

SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives Campaign

Briefing on Supported Housing Reforms

November 2017

The proposed 'supported housing' funding reforms threaten to dismantle our life-saving national network of refuges and put the lives of women and children trying to escape domestic abuse at risk. Women's Aid's survey of refuge services showed that the proposed new model of funding would force over half of refuges responding to close or reduce their provision - resulting in 4000 more women and children turned away from the lifesaving services they desperately need. Women's Aid are issuing an urgent SOS call to Government to work with us to develop a sustainable future funding model that works for refuges. SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives.

Specialist domestic abuse refuges are more than just a 'bed for the night'. They save lives, providing safe and anonymous shelter and support for women and children forced to flee their home to escape domestic abuse. This life-line is critical; it is known that 598 women were killed by men identified as current or former partners in England and Wales between 2009 and 2015, and the time after separation from a perpetrator is a time of severe risk.¹ Refuges are one part of a diverse range of specialist domestic abuse services provided locally - from education and prevention, to outreach or drop-in support. Currently, however, there are not enough refuge spaces to meet demand; data from Women's Aid shows that 60% of total referrals to refuge were declined in 2016/17, with 90 women and 94 children turned away on just one day in 2017.² Despite the desperate need for refuge, funding is highly insecure. Refuges currently have two main forms of income:

- **Support funding** enables refuges to pay their support staff and can sometimes fund counselling, therapy and advice. This funding reduced significantly after the ring-fence on the 'Supporting People' programme was removed in 2009, and the fund was absorbed into shrinking local authority budgets in 2011. In response, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) delivered over £53 million in emergency grant funding for refuges and other domestic abuse services to local authorities between 2014-18. Whilst this welcome funding has bolstered provision, it has not delivered a sustainable solution and the provision of support funding remains highly fragmented and short term. Over one in ten of the domestic abuse services responding to our annual survey had no local authority funding at all in 2016/17.³
- **Housing funding** is needed to run a refuge building, and covers rent and service charges. On average, housing benefit provides 89% of a refuge's weekly housing costs in England and provides around 53% of their total yearly income.⁴ Housing benefit provides national financial certainty for paying the individual housing costs of eligible women and children in refuges and - unlike support funding - is not subject to local discretion.

Supported Housing Reforms

We warmly welcome the Government's commitment to introduce a new Bill to better protect victims of domestic violence and abuse. We fear this legislation will be undermined by 'supported housing reforms' - the biggest change to refuge 'housing costs' in recent years. This is due to the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) - which is intended to replace all current working-age benefits, including housing benefit, by 2022. Because it is paid monthly in arrears,

¹ The Femicide Census - Women's Aid in partnership with Karen Ingala Smith, 2016.

² Women's Aid Annual Survey, 2017 - these are instances of referral; a woman and her children may be counted more than once if turned away from more than one responding service.

³ Women's Aid Annual Survey, 2017 - from 124 organisations responding to this question.

⁴ Women's Aid, Survey on the LHA Cap, 2016 - from 43 refuges in our sample responding to this question.

and has long assessment periods and waiting times, the administration of UC would likely be complex in refuges - where women and children may only stay for a short period of time. The Government is therefore proposing a new system of funding for 'housing costs' in refuge from 2020. This proposal, open to public consultation until 23 January 2017, would:

- Combine refuges with a very disparate group of "short-term supported housing services" - including hostels for homeless people with support needs, shorter term housing for those with substance misuse problems and vulnerable young people, such as care leavers.
- Remove refuges entirely from the welfare system. 'Housing costs' funding will be devolved in a new 'ring-fenced' grant to local authorities in England, who will administer this grant, in line with new non-statutory guidance, to short-term supported housing services. Local authorities will be responsible for commissioning these services to meet local needs.

Impact of the new model

Following the Government's announcement of this new model of funding, Women's Aid surveyed refuge providers⁵ in England about the impact it would have upon their service. The stark findings demonstrate that the Government's proposals will have a catastrophic impact on women's refuges:

- Providers responding to our survey tell us that over a third, 39%, of their refuge services would have to close completely, seeing the loss of a total of 446 refuge spaces.
- A further 13% of the refuge services in our survey would reduce the spaces available in their refuges, by a total of 142 spaces between them.
- From the sample in our survey, just over half of refuges (52%) would either have to close the refuge service entirely or reduce the number of spaces available - a loss of 588 refuge spaces in all.
- In total, we estimate that these 588 spaces lost would have supported 2,058 women and 2,202 children during the year - resulting in 4000 more women and children turned away from the lifesaving services they desperately need.

