

SafeLives' 2020/21 survey of domestic abuse practitioners in England and Wales



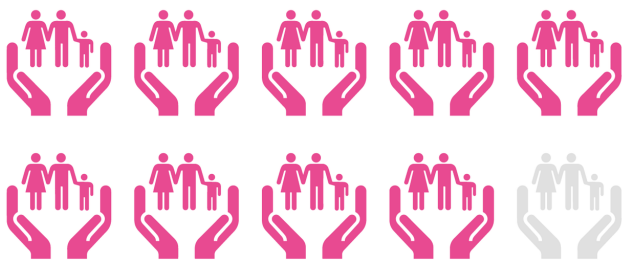
Since 2014 SafeLives has surveyed the number of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (Idvas) at the request of the Home Secretary, identifying how many Idvas are supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse across England and Wales. In recent years, we have also tried to estimate the number of outreach workers and Young People's Violence Advisors (Ypvas) or equivalent.

The 2020/21 Practitioner Survey seeks to understand the current levels of provision for Idvas, outreach workers and Ypvas across England and Wales, as well as the impact on frontline services due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key findings

Demand for domestic abuse support has increased during Covid-19

Almost nine in ten services had seen an increase in demand since the pandemic began

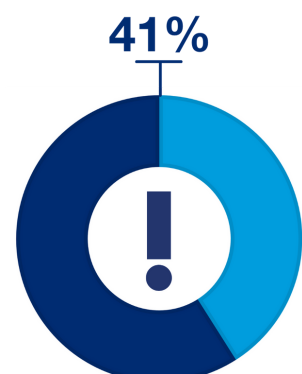


When asked whether there had been an increase in demand on their services since the Covid-19 pandemic, 88% of the 146 practitioners who responded said that it had.

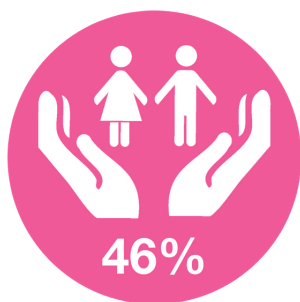
This is a large increase from the 38% of practitioners who responded to SafeLives' survey at the start of the pandemic and said they had noticed an increase in demand.

Two fifths of services (41%) who responded to our survey felt that they were unable to keep up with demand

Services commented that they were either almost at maximum capacity or already did not have enough capacity to meet the demand of clients. While some services responded that they were always working at the top limits of their capacity, most services felt that demand had significantly increased over the past year. Many also commented that they were understaffed and that they had insufficient resources to be able to employ more staff to help manage the increase in demand.



Almost half of all services (46%) biggest concern at this time was the safety of clients and their children

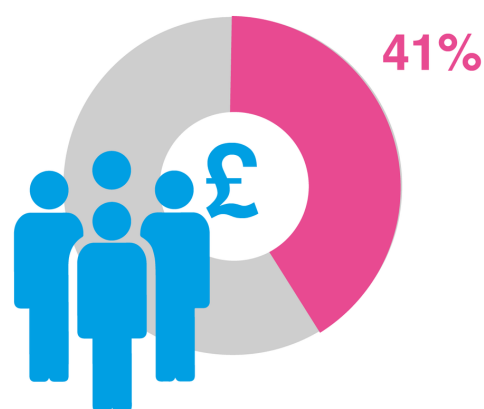


The most common concern raised by services was that domestic abuse professionals were not able to see clients and that this increased the risk to their clients and any children in the household.

Two fifths (41%) of all responses gave their biggest concern as staff capacity, staff recruitment and funding

One of the reasons for an impact on staff capacity has been an increase in caseloads.

“Increase in referrals of average 35% to IDVA services. Working outside of the recommended SafeLives caseload guidance. Increase in complexity of cases / women with multiple levels of need.” Practitioner response



A quarter of respondents to the survey (27%) felt the biggest concern was the delay and unavailability of other services to help support their clients. e.g. housing, substance misuse services, mental health and courts



Services told us that increased complexity of need, related to reduced support from partner agencies, has also impacted on service capacity. In particular housing, drug and alcohol, mental health services and courts were all cited as being less able to engage with clients since Covid-19.

Almost one fifth of responses (17%) voiced concern about the effect the pandemic was having on staff members in relation to stress and staff burn out



This tied in very strongly to the increase in demand on services and the concern that there was not sufficient staff capacity to match this, as this increased workload was seen to be affecting staff wellbeing and mental health.

