



Joint submission to the Victims and Courts Bill Committee

Overview

The Victims and Courts Bill is a crucial opportunity to improve the provision of support for victims and survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, and other forms of violence against women and children. We welcome the upcoming Bill's aims to "strengthen support for victims" and "deliver a justice system that puts the needs of victims first."

However, for a Bill that intends to '*make provision about the experience of victims within the criminal justice system*', the Bill fails to address the dearth of specialist support services for victims and survivors of abuse and exploitation across the country or to provide long-overdue improvements to the commissioning of support.

We urge the Government to take this crucial opportunity to deliver on their welcome commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade by ensuring victims and survivors can access high quality and timely support designed to meet their needs.

For too long, victims of abuse and exploitation have faced a postcode lottery of support¹ and denied their right to have services and support tailored to their needs². Introducing such a duty would align the Bill with the Government's wider mission to halve violence against women and girls and their commitment to make meaningful progress on one of the key recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA): having a national guarantee that victims and survivors of sexual abuse are offered specialist support.³

In April, the Government provided its 'Tackling Child Sexual Abuse' progress update. The Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls made a welcome commitment that "this Government will do everything in its power to prevent the horrors of child sexual abuse, providing the national and local leadership required to tackle offending, protect children from harm, and support victims and survivors."

To fully deliver on this ambition, Action for Children, Barnardo's, The centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre), NSPCC and Women's Aid together **urge the Committee to recommend the Victims and Courts Bill be strengthened for victims and survivors by:**

- 1) **Placing a duty upon local statutory agencies to commission sufficient, specialist support services** for victims who experience abuse and exploitation;

¹ The centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (2025) [Support Matters 2025: Update on child sexual abuse support services in England and Wales](#)

² [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales \(Victims' Code\)](#) - GOV.UK

³ [The Report of the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse - October 2022](#) | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse



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- 2) **Ensuring victims with specific needs, such as women and children, receive high quality specialist services**, including community-based, therapeutic and advocacy services that are properly tailored to their needs;
- 3) **Guaranteeing agencies commission support in line with local victim need**, by drawing on the outcomes from the joint strategic needs assessments undertaken as part of their obligations under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

Background

The sector welcomed the measures introduced through the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. This included the Duty to Collaborate model which sets out to create a co-ordinated effort to identify local needs and jointly commission support for victims and survivors to meet those needs. As per the Act, the relevant authorities are obliged to give due regard to the specific needs of victims and survivors, including children, when creating and delivering commissioning strategies.

However, local collaboration is not in itself enough to ensure the right support is in place for victims and survivors. We remain concerned that too many continue to face a postcode lottery of support and that – amid a backdrop of service closures, real terms funding cuts and commissioning challenges – it is more important than ever that life-saving services for victims and survivors are protected and improved.

Difficulties in accessing support

Too often women and children are faced with a dearth of support after abuse and exploitation.

Every day, frontline specialist services provide a lifeline to women and children who feel unsafe, isolated and have nowhere to turn. These services, however, continue to face real terms funding cuts – off the backdrop of inflation and the increased cost of living – and poor commissioning practices, which fail to keep them secure. There are acute concerns that this situation will only be exacerbated by current local authority financial pressures; Women's Aid is also aware of the increasing use of section 114 notices, effectively declaring bankruptcy, impacting services facing closure. The primary reason why most authorities issue a section 114 notice is because they expect their expenditure to exceed their income for a particular financial year – which is not permitted under the 1988 Act.

Victims and survivors of abuse and exploitation are, as a result, struggling to access life-saving support services that are free at the point of access, many of which are unable to meet demand. In particular, specialist support services for children often fail to be properly integrated into local commissioning pathways, with agencies lacking understanding and expertise in commissioning specialist services for child victims of abuse and exploitation.

The CSA Centre's Support Matters report has consistently revealed the scarcity of support for victims of child sexual abuse despite the scale of this form of harm.



