

The Annual Audit 2026: Summary and Policy Recommendations

Introduction and Methodological Approach

This report is the 2026 edition of Women's Aid's yearly publication on the provision, usage and work of domestic abuse services in England, examining the financial year 2024-25. The Women's Aid data sources used in this report are On Track,¹ Routes to Support,² the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2025, and Freedom of Information requests. To provide a definitive national picture of the work and needs of domestic abuse services over the past year, we set out to explore the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the national response reflect the needs of children as well as diverse women as victims and survivors?
2. What unique value do specialist services, including 'by and for' services, provide in the national response to domestic abuse?
3. Are frontline services identifying changes in the perpetration of coercive control?
4. How are domestic abuse services using AI and what do they perceive as the risks and opportunities of using AI in service delivery?
5. What was the impact of the far-right riots on the sector and victim-survivors?

We have structured the findings in this report into the following five sections: Demand, Provision, Funding, Collaboration and Accountability, and Emerging trends and issues.

¹ Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system. On Track national data represents the experiences of over 200,000 survivors supported by local domestic abuse services across England, as well our own Live Chat, email and No Woman Turned Away Project. On Track reports to a core outcomes framework for survivors, developed in partnership with Imkaan.

² The UK-wide online database for domestic abuse and other violence against women services. It provides details of services available for women and children throughout the UK, including up-to-date refuge vacancies.

Key findings

Section 1: Demand

Key message

Demand for specialist domestic abuse services continues to far outstrip provision of the lifesaving support they provide to survivors. We saw the highest proportion of referrals rejected in five years, primarily due to lack of space or capacity.

The rising rate of rejected refuge referrals, now at its highest level in five years in spite of an increase in the number of spaces, indicates systemic pressures in the housing system that directly affect the availability of lifesaving refuge spaces.

Key findings

- ▶ In the year ending March 2025:
 - 10,665 women and 11,732 children were supported by refuge services
 - 138,955 women and 180,642 children were supported by community-based support (CBS) services
- ▶ Almost two thirds (65.2%) of refuge referrals were rejected in 2024-25 - the highest proportion since 2019-20, and an increase of 5.1% since 2023-24.
- ▶ The most common reason for rejected refuge referrals was lack of capacity or space (42.7% of all rejected referrals). Available evidence suggests this may be linked to increased lengths of stay in refuge due to delays in accessing appropriate move-on accommodation.
- ▶ An estimated two million women and 2.5 million children in England experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2025. Based on ONS prevalence data, only around 7.0% of women and children who experienced domestic abuse during this period were supported by a refuge or CBS service.

Implications

Domestic abuse continues to be widespread, yet the data shows a widening gap between the scale of domestic abuse and the capacity of specialist services to respond. While not all survivors will require refuge or community-based support, the proportion able to access these services remains small relative to overall prevalence. We know that many more who experienced abuse tried and failed to access this valuable support, and that women can experience further harm whilst attempting to access refuge provision (Women's Aid, 2025).

These findings suggest that wider systematic constraints are directly impeding domestic abuse organisations in providing life-saving services to as many survivors as possible. Without addressing these issues, the gap between survivors seeking safety and those able to access it is likely to persist.

Recommendations

Expand bedspace capacity and support

- 1. For Local Authorities:** Identify gaps in provision through collaborative needs assessments which factor in the voice of victim survivors, and use the multi-year funding available under the Safe Accommodation Duty to co-produce long-term plans with specialist services to increase bed capacity and accessibility.

Increase capacity through timely move-on accommodation

- 2. For the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government of the United Kingdom (MHCLG):** Provide resources to pilot a 'move-on hub' for survivors of domestic abuse, which will facilitate pathways to move-on and establish a workable business model that enables specialist domestic abuse services and housing providers to deliver both move-on housing and ongoing support.³

Prevent further strain on the sector

- 3. For the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC):** Work alongside specialist domestic abuse organisations, including Women's Aid, to ensure that the roll out of the new Steps to Safety initiative across Integrated Care Boards does not increase pressure on already overstretched frontline services.
- 4. For the Ministry of Justice (MoJ):** Ensure that further rollout of the Pathfinder pilot is underpinned by sufficient dedicated resources, so that specialist domestic abuse services can meet increase in demand.

