

Domestic Abuse Service Commissioning – Best Practice in Action

1. Introduction

This report provides examples of good practice in local authority commissioning processes for domestic abuse services. The report has been commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and prepared by the Research and Evaluation team at Women's Aid Federation of England (Women's Aid). It answers the following research questions:

1. What does good practice look like in local authority commissioning practices for domestic abuse service provision in England?
2. How can examples of good practice be applied to improving commissioning of domestic abuse services in England in the future?

Using information from the Women's Aid Annual Survey and case studies developed in partnership with Women's Aid members, this report presents service providers' positive experiences with commissioning. It aims to highlight good practice and show how local authorities can best approach domestic abuse commissioning in their area. Each section of the report looks at a key element of successful commissioning, with relevant recommendations for best practice and examples from service providers.

Funding arrangements for domestic abuse services in England are complex and made up of a range of fragmented and insecure sources (Women's Aid, 2021). These arrangements include commissioned funding from local authorities, Integrated Care Boards, Police and Crime Commissioners (PPCs), and charitable funding sources such as trusts, foundations and donations. This report focuses on local authority commissioning only. Core funding for many domestic abuse services is delivered through local authority commissioned funding, although this is not the case for a significant proportion of services, particularly by and for services who are the least likely to receive statutory funding (Women's Aid, 2023). It is vital that local authority commissioning is carried out effectively and these processes result in the availability of good quality service provision that is suitable to meet the diverse needs of survivors, including children.

This report refers to specialist women's domestic abuse services. By this we mean domestic abuse services which are feminist organisations run by women, and for women and their children, whose core business and organisational purpose it is to support survivors and/or children and young people impacted by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). These services are delivered by specially trained staff and are specifically designed to support women and their children affected by domestic abuse, sexual violence and/or other forms of VAWG. The support they offer is needs-led and gender-responsive. The lived experience of women experiencing domestic abuse (survivors) is represented within their governance and staffing structures. These services differ from generic services because they are independent from the state. They were established as local, grassroots and independent organisations, which is critical for women survivors' ability to trust them.

2. Methodology

2.1 Annual Survey data

This report uses quotes from responses to the Women's Aid Annual Survey 2023. The Women's Aid Annual Survey is a national survey of the whole range of domestic abuse services for women and children in England. The online survey was sent in June 2023 (with an end of July deadline) to all domestic abuse services in England that run both or one of refuge and/or community-based support (CBS) services, listed in Routes to Support¹. Respondents were self-selecting. The survey included questions on a range of topics to capture service providers' experiences of delivering domestic abuse services in 2022-23. This report draws on Annual Survey data from questions asking for views on the impact of the statutory duty and providers' involvement with local partnership boards, and to a question which specifically asked respondents what they feel has been successful about local authority commissioning in their local area.

It is important to note that only positive examples of engaging with local authority commissioning have been included in this report. These examples cannot be taken as representative of all domestic service providers' experiences of engaging with local authority commissioning processes. Women's Aid research shows that funding and commissioning are key challenges for local domestic abuse services (Women's Aid,

¹ Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies. The online directory is run in partnership between Women's Aid Federation of England, Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid.

2023). There was a range of mixed experiences with local authority commissioning reported in the 2023 Women's Aid Annual Survey. The quotes drawn from the Annual Survey which have been included in this report are drawn from the responses of all 16 organisations who reported positive experiences with local authority commissioning, out of 104 organisations which responded to the 2023 Annual Survey in total.

It should also be noted that only two of the 16 organisations whose Annual Survey quotes have been included in this report are 'by and for' Black and minoritised women's services². We know these services are less likely than other domestic abuse services to receive local authority commissioned funding and face significant funding challenges (Women's Aid, 2023).

2.2 Case studies

The report also includes four case studies which provide a more detailed insight into some Women's Aid members' experiences with commissioning. Three of these case studies are drawn from Women's Aid's sustainability and policy work with members of our federation of 170 organisations providing local domestic abuse services in England. One case study (Case Study Four) was developed through a semi-structured interview with a representative from a member organisation who completed the Annual Survey 2023. Each case study has been developed in partnership with the members involved and provides a more in-depth understanding of the positive impact that informed and well-considered commissioning processes can have on the delivery of specialist women's domestic abuse services.

