. Despite the importance of community-based services, victim/survivors face a postcode lottery in accessing support. In 2022, the DA Commissioner's Office found that less than half of victim/survivors who want to access community-based services are able

to. Last year, 85% of frontline workers surveyed in Refuge's Local Lifelines Report[25] said their service is impacted by insufficient funding.

In addition to the insecure funding landscape, regular competitive commissioning and short-term contracts also produce significant challenges for services, particularly staff recruitment and retention. 64% of frontline workers surveyed for Refuge's Local Lifelines report said their service was impacted by short-term service contracts. To enable community-based services to take root and provide victim/survivors with the stability they need, it is vital that they are delivered on sustainable contract terms of at least three years.

With the recent rise in local authorities issuing Section 114 notices, and effectively declaring bankruptcy, the challenges faced by specialist DA services are only going to increase. Refuge is deeply concerned about the impact this will have on community-based DA services which are not backed by a statutory duty. It is more important than ever for the government to make adequate and sustainable funding commitments to the sector within legislation so that services can be there for victim/survivors of DA.

In December 2023, the DA Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, commented on what was the Victims and Prisoners Bill at the time, saying that:

*"There are still important provisions missing from this legislation. This includes ensuring that sufficient funding is made available by national government so that services can meet those needs. I want to see a National Statement by government in response to local needs assessments, which should inform sustainable investment in services. There must also be a duty on national government to meet this funding need, as well as a dedicated funding pot for services for victims and survivors who face the most significant barriers, including Deaf, disabled, LGBT+ and Black and minoritized victims and survivors." [26]*

The Victims and Prisoners Act was created to provide support to victims of crime, including victim/survivors of DA, but as it stands, the funding allocated through the Act will not do enough to create meaningful change, and appears to largely focus on the administrative cost of the 'duty to collaborate', such as meeting costs[27]. The total estimated cost for Part 1 of the Act, which focuses on victims and survivors of crime, represents just 18% of the total funding commitments made in the Act.

DA services based in the community are essential for victim/survivors, as they are commonly the first line of support that victim/survivors reach, providing them with options and advice, assessing risk, building safety plans, and supporting them to remain in the home or to flee. They also provide tailored support to victim/survivors in their own home or a safe local setting, on both a long and short-term basis. Therefore, Refuge will be closely monitoring whether commissioners are adapting to the Act and we will report on this in the next annual commissioning report.

## COMMISSIONING: BEST PRACTICE AND LEARNINGS

In this section, we will provide commentary and real-life examples of best practice and what Refuge considers as poor commissioning activity in 2023/24. To evidence best practice and showcase what good practice looks like, we will share an example of strong commissioning and will provide an overview on how it best supports victim/survivors' needs. We will also highlight examples of poor commissioning practice, where inappropriate and sometimes dangerous activity is simply not meeting the needs of women and children.

By addressing and highlighting best practice alongside the challenges, we have been able to develop a core set of recommendations to ensure VAWG services are commissioned to a high and safe standard, enabling thousands of women and their children to live free from violence and fear.

This section covers:

- Examples of best practice
- Unsafe support models
- Favouring of catch all providers
- Premises not transferring
- Short-term funding
- Insufficient funding
- Bad commissioning practice
- Restrictive referral pathways
- Price versus Quality
- Additional barriers faced by specialist 'by-and-for' organisations

Below is an example of best practice where commissioners listened to Refuge's recommendations and incorporated them into their specification.

#### **CASE STUDY: An example of best practice**

In November 2023, Council D, in the North East of England, released a tender to recommission their safe accommodation offer. The service was to provide safe accommodation and support to victims and families of DA within a refuge setting and within dispersed properties in the borough. The specification outlined the need to provide a refuge unit alongside dispersed accommodation using a cluster model approach. The cluster model required to deliver this service is based on Refuge's best practice review, "More than Bricks and Mortar".[28] This referencing of our report highlighted that Commissioners had listened to our best practice recommendations, and Refuge's language regarding dispersed accommodation and best practice was reflected throughout the specification. It is very reassuring to see commissioners listening to our recommendations surrounding best practice in delivering DA accommodation.