Concerns with the new model

The proposed model would mark the full devolution of responsibility and resourcing for domestic abuse refuges to local areas. Women's Aid is clear that this is wholly inappropriate for, and risks the end of, the national network of specialist domestic abuse refuges. We have a number of serious concerns with this proposal, which have already been shared with Government during the past year:

- **Ending individual entitlement** will fundamentally change how refuges operate. Rather than receiving housing benefit for individual women, refuges will likely be subject to local authority grant restrictions for their 'housing costs' - and may face pressure to impose eligibility conditions, such as length of stay. The 'postcode lottery' of domestic abuse provision between areas will worsen.
- **Local, not national:** refuges are a critical part of the national response to domestic abuse, and have to operate as a national network of services to ensure safety for survivors. Over two thirds of women flee to refuge outside of their local area to escape a perpetrator,⁶ which means these services simply cannot be commissioned or funded on the basis of local need alone.
- **Will not respond to demand:** the amount of local grant-funding for short-term supported housing services will be based on current levels of housing benefit spend in that local area. This will be a fixed 'pot' of money, which cannot flex or respond to actual levels of demand for refuge.

⁵ We sent our survey to all providers of refuge services listed on Routes to Support on 1st November 2017. We received 60 responses (38% of all providers) to our survey from providers running 78 refuge services with a total 1,149 refuge spaces between them. In all this accounts for 31% of the refuge spaces available and 29% of the refuge services in England.

⁶ Women's Aid Annual Survey, 2017

- **Generic, not specialist:** local commissioning practices, which often lack domestic abuse expertise, have severely damaged refuge provision. In a context of major demand for refuge and all other “short-term services”, there will be little incentive for commissioning a range of services to meet differing needs. This model will further incentivise “one-size fits all” short-term housing which can be provided at lower-cost - but does not deliver the specialist support of a refuge. Categorising refuges as “short-term” services fails to recognise their unique role, and quality of provision.
- **Closures:** an increasing number of refuge services are not commissioned locally and some receive no local authority funding at all. These are often specific, specialist services for black and minority (BME), disabled women and other marginalised groups, providing a service of very significant national importance. It is very unlikely these services would be able to survive within this model.
- **Short-term and uncertain:** operating within the benefits system provides some funding security in a highly challenging funding landscape. The move to this solely local model creates huge uncertainty - particularly if housing costs funding is subject to short term decisions, budget reductions, or drives to reduce demand, costs and levels of service. The government ‘intends’ to maintain a ring-fence for short-term services but provide no guarantee, and the ring-fence won’t be for refuges alone. The history of the ‘Supporting People’ programme provides no confidence to services that the ring-fence will remain.

SOS Call to Government

In May 2017, two cross-party House of Commons Select Committees [stated that](#) *“refuges for women and children have unique challenges within the supported housing sector. This should be reflected in a distinct model of funding, separate to the arrangements for other forms of supported housing (...) it is essential that refuges are able to operate as a national network, unrestrained by admission restrictions imposed by individual local authorities and with appropriate coverage across the country. The Government should work with Women’s Aid and refuge providers to devise a separate funding mechanism for this sector.”*⁷

Women’s Aid is clear that the funding model proposed would compound the devastating unintended impacts of localism on refuges, remove their last secure form of funding, and result in significantly reduced levels of provision and certain closures. As the Government have committed to ‘review refuge funding’ by November 2018, we are calling for an urgent rethink of this unsuitable funding model within this public consultation period.

We are calling on the Government to work with Women’s Aid to develop a sustainable future funding model for refuges while they are undertaking their refuge funding review. A new model must cover both their housing and support costs, and meet the national need for bedspaces in services that are resourced to meet women’s and children’s needs. We also need an absolute commitment that no refuge services will close or have to turn away any women or children as a result of a new model of funding. SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives.

⁷ 1st Joint Report of the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees - Future of supported housing, HC 867, 1 May 2017