3. Findings: Key elements of good practice in commissioning domestic abuse services

This part of the report is separated into four sections, each focusing on a key element of good practice. These key elements are interlinked and overlapping and should be considered throughout all stages of the commissioning process, from planning to delivery of a contract. Each section details the specific recommendations which should

² Women's Aid uses the definition of the 'by and for' expert sector as set out by Imkaan in the Alternative Bill: *"This term refers to specialist services that are designed and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve. This can include, for example, services led by and for Black and minoritised women, Deaf or disabled women, LGBT+ women, etc. In the context of VAWG we refer to women-only VAWG services as manifesting specific expertise designed and developed to address VAWG."* (Imkaan, 2018).

be considered and applied in this area, along with relevant examples and a case study evidencing the positive impact these approaches have on service delivery.

3.1 Thorough preparation

Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment

Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 places a statutory duty on Tier One local authorities to provide support in safe accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse. This includes the duty to conduct a needs assessment for accommodation-based domestic abuse support in their local area for adult and child survivors. Needs assessments involve assessing the demographics of those needing support, mapping existing provision and identifying gaps. To ensure needs assessments are accurate and robust, they should involve consultation with both commissioned and non-commissioned providers operating in the local area to understand the level and types of need, including needs of those who come from outside the area. One example showing the positive impact of this new requirement on local authorities can be seen in Case Study One below, where learning from the needs assessment resulted in funding being delivered to the most-needed service areas that were not previously funded. The benefits of a thorough needs assessment are also evident in some responses to the Annual Survey. When asked what has been successful about local authority commissioning in their area, two providers said:

“Where funders have asked us directly what gaps we have identified in the services we offer. This has resulted in us receiving funding for an older persons IDVA role. The funding is for a longer period which means it will be more impactful and achieve better outcomes for survivors.”
(Women’s Aid member service, South East of England)

“It works best when you are seen as an equal partner and when the commissioner understands the need locally” (Women’s Aid member service, North West of England)

Develop a violence against women and girls strategy

Another new requirement placed on local Authorities under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is to develop a strategy to address the needs identified in their assessment. The statutory guidance highlights that this could form part of a wider domestic abuse of violence against women and girls strategy. A strategy is a clear and detailed plan for how the council will provide support for survivors, as identified in their needs assessment. Statutory guidance clearly recognises the gendered nature of VAWG

and this should be reflected in local authority VAWG strategies, along with relevant statistics which evidence this. Strategies should also address provision for minoritised groups such as Black and Minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, and LGBTQ+ survivors. Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the approach should be considered from the initial stages of developing the strategy. This process can help to identify local specialisms, which one organisation reported in the Annual Survey was a particular strength of their areas approach:

“Lancashire County Council are good at commissioning local specialist services rather than national”. (Women’s Aid member service, North West)

Undertake coordinated community response training

Local authorities should ensure that employees with responsibility for strategic domestic abuse coordination are equipped with the necessary skills and expertise, including an understanding of how to apply a gender-informed approach to commissioning. One way to upskill professionals is through undertaking coordinated community response training delivered by a specialist organisation or other specialist training or multi-agency responses to VAWG. Commissioners that have extensive knowledge of VAWG dynamics, policies and responses are better able to apply best practice, as shown in this quote from the Annual Survey:

“The Luton DA [domestic abuse] Commissioner has extensive expertise in the domestic abuse arena and has been very inclusive in her decision making and appreciates the expertise of VCS [voluntary and community sector] DA providers. She has also initiated a number of working groups to address areas for further development or gaps in service provision.” (Women’s Aid member Service, East of England)

Case Study One: Specialist domestic abuse service working in partnership with commissioners in Essex.

Effective service provision starts with thorough and robust assessment of need. The council adopted a collaborative approach to commissioning by working closely with local specialist services and service providers to map existing provision. Cabinet members made sure that every partner working on domestic abuse was in the room.

Following the statutory duty, their first priority was to continue safe accommodation for survivors currently in refuge - to ensure any gaps in funding were covered. The council then looked at all the domestic abuse providers in the area, which areas weren't funded (e.g., Children and Young People) and used the available funding to plug the gaps.

As a result, the specialist domestic abuse service and commissioners worked in partnership to design services to create diversity for survivors.