## **Unsafe support models**

In 2023/2024, Refuge identified two opportunities assessed as having an unsafe support model. One of these contracts, commissioned by Council E, was for an IDVA service, and the other, commissioned by Council F, was for a DA Service which included the provision of an IDVA service, refuge accommodation, and floating support. Both of these contracts were based in London. Features of these contracts included:

- The funding envelope of both services was not sufficient to provide a safe and sustainable service model.
- Council E released a tender for an IDVA service which required 6.5x IDVAs. The funding envelope provided would only have allowed for a maximum of 3x IDVAs with a Service Manager, allowing for onboarding costs, back-office support costs, and costs for training, accreditations, and TUPE. The proposed model also had a number of asks that would further stretch the capacity of the team, such as attendance at all local DHRs, running a weekly One Stop Shop, and leading on a survivor forum. There would be an additional cost needed to fund a role to deliver on these elements of the service, due to the volume of referrals the staff would be managing.
- Council F did not appear to value the quality of the service, as they were not prepared to increase the funding envelope to allow for London Living Wage to be paid for staff. When asked in a clarification question, the Council explained that they had not set the number of staff required to run the service, and therefore it was at the discretion of the provider as long as a safe staffing model was proposed. This put bidders in a compromising position, whereby they had to choose to propose a model with a safe staffing model with lower pay (risking poor staff retention, recruitment challenges, and worse staff wellbeing overall) or having fewer staff paid more (risking unsustainable caseloads, staff burnout, and less dedicated support for service users).

## Favouring of larger generic catch-all 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 associations 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 specialized staff and technology, improving efficiency and reducing overhead costs.
- **Risk Management:** With a larger portfolio, they can spread risks across more projects, which can lead to lower insurance and financing costs.
- **Operational Efficiency:** Larger organizations often have more streamlined processes and better 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.

The regulator of social housing (2023) states that's that these factors collectively enable larger housing associations to offer more competitive bids in the tender process and can be viewed as giving better value for money.

### CASE STUDY: 50% price scoring and an insufficient budget

Council K released a tender for an accommodation-based service in London. The evaluation scoring was 50% quality and 50% price, which reflects bad commissioning practice, as it puts smaller, specialist charities with less competitive financial offers at a disadvantage in the tender process. Following our analysis of the opportunity, we decided to withdraw from the process for the following reasons:

1. The service model was not financially viable because the ITT did not allow for Intensive Housing Management costs to be higher than 10%. As there was no flexibility on this, and the staffing model was specified, our service model was not affordable.
2. The evaluation criteria stated 50% price and 50% quality: this approach of placing equal value on quality and price favours larger generic providers they can spread the costs across more services.
3. A value for money approach that favours cost per unit and staff hours, rather than outcomes, is unlikely to attract quality specialist providers. This was evident by the contract award notice which reported that the contract had been awarded to a non-specialist provider.

We notified the Council of our withdrawal from the tender process and sent them a letter detailing the reasons for our withdrawal.

## Accommodation not transferring to the new provider

In 2023/2024, Refuge assessed six refuge service opportunities where no properties would be made available to the new provider. Sourcing a suitable refuge property can take significant time and resources, and becomes more challenging in larger cities, such as London, where there is currently a housing crisis, forcing the price of property up to unprecedented levels. There is also substantial cost associated with setting up a new refuge that is rarely considered in the funding envelope.

## CASE STUDY: Accommodation not transferring to the new provider

Council L, in South East England, commissioned a DA safe accommodation and support service. This was a new service, which included dispersed accommodation, with the aim of supporting those that historically have not had access to refuge services - including older male children, women with additional needs, larger families, and male victims. The service was to provide a minimum of 16 units of self-contained dispersed accommodation across the council area. As this was a brand-new service, there were no properties available for transfer, meaning the provider would have been required to source a minimum of 16 units of dispersed accommodation. The opportunity also had a short mobilisation period, stating that a minimum of 50% of the accommodation units must be available for occupation by the end of three months from the contract start date, and 100% of the accommodation units must be available for occupation by the end of six months from the contract start date, allowing little time to secure properties.

This example also highlights how tenders are being released by local authorities without including funding for the set-up costs of a new service, instead, only including the cost of funding the support in the funding envelope. This overlooks the cost of sourcing and leasing properties to be able to deliver the service from and hugely favours housing associations which have properties available to use.

## Short-term funding

In 2023/2024, there were 41 contracts of 12 months or less. Short contracts create instability for both service providers and victim/survivors. Recruitment and retention of specialist staff is particularly challenging in these circumstances.

Additionally, as evidenced in the case study of Council B, it is unreasonable to expect that providers can source accommodation in such a short timescale and for a contract period as short as one year.

## Insufficient funding

For over a decade, specialist VAWG services have been seriously impacted by a lack of funding. Local authorities, police and crime commissioners, and others who commission services have implemented a wide range of 'efficiency savings' and continue to seek 'more for less' through competitive commissioning. Refuge, like other specialist providers, has subsidised services from its own reserves for many years. This is not sustainable, especially as charities are under increased financial pressure in the cost-of-living crisis, with rising bills for energy, amongst other goods and services.