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- **In 2024, they found an estimated 55,000 adults and children in England and Wales are currently held on waiting lists.⁴**
- The CSA Centre found that 23 support services had closed in the 18 months since their last national survey, with many more facing financial uncertainty.
- There **are now just 363 services across the whole of England and Wales providing support to those affected by child sexual abuse**, leaving an estimated 16,500 victims and survivors for each remaining service to support.⁵

This is unsustainable.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's latest report⁶ into the experiences of babies, children and young people affected by domestic abuse also exposes how thousands of children are being left with nowhere to turn after being subject to abuse, or facing long wait times for support, as services struggle to stay afloat amid rising demand.

The Commissioner's research found that most children will not receive the domestic abuse support they need at the time they need it and that funding for most services supporting child victims is precarious. Just one in five services had secure funding arrangements in place.

In 2021, children were for the first time recognised in law as victims of domestic abuse in their own right in England and Wales. Section 3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines a child victim as any child who "sees or hears, or experiences the effects of, the abuse."

Yet, despite this recognition:

- **Over a quarter of domestic abuse services (27%) surveyed in England and Wales are having to turn children away from vital support amid severe funding shortages.**
- Of the services spoken to by the Commissioner, **over half (51%) stated they had had to place children on waiting lists due to the number of referrals they were receiving**, while others were forced to turn them away entirely. In some cases, this may have left children in unsafe situations and at risk of further harm.

Drawing on a survey of more than 260 domestic abuse services providing support to children, along with 168 statutory agencies responsible for commissioning domestic abuse services, the findings show the immense financial pressures specialist services are under and how children are paying the price.

⁴ The centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (2024) [Support Matters: The landscape of child sexual abuse support services in England and Wales](#)

⁵ The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (2025) [Support Matters 2025: Update on child sexual abuse support services in England and Wales](#)

⁶ Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2025) [Victims in their own right? Babies, children and young people's experience of domestic abuse](#)



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- **Over half of the support services (56%) surveyed by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner had experienced cuts to their funding** over the past five years.
- **This had left over a quarter (29%) needing to make the difficult decision to stop providing a specialist support service to children.**
- Similar concerns came from organisations that commission services, who reported that **funding will be at risk of being cut or reduced for over 40% of services when the current allocation comes to an end.**

Without these services, children affected by domestic abuse are often at risk of long-term harm, including serious mental and physical health issues. Children forced to flee also experience repeated disruption to their education, and the loss of friendships, homes, pets and their communities.

The previous Government's Victims Funding Strategy sought to ensure 'the right support is available to all victims at the right time', and to co-ordinate funding for victims across Departments.⁷ However, we know that children still routinely experience a lack of support, year-long waiting lists and in some cases, are not signposted to specialist support at all⁸. Often, specialist support services for children are not properly integrated into local commissioning pathways and agencies can lack understanding and expertise in commissioning specialist services for child victims of abuse and exploitation. **This is why introduction of a duty is necessary to ensure support is in place for young victims and witnesses after abuse and exploitation.**

These challenges are also reflected in the experiences of adult victims of domestic abuse. Women's Aid's latest Domestic Abuse Report 2025 reveals that the network of specialist domestic abuse services in England is at risk of dismantling if the acute funding and commissioning challenges they are facing are left unaddressed. With over a third (35%) of organisations running an area of their domestic abuse service in 2023-24 without any dedicated funding.

1 in 4 women have been raped or sexually assaulted in England and Wales, and 1 in 2 rapes against women are carried out by a partner or ex-partner. In December 2024 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) announced a 4.2% cut to the core PCC victim's grant. In this announcement, the MoJ ring-fenced particular funds for VAWG services, however the consequence of this has been that some PCCs concluded that the ring-fenced funding is exclusively what they should be spending on VAWG. This has resulted in some PCCs cutting funding to sexual violence services whose funding was derived from the victim's core grant. We welcomed the MoJ announcement that they would recommission the Rape and Sexual Abuse Fund for a further year, but this must go further and multi-year commitments must be made beyond 2025. Specialist women's domestic abuse services have unique expertise, knowledge and a

⁷ Ministry of Justice (2022), [Victims Funding Strategy](#)

⁸ Action for Children, [Patchy, Piecemeal and Precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse](#), 2019



proven track record in supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Community-based services also offer a wide range of support. As a result of multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination, victims from minoritised backgrounds often need access to, and value, support that is best placed to meet their needs, which may be provided by 'by and for' organisations.