Section 2: Provision

Key message

The specialist domestic abuse sector provides a vital range of support to survivors, including critical support to survivors through the family courts and tailored support to safely and sensitively address intersecting needs to survivors with additional support needs who do not always receive appropriate responses from statutory agencies. The level of service provision has increased slightly year-on-year, however, as the On Track national

referral estimates show, the number of survivors supported by refuge has decreased, and the number of survivors who are unable to access refuge continues to grow. As discussed above, available evidence suggests this may be linked to structural issues, such as delays in accessing move-on accommodation leading to increased length of stay in refuges.

³ This recommendation is explored further in [Improving the move-on pathway for survivors in refuge services](#) (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance and Women's Aid, 2022).

Key findings

- ▶ On 1st of May 2025 there were 4,619 bedspaces across 286 refuges, an increase of 68 bedspaces since the previous year. Despite this small increase, there is still a substantial shortfall of 19.9% of the Council of Europe's recommendation of one refuge bedspace per 10,000 head of population.
- ▶ 7,853 vacancies were posted on Routes to Support in 2024-25. This is an increase of 303 compared to the previous year, however it is still significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels.
- ▶ Only 11.5% of vacancies could consider a woman with no recourse to public funds in 2024-25. Vacancies suitable for wheelchair users are incredibly scarce at only 1.1% of vacancies.
- ▶ The proportion of refuges running a dedicated children and young people (CYP) service decreased by 11.6%, so only 58.0% of refuge services and 52.2% of CBS services had a dedicated CYP service as of 1st May 2025.

Implications

Specialist services provide unique value in the national response to domestic abuse by offering a wide range of services designed to meet survivors' diverse needs. Despite small net increases in some services there continues to be a lack of provision, with the number of refuge bedspaces still being below recommended levels

and limited provision available for marginalised survivors. Evidence suggests that refuge services are constrained by broader structural challenges, such as the lack of social housing. Addressing these challenges and adequately resourcing specialist services would enable more survivors to access the support they need.

Recommendations

Prioritise and strengthen infrastructure of specialist provision for marginalised groups

1. For HM Treasury (HMT):

- Introduce dedicated funding for specialist domestic abuse services which support children and young people.
- Ringfence funding for specialist domestic abuse services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, d/Deaf and disabled women and LGBT+ victims and survivors within wider allocations, ensuring that 'by and for' organisations lead on both the development and evaluation of any ringfenced funding pot.

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2. For Local Authorities:

- To meet the full spectrum of need, ensure that funding for the Safe Accommodation Duty is strategically allocated to:
 - Provide tailored support to women with support needs around substance use mental health, disabilities and no recourse to public funds.
 - Include adequate funding for specialist 'by and for' provision to meet the needs identified in needs assessments which covers the full costs of service delivery.

Protect community-based support during transition away from PCCs

- 3. For the Home Office:** Ensure that the core responsibilities currently held by PCCs - particularly the commissioning of victims' community-based support services - are retained through clearly defined, dedicated roles. These postholders should be trained by specialists in violence against women and girls and be accountable for strategic commissioning decisions.

Invest in evidence gathering to strengthen response

- 4. For MHCLG:** Conduct further consultation to better understand barriers and challenges in funding and commissioning that 'by and for' services face.
- 5. For the Department for Education (DfE)/MHCLG:** Work with Women's Aid and the wider sector to invest in further research to identify the financial shortfall of investment services for CYP, including those in safe accommodation.
- 6. For DfE/MHCLG:** Invest in further research to evidence the impact of specialist domestic abuse services for CYP as victims in their own right, including those in safe accommodation.