Funding for VAWG services is stagnant, with contracts rolling over and no increase to the funding. In reality, this means that services are being run on vastly outdated budgets. Simultaneously, specialist DA organisations are struggling to meet rising costs throughout the cost-of-living crisis. Significant increases in utility costs and a marked rise in inflation mean that many organisations are reaching deeper into reserves or having to reduce the scope of their services to survive. Generally, statutory funding to support DA services has not increased, with requests for increases being denied as commissioners also face cuts.

Whilst historically Refuge has been able to utilise fundraised income to supplement underfunding of core service delivery, this is neither appropriate nor sustainable. Not only has the cost-of-living crisis heavily impacted fundraised income, the rising cost of delivering services has meant additional income has been required to plug deficits that have arisen unexpectedly. There is also a significant impact on smaller, especially by-and-for specialist providers who may not have the 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 can ensure specialist organisations are adequately resourced for the time and knowledge

they need to commit to secure engagement and ensure equitable, non-discriminatory and inclusive services are provided.

There are very few commissioners who support full cost recovery. Commissioning models based on price evaluation immediately prioritise large-scale organisations with cheaper costs and economies of scale. Until DA services have more of a variety in terms of commissioning processes, for example through a mix of targeted grants and tender opportunities, this issue will never be resolved. 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.

Services continue to be commissioned with inadequate funding. In 2023/2024, Refuge dip sampled 10 opportunities, and all had insufficient funding to deliver the service, two opportunities stated that, beyond year one, the funding envelope was not guaranteed, and the provider would be required to work with the Council to secure additional funding.

#### **CASE STUDY:**

In November 2023, Council M commissioned a safe accommodation service for victim/survivors of DA.

The tender consisted of three lots:

- Lot 1: Specialist Accommodation for BAME Victims
- Lot 2: Generic, Accessible Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Abuse
- Lot 3: Specialist Accommodation for Male Victims

The Council's strategic needs assessment highlighted the current provision available in the area was below the recommended level, with only 21 safe accommodation spaces. The assessment had shown that the recommended number of spaces was 70, so, an additional 49 units were required. Therefore, this service sought to expand the safe accommodation support options and respond to the identified gaps in provision.

Following an assessment of the funding envelope provided, the funding per unit was just over £5,102 per annum, which is incredibly low and would not be sufficient to provide a safe level of staffing for the victim/survivor residents. We would expect between approximately £12,500 and £15,000 per unit, per annum. This is dependent on the number of units and the size, quantity and type of properties required.

This example also highlights how tenders are being released by local authorities without including funding for the set-up costs of a new service, instead, only including the cost of funding the support in the funding envelope. This overlooks the cost of sourcing and leasing properties to be able to deliver the service from and hugely favours housing associations which have properties available to use.

#### **CASE STUDY:**

In March 2024, Council N and Council M released an opportunity to fund 6.5 IDVAs across two London boroughs. The evaluation scoring was 100% quality, which reflects good practice. Following analysis of the bid papers and drafting an initial budget, we found that the funding envelope of £240,000 per annum was not enough to cover the required 6.5 IDVAs and did not allow and scope to include central management charges or sufficient line management to support the service.

There was also no uplift to recognise inflation or incremental salary uplifts across the five years of the prospective service. Following receipt of the TUPE information, it was also apparent that the funding envelope did not cover the current staffing model, which includes the current salaries of the IDVAs and a manager. After providing feedback to the commissioners, Refuge made the decision not to bid for this service due to insufficient funds.

## Restrictive referral pathways for refuge safe accommodation services

In 2023/24, there was one instance where the referral pathway was restricted for local people. DLUCH Guidance for Safe Accommodation is clear that safe accommodation is a national resource and should be provided for anyone in need as part of the Part IV Duty, not just for local residents. Additionally, it is often unsafe to place victim/survivors in safe accommodation within their local area, as it is easier for perpetrators to locate them. This is effectively gatekeeping of the safe accommodation resource by the local authority.

