



Ending domestic abuse

SafeLives' Briefing for Domestic Abuse Bill - Second Reading - House of Lords

Introduction

1. SafeLives is a UK charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good. Since 2005, SafeLives has worked with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse – in particular we pioneered the use of Idvas (Independent Domestic Violence & Abuse Advisors) and the Marac (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) at which the Idva advocates fiercely on the victim's behalf to get the response she needs.
2. We hold the largest UK datasets exploring adult and child experiences of accessing frontline domestic abuse services and multi-agency support and are known for high quality innovations in frontline practice. This data and expertise – and close work daily with experts and survivors - informs our response to the Domestic Abuse Bill¹.
3. We recognise that the voices of survivors tell the most compelling story of domestic abuse. In preparing for our engagement with the Bill, we created Every Story Matters – an online opportunity for people to tell us in their own words what needs to change. Hundreds of people responded to that call, from those who lived with abuse as children, to those who have managed to leave it behind, to those still experiencing it.

Main proposed amendment to the Bill

1. We are very concerned that the **Bill does not address the issue of the chronic under-provision of services for adult, teen and child victims and perpetrators of abuse** – taking a 'whole family approach' to understanding the support needed to ensure families are free from harm.
2. The Government's statutory duty on Local Authorities in Part 4 section 53 takes a very narrow approach by only focusing on accommodation-based services, particularly when community-based services provide the majority of support for victims, especially child victims.
3. **We are supporting an amendment by Barnardo's to introduce a statutory duty on public bodies to commission specialist domestic abuse services for all adult victims regardless of immigration status, teen victims, child victims, and perpetrators, which would cover community-based services as well as refuge, alongside a requirement to fund that full range of services.**
4. Providing access to community-based services, with a focus on supporting victims to stay safely in their own home is the right thing to do on a practical level – allowing women and their children to stay connected to their home, job, friends, family, GP, school and wider life rather than having to relocate and leave all this behind. It is also the right thing to do ethically. **In the 21st century, it can't be right that our aspiration only goes so far as to expect women to flee their homes and possessions and live behind locked doors in institutional accommodation with other traumatised families. Instead, the Government should support the right of someone who has experienced abuse to stay where they belong, in their own surroundings, safely. With the right provisions in this Bill, that *is* possible.**

1

<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Our%20Alternative%20White%20Paper%20on%20Domestic%20Abuse.pdf>

5. Refugees currently receive around 85% of funding at the local level to respond to domestic abuse, but most (nearly 70%) victim/survivors who seek help access *other* kinds of services that are provided in the community, not in accommodation. Community based support includes specialists such as Independent Domestic Violence and Abuse Advisors (Idvas), outreach workers, helplines, counselling services, and young people and children's workers. Last year alone, more than 65,000 women and over 85,000 children were supported just by Idva services – before we add in other community based services. Around 11,000 women were supported by a refuge. The cost of response per victim is around £400 for Idva support compared with £2,500 for refuge (support element only). **England and Wales need 300 more Idvas just to be at the bare minimum safe requirement.**

"Idvas are like lifelines – they enable you to survive when you're feeling very alone" – Victim

6. We have very serious concerns that, while well intended, the Government's duty will push Local Authorities into reducing, rather than sustaining, vital services, leaving more vulnerable people in abusive situations. We are not making an argument against refuge, which is the necessary response for some women. However, mandating Local Authorities only to provide accommodation-based services runs the significant risk that the vast majority of adult and child victims who need a service will find that their options have narrowed. We know the financial pressure that Local Authorities are under, and a number have said that they can now only provide minimum requirements (statutory) services and nothing further. The proposed statutory duty will also do nothing to prevent perpetrators from abusing new partners.
7. We believe there is a danger that vulnerable adult and child victims will be forced into unsuitable support. As we consulted on the Government's proposals, one frontline service CEO we spoke to told us that their refuge often received inappropriate referrals, often from local authority children's or housing services: *"children's services will threaten victims that their kids will be removed if they don't go into refuge, but if victims are not in the right frame of mind, dumping them across the other side of the country is not the solution. That's why the Idva role is so vital."*
8. Specialist children's support has been declining - the percentage of domestic abuse services providing dedicated support to children and young people fell from 62% in 2010 to 52% in 2017. Young people (teenagers aged 13-17) experience some of the highest rates of domestic abuse, at high levels of severity. Despite this, SafeLives' research found almost one in five police force areas have *no specialist support at all* for young people experiencing domestic abuse in their own relationships.
9. A lack of funding for perpetrator response was recently identified as the biggest issue by frontline practitioners across England and Wales. Survivors want this to change too. Taking part in our Every Story Matters platform, 82% of respondents said that they supported the introduction of more perpetrator programmes, nearly 80% wanted tougher sentences, 74% wanted mental health support for perpetrators, and 73% wanted public awareness campaigns specifically targeted at perpetrators. And yet, less than 1% of perpetrators are challenged to change.
10. By missing out specialist workers/programmes for perpetrators, the new proposed statutory duty will also fail to place the emphasis on the person causing the harm – the perpetrator – instead placing the onus on the victim to leave her home, disrupt her children's lives and potentially isolate herself from her community, networks and work. Unintentionally, the Government will send a very strong message that it is the victim and her children whose lives have to be constantly disrupted and impacted, rather than the perpetrator.

"The Idva services in my area need far greater resourcing. When it works well, there's no substitute for that one-to-one tailored support. But no-one can refer into the service, even if someone is at serious risk. They've got two Idvas – I think they're meant to have seven. When they're full they just close the list. So we have to ask them to go through the Iris route – go to their GP and then be referred through them. Or they go through Marac. The police can't refer directly for an Idva either." **Survivor**

Jess Asato, Head of Public Affairs and Policy, SafeLives
Jessica.asato@safelives.org.uk / 07939 594 634