Strengthen family justice response to alleviate pressure on specialist services

7. For MoJ:

- Address the issues raised in the Ministry of Justice's recent [evaluation report of children and families' experiences of the Pathfinder pilots](#), before rolling out nationally.
- Ensure that high-quality, trauma-informed and mandatory multi-agency training on domestic abuse is rolled out across the family justice system, including the judiciary. The Ministry of Justice should also ensure resourcing is available to the Judicial College to enable the development and implementation of this training for the judiciary.
- Ensure appropriate translation and interpretation services and special measures are sufficiently resourced, and readily available and accessible across England to all survivors who need them.

Section 3: Funding

Key message

Domestic abuse services continue to provide a wide range of services to support survivors. Yet these services remain significantly underfunded and funding remains short term. A growing proportion of services are operating without full commissioning, without dedicated funding

for core elements of provision, and are relying on reserves and volunteers to sustain essential support — with direct consequences for survivors, particularly those with more complex needs and those supported by ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised services.

Key findings

- ▶ At least one in eight (13.3%) refuge services receive no local authority commissioned funding at all.
- ▶ Of those that do receive funding through local authority commissioning, only around a third (36.0%) are funded for all support staff costs, including salaries, clinical supervision and training.
- ▶ There has been an increase in partially commissioned services, suggesting greater reliance on diversified income streams and provision of bedspaces they are not commissioned for.
- ▶ Refuges run ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women were less likely to be commissioned by the local authority, with 42.9% of Imkaan-member refuges being fully commissioned compared to the national proportion of 72.4% of all refuges being fully commissioned.
- ▶ Funding for community-based services from Police and Crime Commissioners remains consistent at around 50.0% year-on-year.
- ▶ Almost two fifths (39.1%) of organisations delivered part of their domestic abuse service without dedicated funding in 2024–25, an increase from 35.0% the previous year.
- ▶ Of organisations delivering unfunded services:
 - 74.0% used reserves to cover costs
 - 42.0% relied on volunteers
 - 22.0% closed or reduced part of their service during the 2024-25 financial year
 - 46.0% reported being unable to plan for the future
 - 30.0% reported reduced capacity to support women with more complex needs.

Implications

The data indicates more services in the sector are operating on partial and unstable funding. While many organisations continue to manage provision through reserves, volunteer labour, and diversification of income, this model is not sustainable in the long term.

Most concerning is the impact on survivors of a reduced capacity to support women with more

complex needs. This will likely affect the most vulnerable survivors, where those with multiple intersecting support needs require additional support from services who hold specialist expertise in how this impacts experiences of domestic abuse. Without greater funding stability, the sector’s ability to deliver safe, high-quality and equitable provision will continue to be constrained.

Recommendations

Protect ringfenced funding for victims and survivors

- 1. For HMT:** Ensure that funding currently allocated to PCCs for victims' services remains ringfenced and continues to be administered by dedicated roles. At a minimum, the Government should ensure that this funding is not absorbed into the wider responsibilities of local authorities, where there is a significant risk that specialist victims' services would be deprioritised or diluted.
- 2. For Local Authorities:** Retain all funding allocated under the Safe Accommodation Duty for domestic abuse provision within safe accommodation.
- 3. Address the need for emergency grants for survivors at the point of fleeing:** Invest in the long-term continuation of the Flexible Fund beyond 2026 and ensure that this is renewed at a minimum of £2m each year, rising with inflation, population changes and demand. As part of this, engage in longer term discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions as part of the VAWG strategy work to ensure that the welfare system is adequately equipped so that survivors have the financial means to flee.

Section 4: Collaboration and accountability

Key message

While most specialist domestic abuse services are represented on local partnership boards, confidence in their decision-making, accountability mechanisms and oversight remains limited. Many services report mixed experiences of multi-agency working, ongoing power imbalances between statutory agencies and specialist providers, and lack of transparency in commissioning and

governance processes. These findings indicate that strengthening collaboration is not solely about the existence of partnership forums, but about ensuring they operate with clarity, accountability, transparency and genuine recognition of specialist expertise - with survivor voice embedded meaningfully within local decision-making processes.