## Bad Commissioning Practice

In this financial year, Refuge have identified two examples of services being commissioned that misunderstand the nature and dynamics of DA:

### CASE STUDY 1:

One opportunity contained a lot to provide an Alcohol and Domestic Abuse Out of Court Disposal Intervention Scheme for low level DA offenders, both intimate partner and wider family members, where the offences committed are accompanied/exacerbated by excessive consumption of alcohol. The specification stated that the intervention would integrate basic treatment for the alcohol abuse and the abusive behaviour. We highlighted this tender as very problematic, as it suggests that there are perpetrators of DA who only abuse whilst they drink, and, by targeting the alcohol consumption, levels of DA should reduce. Refuge wrote to the Commissioner to understand the background for the tender and any good practice that has been used to develop the specification for this lot however they responded to say they were not able to provide us with a rationale behind commissioning this service model.

### CASE STUDY 2:

Council O, in North West England, released a tender for a one-year (with the option to extend for a further year) intervention pilot programme with the aim of reducing intimate partner violence. The Council advised that through their Early Help services, they had identified the need to provide interventions to reduce the impact of intimate partner violence.

The Council stated that individuals who display DA behaviours towards their partners have often experienced significant trauma in their own childhoods. These negative experiences can result in "complex trauma that can manifest as low self-esteem, severe insecurity in relationships, emotional dysregulation, and high stress responses". The specification described how, for some people, these needs can result in controlling and aggressive/violent behaviours towards their partners. The specialist intervention aimed to help service users to achieve positive behaviour change by resolving their past trauma and gaining an understanding about how those past experiences contribute to their current aggressive behaviours. The specification for this tender stated that "supporting positive behaviour change for perpetrators of intimate partner violence benefits the whole family by reducing the risk of harm to their partners and reducing the likelihood of their children experiencing adverse childhood experiences and traumatic incidents, thereby helping to reduce generational patterns."

This service is describing a psycho-analytic approach to therapeutic intervention, looking at how past experiences govern current behaviour. Although the specification does reference, reducing the risk of harm, it does not fully adhere to The Home Office (2023) Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Intervention Standards[29]. It does not prioritise the outcome of enhanced safety and freedom for all domestic abuse victim-survivors including children and does not include an integrated support that has parity of provision.

## Price versus Quality

In 2023/2024, Refuge found five instances of commissioning practice where bids gave greater or equal weighting to price over quality.

- 50% price: 2 tenders
- 55% price: 1 tender
- 60% price: 1 tender
- 75% price: 1 tender

By placing a greater emphasis on price over quality, commissioned providers may rely on poor practice models that are unsafe and put those accessing support at greater risk. These models are often under-staffed and non-specialist, unable to provide tailored support to the needs of victim/survivors.

The VAWG commissioning toolkit (2022) provides guidance to commissioners and outlines prioritising quality over price is crucial for several reasons[30]:

**Safety and Effectiveness:** High-quality services are more likely to provide effective support and ensure the safety of survivors. This includes trained staff, comprehensive support programs, and robust safeguarding measures.

**Long-term Impact:** Quality services can offer long-term benefits, such as reducing the likelihood of re-victimization and helping survivors rebuild their lives. This can create wider savings across public health and social care services, housing, policing and the criminal justice sector.

**Specialised Support:** Domestic abuse survivors often require specialized support that addresses their unique needs. High-quality services are better equipped to assess risk and provide individual tailored interventions, which can be more effective than generic, lower-cost options.

**Compliance and Standards:** Quality services are more likely to comply with national standards and best practices, ensuring that survivors receive the best possible care and support.

### CASE STUDY: Price favourable over quality & no given budget

In mid-November 2023, Refuge became aware that Council P had released their tender opportunity to run their Domestic Violence and Abuse Service. The deadline for submission was early December 2023, which was an unusually tight turnaround. There was no budget specified within the opportunity, and bidders were invited to provide their costings. The ratio of scoring was Quality 40%; Price 55%; Social Value 5%. Due to the lack of transparency around the available budget from the Council, and the unusually high scoring of price, Refuge decided against applying for this opportunity.

Conversely, there were also examples of good practice where 14 opportunities scored Quality at 100% and one at 95%. Despite commissioners recognising the value of the quality of the service, there have been several examples of commissioners setting a fixed budget for a service with a service model that is still unattainable for Refuge at the funding envelope price. Refuge would ask that commissioners be more flexible on staffing models and working towards full cost recovery of contracts. It is essential that service models include the cost-of-service staff, as well as back-office support functions.

## **Additional barriers – better support for specialist domestic abuse and by-and-for organisations**

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:

- Short turnaround time for tenders
- Overly complex and time intensive bidding processes
- Requirements for a single provider
- Stringent accreditation requirements
- Minimum yearly turnover requirements
- Small and insufficient budgets

We would encourage commissioners to adhere to the VAWG commissioning toolkit by recognising the value of smaller specialist organisations, and remove as many barriers as possible, as to not exclude them from the commissioning process. For example, Refuge would want to see commissioners recognising the value of consortium or partnerships bids for complex multi-element specifications and ensure that the full costs of partners are considered. Where partnerships are required, we would ask that adequate time is given from the release of the ITT to allow specialist organisations time to form partnerships with other specialist and 'by and for' organisations to deliver the service.