"Women who are high risk need immediate intervention to keep them safe ... we need targeted support and funding. It's either we do this now, or someone loses their life. How many more headlines of women and children having their lives cut short due to intimate partner violence should we read before we support this as the national emergency that it is?" Anna, Expert by Experience

Specialist women's domestic abuse services have unique expertise, knowledge and a proven track record in supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse.

Women's Aid's latest Domestic Abuse Report 2025⁹ reveals that the network of specialist domestic abuse services in England is at risk of dismantling if the acute funding and commissioning challenges they are facing are left unaddressed. Over a third (35%) of organisations were running an area of their domestic abuse service in 2023-24 without any dedicated funding.

"The whole generic versus specialist is important because it's about having that enhanced understanding of the risks that survivors face both pre and post separation - and generic services just don't understand that." Kerry, Expert by Experience

To uphold Government's commitment to a vision where 'the right support should be available to all victims of crime, when they need it'¹⁰. We urge Committee members to ensure women and children have access to sufficient and specific support which has been designed to meet their needs. This must be delivered through a duty to commission supplemented by guidance to support those duty bound to understand what types of support women and children require. ,

The cost of not supporting women and children after abuse and exploitation

Delayed or denied access to support can have a devastating impact on victims and survivors' mental health and overall wellbeing¹¹. It leaves them and their families in limbo without the crucial support that can help them move on with their lives and come to terms with abuse. For children in particular, this can often be at crucial periods of their

⁹ Women's Aid (2025) [The Annual Audit](#)

¹⁰ Ministry of Justice (2022), [Victims Funding Strategy](#)

¹¹ Ministry of Justice (2023) [Formal support needs of adult victim-survivors of sexual violence Summary of research findings and recommendations from the Ministry of Justice's Programme of Research](#). Plotnikoff, J. and Woolfson, R. (2019) [Falling short?: a snapshot of young witness policy and practice](#). London: NSPCC.



development, impacting their ability to engage with education and build healthy relationships with peers which can have lifelong consequences.

Aside from the moral imperative to safeguard children and support them to recover from abuse and exploitation, failure to provide the right support to victims and survivors costs the state. Public sector costs of child sexual abuse and exploitation are estimated at £122,000 per child or young person.¹² The Home Office's own analysis estimated that the total costs to society relating to children whose sexual abuse began or continued in the year ending March 2019 exceeded £10 billion.¹³ In 2022, the economic and social costs of domestic abuse in England were estimated to be just under £78 billion.¹⁴ The Home Office attributes this cost to lost output and physical and emotional harm on the part of victims and survivors, and the cost for Government, with the combined cost of the police response, trials and prisons making up the largest expense.¹⁵

A lack of support can compound and exacerbate the abuse a child experiences and impact their recovery, incurring state costs throughout a victim's lifetime related to mental health and adult physical health problems, children's social care, and loss of productivity to society through unemployment or reduced earnings.¹⁶ There are also considerable costs to the voluntary sector in the form of victim support services, child sexual abuse related training, and educational prevention.¹⁷

Investment in specific and sufficient support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation makes economic sense. Research from Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics found that for every £1 invested in specific support services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer over £12. These savings are shared by multiple agencies and Government departments.¹⁸ Child specific support services play a vital role in supporting child victims of abuse and exploitation. As well as supporting children to start to recover from their trauma, they can reduce the impact of harm and the risk of a child going missing from home, alcohol and drug abuse, accommodation and housing needs and interaction with the criminal justice system later in life.¹⁹

Additionally, Women's Aid's analysis with ResPublica shows that for every pound invested in domestic abuse support services there could be a saving to the public purse of at least £9²⁰. Specialist domestic abuse services are best places to provide holistic, wrap around support for survivors, that not only addresses individuals' needs, but also alleviates stress on other public services like the NHS; this is particularly significant considering that the current

¹² Rachael Parker, Tim Read, Alexander Scragg & Paul Dawson, MOPAC Evidence & Insight, "The Lighthouse: Final evaluation report", (2021), [childhouse_june_2021_final_evaluation_report_for_publication.pdf](#) (thelighthouse-london.org.uk)