Key findings

- ▶ Three fifths (61.7%) of organisations were represented on their Local Partnership Board (LPB) in 2024–25.
- ▶ Of those represented on LPB's:
 - just over half (54.4%) agreed their LPB had delivered effective decision-making locally
 - less than half (44.3%) agreed LPBs had improved conditions for survivors
 - less than a third (31.6%) agreed LPBs had improved commissioning for specialist services.

▶ Less than a third (29.7%) of organisations felt they were able to effectively hold their local authority to account for decision-making, and only 11.7% of organisations felt that accountability mechanisms in their local area were ‘very effective.’

▶ Just under a third (32.0%) indicated that there had been positive improvements in their local area, however, the same proportion (32.0%) reported that multi-agency working had been mixed, with some positive improvements as well as some negative impact/ deterioration.

▶ Only 14.1% felt there was effective oversight of multi-agency working locally.

Implications

The findings suggest that whilst formal partnership structures are in place in most areas, their impact is uneven. Representation on Local Partnership Boards does not consistently translate into confidence in decision-making, commissioning improvements or strengthened conditions for survivors.

A significant proportion of services report limited ability to hold local authorities to account, alongside low confidence in existing oversight mechanisms. Concerns about transparency, consistency and power imbalances indicate that governance arrangements may not be functioning as intended. Where specialist domestic abuse

services feel their expertise is undervalued or their input does not meaningfully influence decisions, the effectiveness of the wider system is weakened.

Experiences of multi-agency working reflect both progress and persistent challenges. While some areas demonstrate improved relationships and better shared understanding, others continue to experience siloed working, inconsistent responses and gaps in domestic abuse knowledge. Limited oversight of multi-agency arrangements further compounds these issues.

Recommendations

Reform commissioning systems including enforcing existing guidance and strengthening oversight

- 1. For MHCLG:** In partnership with specialist organisations and commissioning experts, strengthen statutory guidance for local authorities in relation to Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and develop a more robust mechanism for accountability.
- 2. For the Home Office:**
 - Drive forward the Government’s commitment to a ‘radical transformation of the commissioning landscape’ without delay.
 - Prioritise the development of a National Commissioning Statement and develop a clear mechanism for the monitoring and national oversight of poor commissioning decisions.

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3. **For Local authorities:** follow the statutory guidance for the Safe Accommodation Duty, including appropriate representation on Local Partnership Boards to ensure that Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Boards deliver effective and collaborative decision-making. Local authorities can view further guidance on best practice for Local Partnership Boards, produced by [Women's Aid](#).
4. **For Local authorities:** Council leaders and councillors should engage regularly with specialist domestic abuse services to inform their oversight of Local Partnership Boards, support the resolution of challenges or blockages, and through appropriate scrutiny mechanisms, ensure that requirements under the Safe Accommodation Duty are being met.

Section 5: Emerging trends and issues

Key message

The operating environment for specialist domestic abuse services continues to evolve rapidly with services adapting to increased use of AI. New forms of technology-facilitated abuse continue to emerge, alongside digital tools that can be used by survivors to protect themselves. Whilst most services report confidence in safety planning, it appears that their ability to support survivors around these issues is restricted by how technical

devices operate, emphasising that device manufacturers have a responsibility to consider safety allowances in their design and operation. Additionally, services are responding to wider social and political developments, including the far-right riots and the impact of international humanitarian crises, which are shaping survivor experiences and placing additional pressures on frontline provision.