We would also recommend greater opportunities within the domestic abuse funding landscape. This should include a variety of; awarding contracts through direct awards, competitive commissioning and the introduction of medium-term grants of 3 to 5 years to increase opportunities for specialist domestic abuse and 'by-and-for' organisations. Domestic abuse services can fall under the Light Touch Regime (LTR) and have a threshold of £663,540 allowing for the avoidance of overly complex terms, removing barriers to access funds and building capacity for smaller third sector organisations[31]. Lastly, considering the continued increase of training, digital, social value and environmental requirements in commissioning in 2023/2024, we would encourage a balanced, realistic approach that ensures equitable opportunities within tenders and grants programmes for specialist 'by-and-for' organisations to bid.

## **THE ONGOING IMPACT OF SOCIAL VALUE**

Since the Social Value Act came into force in 2013, social value has been a requirement for consideration in all commissioning. There have always been questions over whether this requirement should apply to charitable organisations, who are already delivering vital social value through their service provision, but it was, on the whole, a manageable part of the bid process.

However, in recent years, local authorities have placed greater emphasis on social value in a way that creates additional challenges for specialist charities. Most notably of these is the use of the Social Value Portal being used by commissioners, (first used in DA commissioning in 2021/2022). This year, we saw a drop in opportunities using the Social Value Portal to evaluate this element of their procurement, from 11 (6% of bids) to nine (5% of bids). A pattern was also observed in a drop of the Social Value weighting in bids. However, one bid contained a remarkably high social value weighting of 25%.

- 59% of bids had a social value score of 10% or more of the total evaluation (74% in 22/23)
- 7% of bids had a social value score of 20% or more of the total evaluation (16% in 22/23)
- 5% of bids had a requirement to use the Social Value Portal

The use of the Social Value Portal is understandably an attractive option to commissioners, as it offers the outsourcing of managing the social value element of the tender (often a complex and time-consuming part of the bidding process) and subsequent contract. However, in our experience,

the use of this platform presents huge challenges to specialist organisations bidding for these services, including:

- **The additional cost:** Bidders are charged up to £7,500 per annum (a 50% increase since 2021/2022) to bid for opportunities that use the Social Value Portal. This is vital money that is being redirected from essential services to a third-party platform
- **Unnecessarily complex process:** The bidding process using the Social Value portal is unnecessarily complex, requiring submissions on a separate portal, often in addition to explanations of full delivery plans for each measure
- **The additional pressure on bidders' resource:** Successful providers using the Social Value Portal are required to report separately on social value outcomes. The use of this platform in the bidding process is taking up large amounts of time from already strained pools of resource.
- **The additional risk:** Successful bidders are required to enter a separate contract with the portal itself. This additional contractual obligation to a private third party is an additional and significant risk for small local providers who often do not have access to in-house legal counsel.
- **Lack of contextual flexibility:** The Social Value Portal lacks room for nuance to fairly assess the social value contribution of each organisation. It does not allow specialist organisations to be credited for the social value that will be delivered through their rich and highly valuable services; only evaluating elements outside of core service provision. This requirement adds pressure to specialist organisations to divert resources to additional social value initiatives, whilst ignoring the value of their specialist service.

Ultimately, the use of the Social Value Portal favours large, resource heavy, 'catch-all' providers. The process is complex and costly and takes away resource from frontline services. This model presents huge barriers to entry for small specialist organisations particularly and makes it almost impossible for them to successfully bid in these circumstances. Charitable organisations that provide specialist services, should be recognised for the Social Value their services provide, and we encourage commissioners to consider the fairest way to assess the real social value being delivered in their local area.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMISSIONING

- 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. 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.
- 3. 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.
- 4. 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.
- 5. 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.
- 6. Allow for realistic timescales:** Commissioners should ensure realistic tender turnaround and mobilisation timescales, to create a fair process for prospective bidders. Commissioners should also 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.
- 7. 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.
- 8. 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.
- 9. Provide support to specialist organisations for increased requirements:** We have seen a continuous requirement for digital, training and environmental requirements in commissioning in 2023/2024. Local commissioners should provide adequate guidance, funding, and time for specialist providers to be able to deliver on these requirements.

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