3.2 Informed by specialists

Conduct meaningful engagement with existing providers

Specialist women's domestic abuse support providers are experts in local need and priorities for preventing domestic abuse and delivering support, holding valuable knowledge on how to achieve the best outcomes for survivors in their areas. Commissioners should value this expertise and work with providers to ensure their voices are heard. Engagement should be carried out with professionalism and respect. For example, commissioners should be considerate of providers' capacity by not requesting information from them at short notice and properly compensating them for their expertise. A collaborative working relationship between commissioners and providers takes work, but ultimately benefits service delivery and avoids issues in the long-term, as shown in Case Study Four (see Section 3.4). Some providers have reported that their engagement with local authorities has improved recently, for example:

"Commissioners have made a concerted effort to listen to and engage with us as a service. We are part way through a contract that was commissioned pre-covid and our main contacts at the local authority

are more engaged with us than we have previously experienced.”
(Women’s Aid member service, West Midlands)

Other Annual Survey respondents also highlighted the positive impact of meaningful consultation:

“A good working relationship with a commissioner takes time and work. It requires them to treat us as a trusted partner.” (Women’s Aid member service, North West of England)

“Good VCS [voluntary and community sector] representation; we have a strong voice and are being listened to and have been able to influence strategic and commissioning intentions.” (Women’s Aid member service, East of England)

Use qualitative research methods

Commissioning decisions should be based on evidence. Robust quantitative data is essential, but commissioners should also seek out and value evidence that is drawn from qualitative methods. This is crucial given that many of the most marginalised survivors, such as those who are sofa surfing or rough sleeping for example, are hidden from quantitative needs assessments. Qualitative data helps to provide a well-rounded picture, it enables commissioners to measure quality and provides a deeper understanding to better address any issues. Qualitative information gathering activities can include engaging with survivors or attending workshops, as shown in Case Study Three (see Section 3.2). Another example is shown in the following quote from the Annual Survey:

“We are very involved. Good practice from the LA includes the DA Lead attending our Peer Support Group monthly and coming back with solutions or explanations.” (Women’s Aid member service, North West of England)

Include survivor voices

The views and experiences of survivors should be integrated into commissioning processes. For example, survivors should be represented at Domestic Abuse Partnership boards and their voices should be captured in local authority VAWG Strategies. Commissioners should ensure that survivor engagement is safe, meaningful and not tokenistic. Survivor perspectives provide a deeper understanding of domestic abuse dynamics and experiences which leads to more informed commissioning approaches and decision-making that delivers the right support.

It is essential that when survivors are consulted, care is taken to ensure their safety and that their involvement does not cause further harm. Survivors should have access to specialist support throughout the engagement process. A wide range of survivor voices should be included; it is important to remember that one marginalised person does not speak for all marginalised people. Consultation processes should consider the accessibility needs of survivors and make necessary arrangements to ensure survivors with disabilities are able to take part. All expenses associated with engagement must be reimbursed and ideally survivors should be compensated for contributing their expertise. The positive impact of including survivor perspectives can be seen in Case Study Four (see Section 3.4) and in the following quote from the Annual Survey:

"[Referring to their local partnership board] Really supportive and wanting to make a difference. Feels more than a tick box meeting. The fact we have a victim voice facilitator who attends the meeting, makes a real difference." (Women's Aid member service, North West of England)

Case Study Two: Showing commissioners the value of specialist domestic abuse services in Trafford.

Prior to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 being passed, a service provider in Trafford made efforts to build relationships with local commissioners. They invited commissioners to attend Women's Aid's statutory duty workshops to better understand their new duties and presented evidence on best practice commissioning against each of the points set out in the statutory duty factsheet that Women's Aid provided to members.

The provider presented evidence on the value for money that local specialist services bring by delivering a business case to show how local services can support them to meet their objectives and requirements under the new duty. This showcased their work and demonstrated their expertise to ensure that local commissioners understood the value they brought to their new statutory duties.

Strong, collaborative, multi-agency partnerships were successfully built between local expert specialist domestic abuse services and commissioners who had extensive knowledge of the VAWG sector. The service provider were given a 5-year direct award grant, which provided dedicated funding for safe accommodation and a range of other services. This direct award recognised the expertise of the provider, showed they were a valued partner and provided stability for the services. By avoiding procurement, pressure on the provider was reduced and staff were able to focus on service delivery instead of diverting time to bid preparation.

3.3 Successful partnerships and collaboration

Set up a domestic abuse partnership board

Under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Tier One local authorities in England are required to set up a multi-agency local partnership board. Partnership boards should include representation from the following local stakeholders:

- Tier two local authorities within the area
- Survivors of abuse
- Organisations supporting children of survivors
- Specialist women's domestic abuse services and voluntary organisations, including 'by and for' specialist services
- Professionals from health services

- Professionals from policing or criminal justice

Partnership board meetings should take place regularly, have a clear agenda and processes should be transparent. Local authorities should work to make the board a collaborative forum where all stakeholders are able to have an equal voice. Case Study Four (see Section 3.4) shows a positive experience of a provider's involvement with their local partnership board, including examples of elements which have worked well such as meetings focusing on a key theme and members of their Survivor Advisory Board being invited to attend. One Annual Survey respondent said:

"The local partnership boards in Nottingham City are well developed and knowledgeable of the DVA [domestic violence and abuse] sector and what needs to be delivered. Joint Commissioning has also improved working relationships with our Nottinghamshire partners."
(Women's Aid member service, East Midlands)

Establish strategic partnerships and meaningful engagement

Good partnership working is essential in ensuring that the range of services in a local area are joined up and working together efficiently. Partnerships work well when partners have shared beliefs and values, meaning their core objectives are aligned. Partnerships are most successful where local authorities invest by making time and resources available for partnership building. Good partnership working was highlighted in the following Annual Survey responses:

"Partnership working in Surrey is excellent." (Women's Aid member service, South East of England)

"Good partnership working, sharing best practice, taking the voluntary sector views on board." (Women's Aid member service, East of England)

"Improved funding for co-located roles which has created new pathways into support and improved partnerships." (Women's Aid member service, South West of England)

Ensure cross-boundary collaboration

Neighbouring local authorities should work together to ensure their approaches to domestic abuse commissioning are aligned. This can mean bringing contract timelines together to streamline service provision, or it could mean forming a partnership to pool resources and co-ordinate responses. An example of local authorities working together

in partnership can be seen in Case Study Three below. One provider in the Annual Survey reported the following:

"The County working together on this means better multi-agency working." (Non-member service, South East)

Case Study Three: Working in partnership to commission a specialist service based in London.

Three London councils formed a partnership to transform the response to domestic abuse across the areas. Through widespread consultation, the councils worked collaboratively with specialist services to map existing service provision and projected spend.

In partnership, the councils established a Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Procurement Project Group, with representatives from each authority, a procurement specialist, and a VAWG specialist. By deferring to the expertise of 'Experts by Experience' and specialist domestic abuse services, the councils adopted an innovative and tailored approach to the area's needs.

As a result, 13 separate specialist services were streamlined into one contractual arrangement with an improved coordinated response, which meant that savings and efficiencies could be re-invested into frontline services.

The councils delivered a significantly more integrated domestic abuse service system, without diluting the expertise and specialism critical to effective service provision.

3.4 Effective commissioning mechanisms

Identify whether procurement is necessary

Commissioning does not necessarily have to involve procurement. Procurement processes involve time and money which could be put towards supporting frontline services, so commissioners should consider whether going out to tender is necessary. Local authorities have the option of awarding grant funding to providers, which is a particularly useful tool for funding small specialist women's domestic abuse services and 'by and for' providers, and those who are already demonstrating quality provision,

as shown in Case Study Two (See Section 3.2). Other alternatives to procurement also include using low value and Light Touch Regime flexibility, a service contract with a unique provider and precautionary market testing, innovation partnerships, community partnerships and alliance contracts.

Prioritise real 'value'

Local authorities should look to commission the best possible quality service with the available resources and remember that poor quality provision will ultimately cost the council more money, as survivors who are unable to access the right support will create additional demand in public services. In procurement terms, 'value' is based on price, quality and social value. Specialist women's domestic abuse services deliver unique social value within communities which must be considered in decision-making processes. Local authorities should ensure that if using procurement processes for domestic abuse services, they are not giving excessive weighting to price and insufficient weighting to purpose, specialist quality, local knowledge, engagement and trust, meeting actual need and the true costs of delivering specialist women's domestic abuse services.

Quality marks, such as the Women's Aid National Quality Standards³ and the Imkaan's Accredited Quality Standards⁴, are a benchmarking tool that commissioners can use to identify good quality service provision. Applying the approaches covered in Section 3.2, such as using qualitative research methods and including survivor voices, can also help commissioners understand what quality service provision looks like and which providers are delivering this in their area.

Use informative procurement practices

If using a procurement process, local authorities should give all providers the best possible opportunity to submit a quality application, whilst ensuring the procurement process is fair and transparent. Local authorities should consider the diversity of organisations in their size, financing, and bid-writing experience. This means ensuring all providers are equipped with the necessary information and there is sufficient time allowed for the process. Good practice includes robust community consultations to inform specifications, carrying out market warming events to share information on the

³ Members of Women's Aid can apply for the Women's Aid National Quality Standards which demonstrate the unique quality of dedicated specialist services for women and children survivors. (Women's Aid, 2018).

⁴ Members of Imkaan can apply for Imkaan's Accredited Quality Standards (Imkaan, 2014) and their Safe Minimum Practice Standards (Imkaan, 2016).

process in advance and answering all questions in a timely fashion. One Annual Survey respondent said:

“Our tender is coming out in the next few weeks and we have been heavily involved in the preparation of the spec.” (Women’s Aid member service, East Midlands)

Efficient data collection and reporting

Data collection and reporting should enable local authorities to evaluate how well services are meeting the needs of diverse survivors, and the learning from this should inform future development. Specialist women’s domestic abuse services should be engaged in early discussions around reporting mechanisms to ensure that they are meaningful, capture a diversity of experience, and do not place an additional burden on already stretched services’ time and resources. Local authorities should fund data collection, analysis and reporting, including support for services to strengthen their own monitoring and evaluation. This could include funding systems such as the Women’s Aid On Track case management system⁵, which enables services to collect data to demonstrate impact as part of their routine work. Case Study 4 demonstrates how additional funding associated with the Statutory Duty enabled one service to recruit a data analyst post, improving access to information for both the service and the commissioner.

Commission longer contracts

Long-term contracts provide stability and allow services to embed in the local community. They reduce pressure on services to repeatedly find capacity to prepare bids and enable providers to offer longer-term staffing contracts, which can reduce issues with recruitment and retention of staff. Some providers highlighted contracts of seven or eight years as an example of successful commissioning practice in the Annual Survey (see below). Where possible, local authorities should consider whether they can award contracts of this length to established quality service providers. They should also ensure there are inflationary increases (including for staff costs) built into contracts, to allow adequate funding for providers over the duration of the contract – including to increase salaries in line with cost of living and incremental pay scales.

⁵ On Track is Women’s Aid’s case management and outcomes monitoring system. The system is used by (at the time of writing) over 95 local domestic abuse services to record information about service users they work with.

"...we have had some success when community services have been commissioned on a 8 year basis (showing this is an option for local authorities)..." (Women's Aid member service, London)

"Long-term meaning 5 - 7 years, whereas in previous years contracts have been 3 -5." (Women's Aid member Service, South West)

Effectively commissioning processes for 'by and for' services

As noted in Section 2, this report includes limited examples of good practice in commissioning experiences of specialist by and for Black and minoritised women's services. These services tend to be even smaller and have less resources than other domestic abuse providers, meaning they can be at an ever greater disadvantage in competitive procurement processes. If using a competitive tendering processes, local authorities can help to provide an equal playing field by establishing specific lots for by and for services – which help to recognise the unique, specialist support that they offer to specific groups and ensuring only expert by & for providers can apply for this part of the contract. Two responses from the Annual Survey highlighted contracts which were designed to enable the successful commissioning of by and for services:

"The city council ringfenced DA bill - new burdens money - for small grassroots by and for providers." (Women's Aid & Imkaan member service, West Midlands)

"Our commissioners have supported both DA [domestic abuse] services by splitting the refuge commission." (Women's Aid and Imkaan member service, North West of England).

Case Study Four: Commissioning bodies and a provider working together to deliver specialist services in Yorkshire.

This service provider established positive working relationships with the domestic abuse commissioning teams in the different local authority areas they work in. Relationships have been developed through regular communication and by taking a collaborative approach towards a shared end goal of providing quality support for survivors. The commissioning teams are supportive of the service and have worked to ensure other local authority stakeholders understand the importance of funding both domestic abuse safe accommodation and community services. Some contracts the provider holds have been jointly commissioned by the local authority and the PCC.

The provider has had a positive experience of engaging with their local Domestic Abuse Partnership Board. There are regular meetings focused on a particular theme and linked to the local VAWG strategy. Commissioners are keener than ever before to include survivor voice in processes. The provider is encouraged to present relevant case studies and members of their Survivor Advisory Board are invited to attend board meetings.

The service has received increased commissioned funding as a result of the Statutory Duty which has enabled them to strengthen their core functions. Funding has also enabled them to recruit a new Data Analyst post, meaning they are better able to share information with commissioners and effectively demonstrate the value of their specialist work.

4. Conclusion

This report has outlined the key elements of good practice which should be applied in local authority domestic abuse commissioning processes. While the examples and case studies included in this report are unfortunately not representative of all domestic abuse providers' experiences with commissioning, they do show that some local authorities are taking well-considered and informed approaches to commissioning which has achieved good outcomes in their areas. These examples also indicate that some providers are seeing the benefit of improvements which have been made to local authority commissioning processes through the implementation of new duties under Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, such as requirements for Local Area Needs Assessments and Domestic Abuse Partnership Boards. All local authorities with responsibility for commissioning domestic abuse services should ensure that the key

elements of good practice covered in this report are applied in their approaches, to ensure that survivors across England can access quality services equipped with the expertise required to enable their recovery from domestic abuse.

References

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