Key findings

- ▶ Almost a third (32.2%) of services reported that they had a written AI policy or were in the process of developing one.
- ▶ Services reported using AI-based tools primarily for:
 - Secretarial tasks (20.0%)
 - Communications (17.1%)
 - Funding/benefit applications (15.7%)
 - Research and reporting (15.7%)

- ▶ The majority of services (64.9%) either agreed (47.7%) or strongly agreed (17.2%) that they were able to sufficiently safety plan around technology-facilitated abuse. However, they are restricted by how these technical devices operate.
- ▶ The most common forms of technology-facilitated abuse disclosed to services were:
 - Online stalking (78.1%)
 - Compromising social media profiles (68.0%)
 - Misuse of GPS trackers (68.0%)
 - Non-consensual intimate image sharing (or threats of sharing) (66.4%)
- ▶ The most common form of technology-facilitated abuse identified as new to services' experience in the past year was coerced participation in OnlyFans or other online activity.
- ▶ Services reported the following impacts of the far-right riots in Summer 2024:
 - Increased demand on services
 - Increased discrimination and direct racist abuse experienced by survivors
 - Two services reported having to close offices or cancel face-to-face provision during this period
 - Services expressed concern about longer-term impacts on survivors' willingness to seek help
- ▶ Services reported an increased need to support women affected by humanitarian crises, particularly migrant survivors, alongside a greater emotional and practical burden on frontline staff responding to trauma outside their usual remit.

Implications

The findings demonstrate that specialist domestic abuse services are operating within an increasingly complex and rapidly shifting context. The gradual adoption of AI tools reflects operational adaptation, particularly in administrative and communications functions. However, this shift also highlights the need for clear policies, ethical safeguards and ongoing consideration of risks in sensitive service environments.

The impact of the far-right riots and international humanitarian crises demonstrate that services are not only responding to domestic abuse, but also to trauma linked to these contexts. Taken together, these trends indicate that the specialist domestic abuse sector must continually adapt to technological change and wider societal pressures. This evolving landscape places additional responsibilities on frontline services and highlights the importance of flexible, informed and trauma-responsive practice in meeting survivors' changing needs.

Recommendations

Sector-specific AI guidance

1. **For the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT):** Work alongside specialist domestic abuse organisations, including Women's Aid, and survivors to adapt AI guidance (such as Government [guidance on developing and using data analytics tools in children's social care](#) and [Data and Ethics Framework](#)) to the domestic abuse and VAWG sector.

Platforms are held accountable

2. **For Ofcom:** Make Ofcom's VAWG guidance, [Guidance on a safer life online for women and girls](#), a mandatory Code of Practice for tech companies. Responsibility for preventing and tackling VAWG in the online space must primarily lie with tech companies and online platforms.

Counter harmful narratives

3. **For the Home Office:** Recognise and address the impact of anti-migrant rhetoric and the weaponisation of VAWG in exacerbating VAWG against Black, minoritised and migrant survivors.

Provide guidance on survivors' rights

4. **For the Home Office:** Develop clear guidance, in partnership with specialist domestic abuse organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised survivors, on the rights of survivors to access safety from domestic abuse regardless of ethnicity, nationality and immigration status.

Concluding remarks

The findings of the Annual Audit 2026 present a stark picture of a sector under sustained pressure. While specialist domestic abuse services across England continue to demonstrate resilience, expertise and commitment, demand for services far outstrips provision. Refuge rejection rates are at their highest level since 2019-20, and bedspaces remain nearly a fifth below the Council of Europe's recommendation. Other available evidence suggests that systematic barriers - particularly delays in accessing safe move-on accommodation - are key problems. The funding landscape remains fragile, with many services operating without full commissioning for core staff and essential areas of work, relying on reserves and volunteers to sustain provision. This instability has direct consequences for survivors, especially those with more complex or intersecting needs, and is particularly concerning for specialist 'by and for' services supporting Black and minoritised women.

Collaboration and accountability mechanisms show mixed progress, with ongoing concerns about transparency, oversight, and power imbalances. Meanwhile, the environment and needs of survivors continue to evolve, with new forms of technology-facilitated abuse, cautious adoption of AI, and wider social and political developments placing additional pressures on survivors and frontline staff.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates how specialist domestic abuse services are a life-saving and essential infrastructure, and the national response to violence against women and girls cannot be delivered without a robust and sustainable specialist sector. Strengthening and stabilising this foundation is critical to narrowing the gap between need and support and ensuring a coordinated, survivor-centred response.

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