“Staff burn out. Staff fatigue. Staff Mental Health.”
Practitioner response

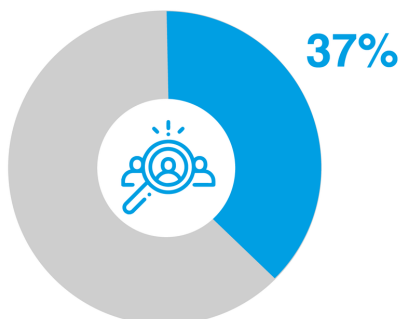
One in ten (9%) of practitioners were worried about the mental health of their clients

Comments included concerns that clients had increased levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation and were more isolated as they were unable to be with support networks and family.

“...Due to social isolation and support networks, clients are withdrawn and lack emotional and “human” support/empathy. Clients are presenting with increased anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations making them vulnerable and at great risk of harm to themselves.” Practitioner response



Over a third of respondents (37%) stated that recruiting and retaining staff was difficult when funding was not consistent and based on short term contracts



Retaining staff was commonly cited alongside planning for the future as being a key benefit of longer term funding, with the ability to retain staff seen as vital in underpinning a service’s potential to provide high-quality support to their clients. Several respondents highlighted how difficult it is for them to recruit and retain good staff when only short-term contracts are available.

Longer term funding would also give services the opportunity to focus on staff development and would give staff more incentive to focus on their own development, whereas not having this stability means services are at risk of losing staff they have already invested in training and developing.

One quarter of respondents (25%) noted the time it takes to look and apply for funding.



Several services commented that the time they spend identifying appropriate sources of funding and completing bids takes time away from service improvement and focusing more directly on supporting their clients. A few respondents also highlighted the fact that funding can be difficult to obtain, and this creates a lot of uncertainty for services when trying to plan for the future.

There is only 66% of the required number of FTE Idvas in England and Wales to meet the needs of victims at the highest risk of serious harm or murder and this level has fallen for the first time since 2016

The current number of Idvas is 420 fewer than the minimum number required (at least 1,220) to meet the needs of victims and survivors at high risk of serious harm or murder. In 2016 there was 67% of the required coverage for Idva provision, and this rose to 74% in 2017 and remained stable at 74% in 2019.



There has been a 37% increase in the number of cases heard at Marac in 2020 compared to 2016.



The increase in Marac cases across England and Wales means that the number of Idvas required to support victims at the highest-risk of serious harm or murder also needs to increase to meet the demand.

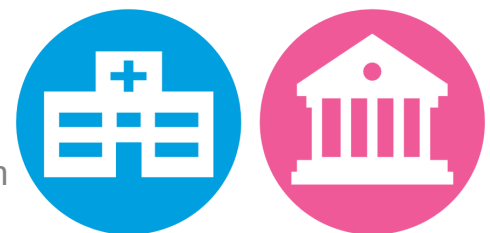
Only three police force areas have the minimum required number of Idvas, while 14 have less than 50%



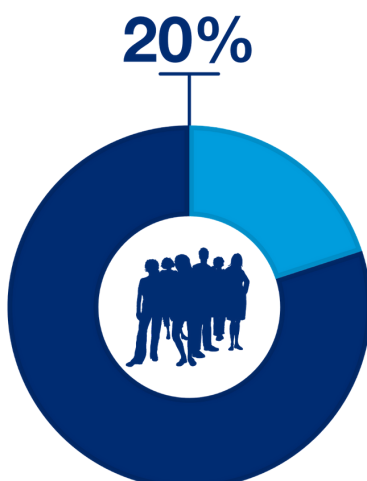
In 2019, ten force areas had 90% or more of the recommended coverage, so the number of areas with this better level of coverage has decreased. There are 14 police force areas with less than 50% of the recommended Idva coverage, four of which have less than a third. These numbers have increased since 2019, when nine police force areas had less than 50% and three had less than a third of the recommended Idva coverage.

Just one in ten services had an Idva who was based in a health setting, and only one in twenty had an Idva providing specialised court support

While the vast majority of Idvas work within a specialist community-based domestic abuse service, they can be based in a variety of different locations. We know that just one in five of those experiencing domestic abuse calls the police which is why multiple access points outside criminal justice settings are vitally important.



Only 20% of services provided support to victims and survivors from marginalised groups



Services that provide domestic abuse support to victims who are marginalised, such as Black, Asian and racially minoritised people, LGBT+ people or disabled and deaf people, are invaluable. Staff in these services have an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the particular ways in which domestic abuse affects people from these communities that mainstream services may lack, enabling them to provide more tailored emotional and practical support.