¹³ Home Office (2019) A report on the economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse in England and Wales for victims who experienced abuse in the year to 31st March 2019,

¹⁴ Sarah Davidge (2022) Investing to save: The economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support, Women's Aid

¹⁵ Home Office (2019) A report on the economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse in England and Wales for victims who experienced abuse in the year to 31st March 2019

¹⁶ NSPCC, 77% of local authorities offer no specialist support for children who have experienced sexual abuse | NSPCC

¹⁷ Home Office (2019) A report on the economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse in England and Wales for victims who experienced abuse in the year to 31st March 2019,

¹⁸ Pro Bono Economics and Barnardo's (2011), [An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited](#)

¹⁹ Barnardo's, (2023) [Child Exploitation: A Hidden Crisis](#)

²⁰ Women's Aid (2023) [Investing to save report - Women's Aid](#)



economic and social costs of domestic abuse in England are estimated to be approximately £84 billion in 2024-25.

What we know about the scale and nature of abuse and exploitation

Abuse and exploitation can happen to any child, in any family, in any place or online. Abuse and exploitation often happen over a period of time, rather than in a one-off encounter, and can have devastating effects on a child's development, their close networks such as family and friends, and society as a whole.²¹

1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse and Women's Aid's research found 46.1% of women have experienced at least one form of abusive behaviour in an intimate relationship during their lifetime²². Additionally, on average at least one woman a week is killed by a current or former partner in the UK. Domestic abuse has been declared a national emergency and the effects are far-reaching and long lasting. For women and children fleeing abuse, their whole life may be uprooted in order to move to a place of safety, sadly we know that women and children can be even more vulnerable post-separation as perpetrators escalate their control over any aspect they can reach including economic abuse, child maintenance, divorce and financial remedy proceedings, and through joint property contracts.

Abuse and exploitation can take many forms and rarely happen in isolation. Children can experience multiple forms of abuse and exploitation during their lifetime – for example, evidence shows the often-inextricable link between criminal and sexual exploitation.²³ We know that abusers actively seek out the most vulnerable and accessible children.

Despite estimates of the scale of child abuse, there is no comprehensive, national prevalence data to allow us to determine the true number of children affected by abuse and exploitation. The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse estimates that 500,000 children across England and Wales are sexually abused every year.²⁴ The Centre also states that children are more likely than adults to be the victims of sexual offences. They are the victims in 40% of all sexual offences – including rape and sexual assault – yet make up just 20% of the population in England and Wales. The available data does, however, show that a significant number of children have experienced or are at risk of experiencing abuse and exploitation.

Although children are legally survivors of domestic abuse in their own right under the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), there is poor implementation of the legal recognition of them as

²¹ NSPCC (2023) [Effects of Child Abuse](#). London: NSPCC.

²² Women's Aid (2022) <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Come-Together-to-End-Domestic-Abuse-a-survey-of-UK-attitudes-to-domestic-abuse-2022.pdf>

²³ The Children's Society (2019) [Counting Lives: Responding to children who are criminally exploited](#). London: The Children's Society. Action for Children (2024) [Shattered lives, stolen futures: The Jay review Criminally Exploited Children](#)

²⁴ CSA Centre (2023) [Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data](#). Essex: Barnardo House.



victims, and current approach is focused on abuse in the family/household rather than in children's own intimate relationships.

The latest data from local authority child in need assessments show that, in England in the year to March 2023:

- 48,780 risk assessments identified concerns regarding child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation and child on child sexual abuse.²⁵
- 57,550 risk assessments identified concerns regarding children as victims of domestic abuse²⁶ while 160,140 risk assessments identified concerns about the child's parent/ carer being the victim of domestic abuse – just under one third of all episodes with assessment factors recorded.²⁷
- 14,420 risk assessments identified concerns regarding child criminal exploitation, and 11,110 identified concerns related to 'gangs'.²⁸

Even based on this data, which is likely to be a vast underestimate, there are a significant number of children who are unable to access support each year.

²⁵ Department for Education (2023) [Children in Need reporting year 2023](#). London: Department for Education.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid